

RESPONSE TO GORDON SMITH'S
"FORMATION FOR MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE"

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I am deeply appreciative of Dr. Smith's thinking as presented in this paper, and find myself resonating with many of his conclusions. I found myself reading the paper multiple times, first through the eyes of one not born and raised in the USA/Canada region, then through the eyes of a son of missionaries who spent 37 years in overseas ministry, then as a missiologist and finally through the eyes of a district superintendent of the very culturally diverse Southern Florida District Church of the Nazarene. My comments reflect a synthesis of my perspectives from those four roles or filters. The first two roles/filters find me personally living on the margins culturally, as one who was "neither [fully] from here nor from there" ("ni de aquí, ni de allá"). The latter two roles have provided me opportunity to observe and participate with the marginalized in various contexts.

I appreciate the sensitivity of the church and the academy to jointly address in this conference the matter of formation for ministry (for both clergy and laity) in a post-Christian, secular context. The interest, I believe, is to find ways of greater effectiveness for the sake of the fulfillment of the *missio Dei* in a USA/Canada region where the social, cultural and religious landscape has changed significantly in ways that require changes in the church's approaches, practices and systems in order to be relevant and effective in our work as God's Kingdom agents in this world.

I confess I am a bit uneasy with the designation of the church as "in exile" in this secular context, as my understanding of exile is one of existence in a land that is not our own, where the leaders of the oppressed are not given opportunity to lead their own, and where the provision of resources with which the oppressed have to work and with which they survive are dependent solely on the mercy of the oppressors. I do not see the USA/Canada church in such a dire circumstance, and appreciate Dr. Smith's admonition that we "be wise and discerning and not get caught in and claim that we are being persecuted when we are simply being less than wise" (p. 6). I am much more comfortable with the notion that the voice of the church is not often given, by predominantly secular cultural and political forces, the place of honor and influence that it perceives it once held, and so finds itself marginalized in the conversations taking place.

Even the concept of marginalization begs debate concerning its validity should we choose to carry that picture too far. Opportunities abound for the church to be seen and heard in today's world. The church at times fails to avail itself of those opportunities, and at other times misuses those opportunities. Ministers (clergy and laity) are sometimes their worst enemies as they avail themselves today of social media outlets, to carelessly and sometimes hatefully spew personal opinions and positions that do not reflect the redemptive nature of the church. In conversations about delicate and critical matters, we lack disciplined apologists who can gracefully and truthfully posit the position of "the marginalized". Is there an Aaron among us who will speak for Moses, who speaks for God? Perhaps the area of apologetics is an area where ministry formation efforts could help us during this time. (As a side comment, there is no clarity in the Manual as to who speaks officially on behalf of the Church of the Nazarene. Is it the BGS, the DS, the pastor? Is it all three, but in different contexts? Who vets the responses? In the context

of such ambiguity, many times no response at all is given. Our voice has not been taken from us, we just don't exercise it because of confusing lines of authority and accountability.)

We have also failed largely to avail ourselves of the opportunities to establish centers of holy fire in our great urban contexts. The great cities of USA/Canada, the birthplace of the ministry of the Church of the Nazarene, became places from which we fled, in "self-imposed exile" if you will. Now we attempt to return, and find ourselves on the margins, victims of our own undoing. We have not a single Nazarene congregation in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. A few years ago I organized a Nazarene congregation in the Gage Park neighborhood on the southside of Chicago (the murder capital of the USA). The youngest congregation to follow that one, was celebrating its 60th anniversary. That is a six-decade gap of ministry on the southside! Our exile is not always imposed on us, it is many times self-imposed.

I deeply appreciate the suggestion that "faithful presence...seeking peace" is an appropriate fourth response to exile/marginalization. The critical piece of an incarnational approach to mission is often lost on us, as in our history in the cities, mentioned above. Long-distance mission does not work. Our global mission efforts should make us wiser here "at home". As Wesleyans we believe God is present in prevenient grace, but the presence of the Spirit is no excuse for not having "boots on the ground" in "field hospitals" all across our region. The characterization of that presence as peaceful, attempting to bring about redemptive transformation is one I deeply appreciate. As one who has lived on the margins and observed others on the margins, I do think there is always a tension between that emphasis on peace and "speaking the truth in love". We are often reticent to speak truth, hoping our loving and caring acts will speak louder. Our histories prove that to not always be adequate. How will we prepare ministers to be faithful presence, speaking the truth in love, and seeking justice as well as the peace of the city?

If we are not experiencing a true exile, then the exilic sources of wisdom suggested by Dr. Smith, while still of value, are not as directly pertinent as they might be otherwise. If anything we are learning to live as a church "on the margins", and I am, as is obvious by now, more comfortable with that designation.

As a church on the margins, I would recommend that we consider among the sources of wisdom also those cultures within the USA/Canada church itself that have been ministering from and on the margins. This could be considered par of the third source of wisdom that Dr. Smith identifies, although the ones he suggests are generally outside of the USA/Canada context. We need to recognize that the African American church, the Hispanic/Latino church in the USA/Canada and women in ministry are just three of many elements of the USA/Canada church that have been ministering from the margins for decades. What could ministry students learn from their stories? Perhaps this idea of not having our voices heard is not as novel as some of us may think? Perhaps this idea of limited opportunities and limited resources is something that particular cultural/ethnic/language groups within the church have lived with for some time?

As additional bibliographic resources to help our ministers, I would suggest the writings of both Catholics and Evangelicals who are part of the US Hispanic/Latino Theology movement, particularly Daniel Rodriguez, *The Galilee Principle: A Latino Evangelical Perspective*; Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*; Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos*

con Jesús: toward a Hispanic/Latino theology of accompaniment and Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins*. Not part of this movement, but also very helpful, especially in the urban context is Eldin Villafañe and his *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry*.

Dr. Smith suggests four particular skills or capacities to be cultivated among our ministers in formation. I agree with him. To his comments on the skill of preaching for Monday morning, I would add that included in this are the abilities to exegete cultures and to communicate cross-culturally. When I came to the US as a newly-elected district superintendent in 1997, I was asked how I perceived the USA church and pastors to be different than the church and pastors in other places where I had served.

Among my answers was “Pastors in the USA don’t know how to exegete culture and communicate cross-culturally.” I still hold that to be largely true today, even though we are making progress. So I would insist that in the “preaching for Monday morning” skill, be included these abilities. Churches that are dying have failed to adequately exegete the changing culture and failed to find ways to adapt and remain a relevant witness and presence. We can do better. And, with so much multi-lingual and multi-cultural ministry flourishing today, how can we not require of our ministers the ability to communicate in more than one language and to be formed in more than one cultural setting?

On the matter of spirituality, I agree we need a greater emphasis on personal spiritual formation. I believe those in the margins would, however, shift the balance of importance to the community side of the equation in order to find strength for the journey. I also have a personal affinity for a greater celebration of the sacraments than is commonly practiced in our churches. Among our Hispanics, there will need to be a great deal of patience and grace extended as they move from an Evangelical Christianity that resists some practices that they equate with a Roman Catholicism (infant baptism and weekly sacraments, et. al.). Their move to Evangelicalism was often marked by a distancing of those things that seemed more “Catholic” to them and to the pioneer missionaries under whose tutelage they were formed.

Dr. Smith concludes that the response to the initial question of how to form ministers for the secular age is no less than a “full orbed theological program of study, complemented by a richly textured approach to spiritual formation”. That answer is accompanied by a warning to not “shorten” approaches to ministerial formation. There is probably a great deal more we could ask him to unwrap in that term “shorten”. I can assume that there is probably reference there to efforts in academia and in church leadership to lessen the requirements for degrees and for ordination in the church. Perhaps he has in mind the “modular” program offered by the denomination as a “minimum requirement” for ordination (which just recently *added* an additional module on Women in Ministry). Perhaps he sees a tension between a call of “urgency” and a movement of church planting by denominational leaders, in tension with accredited multi-year resident and online programs that result in academic degrees. I recognize that tension exists.

The USA/Canada Regional Office and the Research services of our denominational headquarters are quick to point out that the locus of greatest statistical growth in the USA/Canada church is among the “other than Anglo” peoples of this country, and more

particularly the Hispanic/Latino and Haitian communities (which make up over half of the Southern Florida District's churches). How do the Hispanic and Haitian churches experience such growth when educational, literary and leadership opportunities and resources are more limited than those of their Anglo counterparts? The frequent suggestion (Sanneh, et. al.) that the hope for the future of the Western church in North America will come from the vibrant church in the Southern Hemisphere seems to be playing itself out in this scenario. What is true for the Hispanic/Latino and Haitian churches is not as evident in the African American church and some of the other cultural groups who continue to minister from the margins but without as notable growth.

My observation from over 20 years of serving alongside Hispanic congregations, and 11 years alongside Haitian congregations, is that there is an unmistakable sense of divine calling and urgency about their ministry. The pastors of these congregations carry out their ministry with a sense of great urgency, as if Jesus were to come tomorrow, and they want no one to be lost. They serve at great personal sacrifice, with extremely limited resources of time, energy, finances and curriculum materials for discipleship and catechism. They do "whatever it takes" to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ known. Almost all of these pastors serve bi-vocationally. Many of them personally pay the bills for the church so the doors can stay open. They work full time secular jobs (both out of financial necessity and as a means of engaging the secular culture and developing relationships for evangelism). They do their best to care for their families and provide for them, but their fields of service place them often in areas where they face daily danger to the lives and their children are provided with less than ideal educational opportunities. I visited a few weeks ago with one of my Haitian pastors who drives a taxi by night to support his family. He is nearing the 10-year limit to complete his ministerial studies. He tried online studies but his command of English and technology was insufficient for him to succeed in that delivery system. He then tried to avail himself of the modular courses being taught in French in a town 90 miles from his home on Saturdays. He found himself falling asleep at the wheel on Saturday morning after his work shift and then falling asleep in class. There is no lack of desire and effort on the part of this servant of God to fulfill expectations to seek ministerial formation, but we aren't able to adequately resource him. I need to do better by him as a district superintendent. We need to do better by him as an educational region. Perhaps we need to consider eliminating the Manual requirement of the 10-year window, given the vast array of contexts in which our ministers find themselves serving.

Whatever the answer for this pastor may be, my point is that a sense of urgency and divine calling seems to be a greater contributor to the growth of the church than a full-orbed ministerial formation. The questions will then be raised, "But what kind of pastor, and what kind of church, are we producing?" Valid questions. I may be reading into Dr. Smith's conclusion more than he intends. I think I read that the sense of urgency can be a deterrent to proper formation of ministers in a secular context, because that sense of urgency may tempt us to "short the process" of ministerial formation. Another factor contributing to the "shorting of the process" is not from the evangelistic urgency side but also from the academic degree program side, where the courses offered in ministry majors may not be adequate to produce the desired competencies and character for effective ministry.

I would contend, that this is not an either/or scenario, but a both/and scenario. A “full-orbed theological program of study, complemented by a richly textured approach to spiritual formation” can be had in spite of the limitations of degree programs and alongside an appropriate sense of urgency. Can we begin with what we have, and take it to the next level, so that we enhance what is already in place, and address our shortcomings, especially in the light of the context of marginalization?

I believe we can, but the greatest obstacles will not be the secular world, but the internal structures and processes within which the church currently operates. Dr. Smith speaks of “the cost” of being a faithful presence. That cost will include the giving up of power by some, and the creating of vulnerabilities within our comfortable systems, to allow for an incarnational, contextual, infinitely reproducible ministry within the secular context of USA/Canada. The cost will include creating greater opportunities for graceful dialogue on critical matters, including a broad base of leadership, especially from the margins. It will include intentional integration of the marginalized in key leadership roles of the church. As I finish writing this paper, I am in a lifelong learning opportunity with some 80 district superintendents of the USA/Canada region. In my 20 years in the US superintendency, I have had the privilege of working with only 2 women superintendents, and only 1 African American superintendent. Today, there are two Hispanic superintendents and one Native American superintendent, serving two Hispanic and one Native American district, respectively. All the rest of us are white, male superintendents. There is nothing wrong with being a white male (it’s an exile forced upon me 😊), but there is something wrong with this leadership picture, if our church is to be relevant in today’s secular society. Our message of “Christ died for all”, seems to be lost in the unintended message we speak that “only white males lead”. Lord help us. Are we willing to pay the cost for change? How deeply do we care about being relevant in secular society? How will we form leaders for effective ministry, and at the same time recreate and retool our structures and system to send a consistent message to the predominant culture? How can create room and give permission for the marginalized in the church to lead a marginalized church in a secular age?