

# THE LEXINGTON SEMINAR FINAL REPORT

Sara Wenger Shenk (with Ervin Stutzman, Dorothy Jean Weaver and Gerald Shenk)  
December 12, 2007

## ISSUE AND CONTEXT

Eastern Mennonite Seminary is a graduate division of Eastern Mennonite University, located in the heart of the scenic and historic Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. While the seminary and university are Mennonite in church association with a slight majority of students who hail from Mennonite congregations, our student body and faculty are becoming more culturally, denominationally and religiously diverse. For fifteen years, we have included a cross-cultural course as a core requirement within our Master of Divinity program. While most of our faculty and a fair number of students have had significant cross-cultural experiences prior to coming to EMS, we continue to discern that our readiness to engage diversity is an area in which we all have much more to learn. When invited by the Lexington Seminar to undertake a faculty project, the EMS faculty agreed that our primary issue in teaching and learning may best be expressed in the following two questions: How can we effectively engage the “other” to fulfill our mission as a seminary? How can we best equip our students to engage the “other” in ways that enhance God’s mission in the world?

Several factors that augmented our sense that engaging the “other” is an important issue for us to address included our seminary purpose statement which reads: **Eastern Mennonite Seminary equips men and women to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, prepared to lead the church in mission with passion and integrity. As a community of disciples, we are humbled by God’s call, formed in Christ, transformed by the Holy Spirit, and empowered to serve with knowledge, wisdom and grace.** We believe that in order to prepare our students to “lead the church in mission,” we must enable them to effectively engage a diverse world. We expect that they will minister to people of different religious faiths, ethnic groups, and lifestyles. To minister effectively in such cases, they will need to learn effective ways to engage “the other.”

We are also part of a denomination – Mennonite Church USA – that recently identified becoming a missional church as a primary goal. Many Mennonites have traditionally lived apart from “the world” as a witness to their faith. As some Mennonites have become eager to leave their “separateness” behind in order to assimilate into the larger culture, others are energized by the call for missional engagement with the world. As one of two Mennonite seminaries, EMS is in a unique position to provide theological and practical resources to churches who desire to engage the “other” in missional ways.

The seminary is also a part of a university with both the challenges and opportunities of collaboration across the undergraduate and four other graduate programs. We’re convinced that we haven’t maximized the richness of potential synergy between our several programs, particularly between the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) and the seminary. Toward that end, we hoped a project that includes an intentional

engagement with the “other” would enable us to better provide biblical/theological resources in ways that contribute to healing and reconciliation across religious and ethnic divides.

The faculty recognize that to better equip students and resource congregations, we ourselves must grow in our own ability to engage the “other.” Yet we also determined that the growing edge for such engagement may vary considerably from one professor to the next. For example, several professors have lived in overseas contexts where they regularly interacted with people from different religious faiths. Other professors have had little such contact. Therefore, we attempted to design a project that would help us to grow both as individual professors and as a group.

The faculty also agreed that we wanted to address issues of teaching and learning even as we address issues of individual growth for each professor. We acknowledged that as we are pushed beyond our comfort zone through encounters with people very different from ourselves, we will be better able to appreciate and benefit from the rich diversity present among our students.

Our goals then, for the Lexington Project we undertook were that each faculty member will:

- 1) gain new insights into the unique needs and perspectives of a particular group of people significantly different from his or her own primary community;
- 2) gain new competencies in teaching students how to relate to diverse constituencies;
- 3) engage with other faculty members in discussion about issues of teaching and learning.

## **PROJECT DESIGN**

The Lexington Seminar project was designed to employ reflection/action research. As stated above, the faculty also hoped that we could incorporate both individual and group activities into project. The former would be customized for each faculty member, the latter would be inclusive of the entire faculty. In order to allow for both, we designed a project that would enable us to:

- 1) reflect as a faculty on the theoretical concept of engaging the “other” from each person’s disciplinary perspective;
- 2) have all faculty members actively engage the “other” in some experiential fashion;
- 3) reflect together on engaging the “other” in a way that informs our ongoing work and mission as theological educators in a Mennonite Seminary within a university context.

We pursued a sequence of activities, including a retreat at the beginning and conclusion of the project, and an encounter with the “other” itself. At our initial faculty retreat, as

we began with the Lexington Project (January 3-4, 2006), each faculty member was invited to address one or more of the following questions:

- 1) How does my experience of myself as “other” within the faculty affect my roles and relationships within the faculty?
- 2) How does my particular academic discipline influence the way that I respond to “otherness”?
- 3) How have experiences of the “other” in my life shaped who I am and how I teach?

We were then each invited to plan an encounter with an identified “other” for sometime during the spring or summer months of 2006. We were asked to focus an encounter that would push us out of our “comfort zone” into an experience of the “other,” to write a brief proposal to the dean requesting any needed funds to carry out the project for up to \$500, and to journal and/or reflect in writing on the experience itself.

Following our varied encounters, we gathered again for a follow-up faculty retreat in January of 2007. This retreat conversation was facilitated by a faculty colleague from EMU’s Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP). Our conversation revolved around these focused questions:

- What did you learn about the “other”?
- What did we learn collectively, either about teaching the “other” or about connecting with the “other” outside of the classroom setting?
- How do our students understand learning? What have we learned about our pedagogy and our curriculum design through this process?
- What possibilities exist for the ongoing relationship with EMS & CJP?

## **RESOURCES USED IN DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT**

The resources made available to faculty were in the form of two retreats, a consultant to facilitate our conversation, and a \$500 grant for an individually designed project to encounter the “other.” The two retreats were particularly designed to allow faculty a comfortable, delightful place apart from their normal routines in order to engage in meaningful conversation with each other. On both occasions, faculty were able to enjoy good food, recreational time in the out-of-doors, and spacious hours to reflect together in conversation that allowed both personal story-telling and reflection on the meaning of various encounters for our teaching and learning in the seminary context. The \$500 was made available so individual faculty could determine which of the various possible “others” each would most beneficially encounter. This approach to dispersing available funds allowed for significant personal freedom and discernment which was energizing for the faculty.

With the retreats, we had corporate conversation; with the design of the projects, we were empowered to pursue our own individually discerned arenas for growth and encounter.

## PROJECT RESULTS

Following their encounters, various faculty offered their observations in written reports. Several of their comments follow:

In reflecting on her experience, Dr. Dorothy Jean Weaver, Professor of New Testament, reported that perhaps the most prominent insight she have gained through our faculty discussions about encountering the “other” had to do with the wide range of “others” that came into play as we considered this topic individually and then reflected on it corporately. She said she was initially hoping that we would name a corporate project that we’d experience and reflect on together. But a significant learning for all of us lay precisely in the fact that we each named such intriguingly different “others” which uniquely challenge us as individuals. These “others” included Muslims and Hispanics in Harrisonburg, Muslims in Iran, Pentecostals, Conservative Conference Mennonites, family members on the “other” side of a church split, sacramental vis-à-vis non-sacramental traditions, young adults involved with the “emerging church,” gays and lesbians within the church, urban churches, patients and caregivers in the local Hospice program, western Mennonites in Denver, CO, post-Hindu Mennonites in Trinidad, and the motor cycle sub-culture. “Otherness” can clearly be framed in as many ways as there are individuals.

Dr. Lonnie Yoder, Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling, made the observation from his encounters that we have a strong predisposition as academics to engage the “other” by making the “other” an object of study and reflection rather than a true conversation partner which would afford mutual opportunity for growth and change. He acknowledged that in his encounters, he didn’t engage the “other” so much as study or experience the persons he visited with. And he asked himself, “How am I open to change when engaging the ‘other’?”

Dr. Daniel Garrett, Professor of United Methodist Studies, observed that he came away from his encounters with a renewed commitment to engaging the “other” and to develop teaching methods and styles that are dialogical in nature. He suggested that dialogical teaching allows for a richer connection to a diverse student body.

Kenton Derstine, Director of Clinical Pastoral Education, observed that sometimes the closest “other” is the most difficult to engage. He said that his efforts to engage family members who have been alienated served to corroborate his conviction that efforts to bridge distances in one’s own family can result in the emergence of new and meaningful relationships. He also commented that he is newly respectful of the challenge of actually following through with plans for bridging the distance to any “other.”

Dr. Mark Thiessen Nation, Professor of Theology, asserted that it is vital that we continue to encounter the “other” as truly “other”. And he quoted Miroslav Volf as saying that we must have both a “catholic personality,” enriched by otherness of those who inhabit our culture as well as an “evangelical personality,” utilizing discernment and judgment to know what is and isn’t consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Wendy Miller, Professor of Spiritual Formation, observed that what she learned in her encounters was to continue to be open to listen, to be respectful, and to be hospitable to the presence and work of God within the “other.”

Don Yoder, Director of Admissions, said that following his encounters, he has a new level of confidence in approaching strangers in the various venues where he does his work, and that he is more ready to look beyond the externals and engage persons at a human level.

Dr. Ervin Stutzman, dean of the seminary, invested significant time in learning another language as an aspect of his encounter. He commented that in his teaching, he is more compassionate toward students who speak English as a second language since he has personally experienced the challenges of speaking and writing in another language.

We reflected together at a Seminary Faculty Retreat, January 2-3, 2007, as we recounted our varied experiences with what it means to “encounter” these “others” and to equip our students for such encounters. Dr. Weaver commented that what connected most prominently for her in that conversation was the striking divergence between the two poles of “other as challenge” (a stance of over-againstness) and “other as gift” (a stance of openness). This spectrum lies, she said, at the heart of the entire matter. And this issue has to do on the one hand with acknowledging and claiming our own “identity” (personal, family, ethnic, confessional, etc.) and on the other hand with extending “hospitality” (respect, space, time, openness) to others. To live with this spectrum is not to blur or obliterate genuine distinctions, she said, but to learn how to live out our own identities with courage and integrity while welcoming the “others” with grace and hospitality.

## **SHARING THE WISDOM**

In our conversations as faculty following our individual projects, a variety of themes emerged that resonate broadly among us as a community of scholars, teachers, and learners ourselves.

We observed that learning from encounters with some “others” does transfer to a readiness to encounter other “others.” Our hope is that we’re not just about cultivating an awareness of “otherness,” but will continue to actively and regularly engage persons outside our comfort zones.

One fascinating conundrum that kept showing up was that the “closer other” is sometimes more challenging than the exotic “distant other.” That ah ha, in a surprising way, frees one to acknowledge the “up close” uncomfortable reality with new awareness and deliberate engagement.

The dynamics around identity and encounters with the “other” were a frequent theme, with general acknowledgement that identity is often shaped in contradiction with the “other” and that we must both pay attention to our resistance to encounter the “other”—

examining where it is coming from, even as we thoughtfully and deliberately move to create the conditions for a genuine encounter.

We observed that when we deeply engage the “other,” the likelihood is that both of us who engage will be changed. And that we can’t do business as usual and expect the “other” simply to fit in, but must count on it that genuine engagement will entail readiness to change what we need to in order to truly listen and honor the “other,” even as we welcome the “other” to change in relation to us.

A theme that showed up repeatedly was that engaging the “other” often includes an opportunity to clarify our own distinctives. In the process, we may very well notice similarities we share with the “other” but we will also no doubt, more clearly see our differences.

In some cases, our encounters surprised us with how generous we found the “other” to be, and eager for friendship. We were simply confirmed in our hope that there is rich potential for friendship when we make space in our busy lives for genuine connections.

We reflected on ways to proactively prepare to encounter the “other” and to plan opportunities and settings in which we will regularly encounter the “other.” Such encounters will sometimes require that we “establish safe space” particularly for those who experience threat in the encounter. This is an important consideration when we deliberately plan encounters for our students.

Dr. Gerald Shenk summarized several learnings in his report to the Lexington Seminar gathering with other seminaries at the Asticou Inn, Bar Harbor, Maine. The range of individual projects as selected by faculty members (from one's own family system to urban ministry and emergent churches to motor-cyclists to Shi'a Muslim theology in Iran) impressed our review audience of peer seminaries in Maine with the realization that "otherness" is defined very differently by each participant.

Dr. Shenk observed that during the course of our faculty activities and reflection on them, it has become important for us to create safe spaces for learning *about* diversity, *within* diversity, and to learn *from* diversity. He spoke of how our encounters with the “other” not only provided us with additional information about diverse realities, but enhanced our readiness to identify with the humanity of the “other” in ways that make it more difficult to discount their experience. We were pushed to become more self-consciously aware of diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the world and to engage multiple languages and world views.

While we work to hold what are sometimes competing realities together as aspects of our common humanity, Dr. Shenk said, we are also pushed to more clearly define our own particular commitments. Somehow, an encounter with the “other” prods us each to reflect more intentionally on our own lifestyle, our own confessional commitments, our own identity both as individuals, and as a seminary community. It is in knowing the viability of other traditions and other perspectives, that we are moved to critically reflect

on our own. Our encounters with the “other” become the occasion to examine our own commitments and lifestyle more deliberately; to become more thoughtfully self-aware. And ironically, the more at home we become in our own identity and tradition (having freely tested it in multiple venues with “otherness”) the more generous of spirit we can become in our appreciation for the differentness and rich diversity of perspectives provided by the many “others.” In other words, as a seminary community, we are freed to recommit ourselves to embody our identified primary tradition, without being “ghettoized” by it.

These encounters thus can become and did become for many of the faculty, the occasion for creative transformation, Dr. Shenk suggested. They contributed to an enhanced readiness on the faculty’s part to engage others across campus, and off-campus. Clearly, the EMS faculty have been doing this all along. Most of the faculty, in fact, have spent years living, studying and teaching in cultures very different from their own primary culture. This project was particularly helpful at this juncture, however, because we’re more and more aware of the increasing diversity and religious pluralism in our own classrooms—not just across the university, or the world. We’re becoming more aware that we ourselves must be prepared and must prepare our students for public discourse and practice that is both unapologetically Christian and graciously hospitable to the “others” who are frequently within our neighborhoods, schools and even churches.

Dr. Shenk observed that after the faculty encounters and the intentional conversation in retreat settings about our encounters, we returned with renewed commitment to theological education that is 1) God-focused, (but not ethereal); 2) self-aware, (but not self-absorbed) and 3) other-engaged (but not disoriented). Dr. Shenk said he believes we as a seminary have opened a trajectory that may take us far down new paths in our upcoming curriculum revision. His observation is that as a community, we are becoming more transparent and deliberate in our welcome to persons of other traditions, recognizing that they enrich our interactions on campus, even as we are firmly committed to be a Christ-centered Anabaptist/Mennonite seminary.

Dean Stutzman observed that the Lexington Seminar project seemed particularly well-timed for our faculty as it came during a year of significant reflection on our pedagogy in general, and as we enter a major curriculum revision in the subsequent year. It helped to create the relaxed space and opportunities for faculty to engage in important conversation about teaching and learning. It enhanced our participation with two other grants that came along with similar aims—one from the Wabash Center and one from *Allelon*. It helped to prepare us for our current curriculum revision process by alerting us to the need for adaptation to a variety of “others” who might feel excluded by our current curriculum. It provided the opportunity to bring in a consultant, a colleague from another department of the university. And it modeled in multiple ways, the invaluable function of shared conversation in settings where we can move beyond the routines to genuinely engage with each other around our common vocation: equipping men and women to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, prepared to lead the church in mission with passion and integrity.