

# AGENDA FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Carl M. Leth

## Preface

This paper is offered as a starting point for dialogue among theological educators. It contains the outlines of a missional approach to theological education. As such it can serve to prompt our conversation in this theology conference. It is not offered with the impression that these issues are all new. In fact, it is my hopeful expectation that most of what is outlined here will simply be an affirmation or engaged discussion of ideas and principles already held. My goal (beyond addressing your interest in a fuller expression of my approach to theological education) is to work toward clarity and focus in our conversation and shared task as theological educators.

This kind of review and refocus is, in my opinion and experience, an ongoing process. In pastoral ministry I have normally dedicated time annually with my pastoral staff to this kind of "re-inspection of the foundations." Any explicit or implicit critique is not intended personally or critically. (Usually, these annual exercises in pastoral ministry have focused significantly - and helpfully - on critique of my own performance.) The only purpose for raising these critical issues is to inform our conversation about our future work together. I hope this paper will be received in that spirit.

## I. Introduction

*Presuppositions.* We approach the issue of theological education with some important presuppositions about our faculty of religion. That is, I want to affirm as foundational the academic competence of our faculty members, their commitment to Christ and their desire to faithfully serve the Church - in particular, the Church of the Nazarene. We begin with clarity of motive and commitment. At issue, then, is not motive or commitment in principle, but missional priority and focus. That is, how can we most effectively accomplish what we agree is our missional purpose and commitment?

*Context.* A selection of recent documents addressing theological education are attached. They are not intended to serve as precise guides for our consideration, rather they offer a range of conversation aptly illustrating the dynamic context in which this review takes place. The viability, function, and effectiveness of current models of theological education are being seriously and critically discussed. Alternate methods and models are being considered, envisioned and implemented. The ecclesial and missional context of theological education is being thoroughly critiqued. The challenges facing theological education are not unique to the Church of the Nazarene. Our conversation takes place within a much broader context of serious dialogue relating to the form, character and future of theological education.

Our particular context reflects these broader questions while contributing additional factors. We can easily identify three. One prominent factor is the missional emphasis and strategy of the Church of the Nazarene in planting new churches. This effort has significant implications for ministerial preparation in our respective regions. Second, increasing numbers of practicing clergy are

being drawn from bi-vocational or second career tracks. These clergy will rarely attend the regional Nazarene institution for formal theological training. Their need for theological preparation and practical training poses new questions. Third, the Church of the Nazarene is in the midst of its own identity "crisis." Understanding and effectively traditioning who we are is a critical challenge to the present and future pastoral leaders of our church.

Even this brief overview should suffice to demonstrate that we are in a time of dynamic change and fundamental challenge. If the task of theological education and clergy preparation is important to the faithful life of the church - and we all believe that it is - then our response to these challenges are of critical importance to the emerging ministry of the church in our area of responsibility. Assigning responsibility or blame, or lamenting the developing realities will not help us effectively address the challenges of the future. The central question is not "Where we have been?" or "Why are we here?" but "Where are we going?"

## **II. Key Principles**

There are several issues that are key to our accomplishment of our missional purpose and should be prominent features of our reflection. These are foundational perspectives that should inform our development of theological education.

*Missional Priority.* The first foundational principle is the missional priority of our ministry partnership with the Church of the Nazarene in the work of the Kingdom in the local and regional church. The work of the Church of the

Nazarene is certainly not the only faithful expression of the Kingdom. It is, however, our traditioning community of faith and our "field of labor" as part of the greater Kingdom. Supporting, enabling and enriching the life and ministry of the Church of the Nazarene in the local church ministry of the Olivet region is a foundational mission priority for theological education at ONU. We are a ministry arm of the practicing church in our region. We seek the highest levels of scholarship and academic excellence in the service of that missional priority. Our effectiveness in theological education should rightly be measured by our accomplishment of that supportive synergy.

*Collaborative Partnership.* The accomplishment of our missional priority will be dependant on the development of an active and effective collaborative partnership with the district leaders, pastors and laymen of this region. The understanding and execution of our mission should be done in the context of the church's corporate identity and lived-out character (i.e. theological praxis and historical/theological identity). For this reason ongoing, effective and meaningful dialogue is essential. Our role as theological educators is "alongside," rather than "over against." We are ministry partners rather than corrective critics or scholarly "prophets." This does not mean that we should not engage in substantive, even critical, dialogue. It does mean, however, that such a dialogue should take place within a context of constructive partnership in appropriately redemptive ways.

*Scholarship Bias.* Our missional focus implies a priority, or bias, for scholarship that is directed towards effecting our missional priority and collaborative partnership. This is not a bias toward poor scholarship rather than excellent scholarship. That would be an inaccurate characterization based on a

mistaken educational paradigm. Rather, it is a bias towards a particular focus of scholarly and academic excellence that is exercised in service to the life and work of the church. This bias is, in fact, characteristic of our tradition. John Wesley certainly exemplifies this dynamic. The commitment and priority of our denomination's specific history in higher education - including the history of Olivet - is consistently characterized by this kind of bias.

This bias heightens the importance of engagement with the congregational life of the church in the region. Critical feedback from, and dialogue with, our regional ministry partners is essential to effectively exercising our scholarship in effective service to the church. It also suggests that scholarship that is focused primarily on the academy, or guild of scholars, must assume a secondary role, or priority, in theological education in our church schools. That is not to say that such scholarship is inappropriate and unwelcome but that it must be pursued in the context of our foundational ministry commitment and not at the expense of effecting that missional priority.

### **III. Outcomes**

There are at least three identifiable areas of ministry impact for the Division of Religion. These identify the specific foci of our task. They form the outline of our ministry agenda.

*The University Community.* The first focus of ministry is our impact on the life of the university, including the faculty and the student body as a whole. This raises a range of issues including serving as a theological resource and pastoral

model for other faculty and administration. The religion faculty should exemplify and facilitate a campus ethos that lives out the stated mission of the university. The primary (but by no means sole) vehicle for that impact on students is the teaching of the required religion courses in the GenEd curriculum. These are some of the most important courses we will teach. Every student is "captive" to this opportunity to engage them with the Christian faith and to energize them as disciples of Christ. Our goal should be to lead all the students who attend those classes to love Christ and the Church (in particular, the Church of the Nazarene) more as a result of our teaching and witness (modeling / character).

The primary focus should be on formation rather than information. That is, an over-attention to communicating a body of data will actually interfere with the more important outcome of the class. Perhaps we could best describe the approach to courses at this level as evangelistic in the broad sense. We will have been most effective when we have engaged the students interest in Christ and a practical understanding of life in the Kingdom, energizing and equipping them for life-long learning. If we can produce students that have an increased passion and enthusiasm for the Christian faith and Scripture as a resource for living we will have been more successful than if we have effectively conveyed a body of information. These courses should be essentially formative and transformational in the lives of our students.

This engagement also needs to take place in the context of a sympathetic engagement with the Church of the Nazarene. Our partnership with the pastors and people of the congregations from which these students have come needs to be an active priority in our teaching. Some of the students will come from

settings where a pastor, for instance, may not be well trained and whose theological teaching has been inadequate, perhaps incorrect. Our task must not be to enlighten the student at the expense of their relationship with that pastor. Appreciation for ministry at the local level should be an expressed dimension of our teaching, especially when we are teaching material that conflicts with the students experience or understanding gained in that local setting. This is not to say that we should not teach our disciplines faithfully. The question is not whether we should teach our disciplines faithfully but how we will teach them. It is our responsibility in this educational setting to facilitate an appreciative and sympathetic engagement with the life of the Church of the Nazarene in the region even as we may sometimes challenge or correct ideas or opinions learned in the local church.

There are both ethical and pastoral reasons for this approach. The ethical issue pertains to the use of the teaching office of the church (commissioned and paid for by the church) as a forum for criticism of the church. This is particularly problematic when the criticism may question the essential character or identity of the church. These criticisms may engage important issues that need to be addressed by the church but an introductory course for college students is not the proper forum. To use the forum provided by the church to facilitate a theological, biblical or missional agenda that is at odds with the church (as we encounter it in the practiced life of the church as well as the formal pronouncements of the church) raises some troubling ethical questions.

The pastoral issue concerns the relationship of these students to spiritual teachers and models who may have been important influences in their lives despite inadequate theological or biblical understanding. When our teaching

(overtly or inadvertently) challenges or corrects that understanding it should be done in a way that does not demean or invalidate that spiritual mentor.

Especially when this kind of conflict becomes apparent it should be handled graciously and humbly, especially attentive to the student and their situation. Every effort should be made to engage sympathetically with the life and ministry experienced in the local church. Students should return home with an enhanced and sympathetic (if better informed) appreciation for their local church and spiritual leaders.

*Ministerial Preparation - University.* The second area of ministry impact for the Division of Religion is the theological preparation of students for ministry (primarily for ministry in the Church of the Nazarene). Theological education at ONU should have a pronounced focus on preparation for the practice of ministry. This is true for the training of future teaching scholars as well as those who envision congregational ministry. Those who will teach in our theological schools will be teaching students preparing for ministry. For future teaching scholars a pronounced focus on the practice of ministry will be an important dimension of preparing them for effective teaching ministry.

For students preparing for ministry the effective teaching of core disciplines needs to be shaped by the missional task. For instance, integration of scholarship and praxis needs to be an ongoing concern of every discipline. This should not be relegated to "practics" courses. Adequate preparation for ministry requires the developed competence of integration. Biblical and theological study should be done with one eye on the scholarship of the discipline and another on the context in which those resources will be used. The pastoral context should be present in every classroom, engaged in dialogue with every subject. To some

extent this will shape the content of our courses - i.e. what we teach. To a greater extent this focus should shape the conduct of our courses - i.e. how we teach.

*Theological Resource and Ministerial Training - Region.* The third area of ministry impact is in the theological training or enhancement of ministers in the region. We are the primary theological resource for the Church of the Nazarene in our regions. District superintendents, district teachers or trainers, and pastors should be able to look to us for partnership in helping them address their ministry assignments. That role will no longer be adequately addressed (if it ever was) by traditional residential learning targeted toward young adults preparing to enter ministry. In the absence of effective and substantive partnership from the regional theological faculty these practitioners will look to other ready resources to shape their ministry. Prominent mega-churches, teachers and writers will assume the function of theological formation for ministry. Contributing substantively to the theological praxis of the church will require finding some means to address this area of increasing need.

#### **IV. ISSUES**

*The Question of Magisterium* - A critical question in our consideration of effective missional theological education centers on the issue of the magisterium. That is, to what, or to whom, are we accountable? Recognizing the multiplicity of interested constituencies associated with the educational task we will be well served if we can clarify the priority of accountability. This issue is critical in arriving at any assessment of competence or success. The role of the

magisterium is to determine our success at achieving appropriate goals or effectively serving our purpose. It is the focal point of assessment and accountability. Lack of clarity on this issue results in varying, even conflicting, assessments of success based on different criterion or measures. In the matter of theological education the key issue reduces to the question, "Does the Church or the Academy constitute the primary magisterium for theological education?"

The answer to that question historically in the Church has, until the modern period, consistently been the Church. The answer to that question historically in the Church of the Nazarene, until recent history, has been the Church. The notion of the Academy standing "over against" the church in the practice of theological education as an independent arbiter is a quite modern development. It implicitly assumes the priority of theology, as science, over the authority of theology, as practice and worship of the Church. It makes the academy the normative traditioning community rather than the living community of faith per se. It reflects an assumption that scholarship stands in a relation of critical superiority to the practiced life of the community of faith (as we encounter it in the life of the organized church).

The very context of this dilemma is a function of the formative influence of the modern, post-enlightenment period. The practice of theology and theological education has been increasingly fragmented. The concretization of discrete disciplinary approaches to theological study works against essential integration of those disciplines. The artificial isolation of those disciplines fails to reflect - or effect - the integration of the various tools and facets of theological study into an integrated whole. The practice of theology and

theological education has also been increasingly separated from the praxis of the life of the church. Even in theological education core disciplines are separated from the teaching of "practices." Theology is no longer a function of pastors and church leaders but is relegated to the domain of academic specialists. A casual review of church history will demonstrate that the practice of substantive theology has been primarily the function of practicing clergy until the recent modern period. Theology was done in the context of ministry in service to the practiced life of the church and was accountable to the church.

The notion that the - now distanced - practice of theology by academic specialists should no longer be primarily accountable to the church but to the Academy, or guild of scholars, is a thoroughly "modern" development building on the fragmentation already created. This needs to be recognized for the innovative movement that it is. In fact, there is increasing awareness within the scholarly community of the necessity to "do" theology within the context of the living church. This recovery movement reaffirms - at least in principle - the priority of the church as magisterium. It restores the historical role of the priority of the church in the theological enterprise. This priority needs to be reaffirmed and explored and should serve as a foundational principle for theological education.

This does not reject or preclude academic excellence or accountability. These guarantee that we address our missional task with the best resources, affirmed by the Academy. We are simply establishing missional priority, and therefore, accountability. We may find that other professional, serving disciplines (e.g. the practice of medicine) may provide some helpful insight or models for this process, balancing scholarship and effective practice.

*Identity (historical & theological) as Context* - Our immediate context for the work of theological education is the Church of the Nazarene. It is neither the only true church nor an adequate expression of the whole church. But it is the living stream of the universal church in which God has placed us and in which we are called to serve. Our faithful service to this particular traditioning community within Christianity does not negate or reject our part in the whole. In fact, we are most effectively and truly a part of the greater whole (the Church) when we faithfully serve the part (The Church of the Nazarene) that is our immediate community. It is a seriously flawed ecclesiology that affirms the whole by critically rejecting the part that is our immediate community. It exchanges the (sometimes challenging and ever-flawed) embodied community in which we are located in favor of a more remote idealized community (usually conveniently self-defined). Thus identified as a faithful member of the greater community we are freed to critique or disengage from the immediate community. This a self-serving and inadequate understanding of our relation to the church catholic.

Our immediate context is the Church of the Nazarene. More specifically, it is the Church of the Nazarene as we encounter it in our educational region. This is the embodied church with which we are in partnership and to which we are accountable. Its flaws and failings are the business of our family - to be lovingly and sympathetically addressed in the context of committed and engaged relationship in that community.

## **V. The Theological Community as Resource for Ministry**

The challenge for theological education is to become an increasingly effective resource for the ministry of the church. Let me suggest three presenting tasks:

1) More effective integration of disciplines. In the pedagogical forms and strategies that we use and in the approach we take to the material of our disciplines and educational process we need to strive to equip and enable students to integrate effectively. Pastoral ministry rarely encounters discrete questions or problems. People do not ask "church history," or "New Testament," or "systematic theology" questions. The issues and challenges posed in congregational life are not discrete disciplinary problems. The questions and problems of congregational ministry are practical life problems that call for the integrated resources of theological education to be brought into effective focus. This integration cannot be left to occasional courses in ministry practice or deferred to life in ministry when the student/pastor will need to integrate these resources on his/her own. This integration needs to be taught and modeled throughout the processes of theological education.

2) More effective integration of scholarly resources and theological praxis. The ministerial student needs to be prepared to be the resident theologian, effectively shaping the lived, taught, and administered theology of his/her local church or ministry setting. The resources of the teaching office of the church need to be brought to bear on the issues and challenges of praxis in the life of the church. How we do and understand evangelism, worship, music, music styles and uses, church growth and marketing strategies, property, the practical process of conversion, patterns of discipline/ spiritual formation in church life,

comprehensive models for value/purpose focused congregational ministry, fund-raising and stewardship, and contemporary models like Hybels, Maxwell and Warren are all issues of theological praxis calling for the resources of theological education and training.

3) More effective models of theological education and clergy preparation. We need to explore creative strategies and pedagogical methods to meet the increasingly diverse needs of the church. Partnership with teaching congregations, interdisciplinary teaching, creative and effective use of the growing constituency of educated and qualified pastoral leaders who will remain in parish ministry, development of extension teaching/ remote campuses, resourcing partnership with district trainers, use of internet and remote learning strategies, and creation of theological dialogue opportunities are examples of creative educational methods and strategies that can make theological education on the ONU region more effective when shaped by our missional purpose.

### **Concluding Comments**

These are issues, principles and concerns that significantly inform my leadership agenda and are offered as a basis for engaged discussion and collaborative development. Other issues, alternative considerations and creative options will surely emerge as we work together in this challenging and critically important enterprise of theological education. The importance of the task at hand and the critical character of this time in our church's history demands no less.

## INDEX OF SAMPLE RESOURCE DOCUMENTS

- 1)"A 21st Century Seminary Faculty Model," from The M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, 1994.
- 2)"Memo to Theological Educators", from Ministry on the Firing Line - A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church, by Ray S. Andersen, 1993.
- 3)"Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education," from the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, 1990.
- 4)"The Road Less Travelled: Theological Education and the Quest to Fashion the Seminary of the Twenty-First Century," in Faculty Dialogue, 20, Winter 1993-94, by Richard Cavnes Neese.
- 5)"Church and School Together," in In Trust, vol. 13 no. 4, Summer 2002, by Melinda R. Heppe.
- 6)"The Churches Drift Away," in In Trust, vol. 13 no.2, New Year 2002, by Kenneth A. Briggs.
- 7)"Theology is Moving South," in In Trust, vol.14 no.2, New Year 2003, by Andrew F. Walls.
- 8)"Trends in Theological Education: Seminary for the 21st Century," address by William O. Crews, February 10, 1997.