

LEXINGTON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Lexington Seminar Project : 2002-2004

Issues and Context

Lexington Theological Seminary is an ecumenical seminary with a Disciples of Christ heritage that has long stressed the importance of faith and reason as it focuses upon preparing leaders for the multiple ministries of the church. For over a century the seminary has stressed the critical nature of theological education for the church in a culture that is constantly in flux. Lexington Theological Seminary is a school with 140 years of demonstrated resiliency. It is a seminary with an ethos of healthy self-criticism, of re-examining itself when it senses that the church and community are not being well-served. It is not an institution that pounces upon quick fixes which will draw attention only to LTS. As a charter member of ATS, it is a seminary that is committed to cooperation with other seminaries in working through the issues facing us all.

When Lexington Theological Seminary was invited to participate in this seminar the institution was going through a period of extraordinary transition. There had been a large turnover of personnel. It was an emotional period. Also, LTS was beginning to experience the effects of the cultural shift that so many other seminaries had come against sooner. The demographic changes and the need to do more *remedial work* with students was necessitating some serious re-evaluations and assessment. Whereas once LTS was the leading Disciples seminary, in very recent years the school has become a regional seminary. This had necessitated dramatic shifts in scheduling of classes and in the orientation of new students. The average age fluctuates in the high thirties. There are more female students than males. Over half the student body lives off campus.

Entering students were demonstrating the cultural neglect of critical reflection which is even more pronounced in the area of religious studies. Many students entered seminary not only with little to no theological formation, but also many came with minimal background in history, philosophy, logic, public speaking, reading and writing skills, and other subjects that did not fit into their understanding of the *vital skills for the workplace*. Many students do not think of church as a place for the transformation of lives, but as a place where people can engage in activities to ward off boredom, therefore they tend to come to seminary only to learn entrepreneurial skills, to get a toolkit or a bag of tricks.

Many students, shaped by the multi-cultural and ecumenical language of the day, take the attitude that “*since there is no one way to think of God, why make a big deal out of theology—JUST EXPERIENCE GOD.*” Christologies are even smaller. Seminary for some is a place to discover their niceness meridians. The seminary faculty began pondering what is the model of ministry we should be forming. How can we help mainline denominations rediscover their voice? How to recover the ideal that we are about imparting wisdom, not dispensing information, especially in a day when there is more supply of information and less demand? Woven throughout all these questions is the conviction that nothing significant can happen until we recapture the importance of *thinking theologically*.

This was an issue that we soon discovered was not unique to Kentucky. Seminaries everywhere are facing this challenge and, indeed, several other participants in the Lexington Seminar also are

addressing it. Furthermore, we came to realize that in this day of mass media and rapid communications there are very few areas of life in which people are engaged in serious reflection and examination of issues.

When LTS was invited to participate in the Lexington Seminar we were at a point of time that called, not for crisis management, but for great imagination and faith, for open mindedness and willingness to test new models before we embraced them fully. This Seminar project in theological education was a Godsend that helped us not only to focus upon this issue, but to remold and rebuild our faculty and program around this important issue.

Project Design

The LTS team returned from Maine with the goal of bringing the rest of the faculty on board around ways to sharpen theological focus. We chose to enter into structured conversations that explored ways the faculty could strengthen its own teaching skills and enhance the current curriculum as we looked at the need for changes in the curriculum and the methodology that would recover the ideal that we are about, that is imparting knowledge that leads to wisdom, not just information. Our goal was to strengthen the faculty in the formation of students who understand the value of integrating mind and heart in a way that reflects critical theological thinking about all of life including spiritual depth, moral integrity, historical understanding, and relational skills, who can proclaim the Gospel in the context of the world and the Christian faith in ways that inspire the Church to think and act in faithful ways.

As we discussed the above statement about what a successful graduate of LTS would look like we saw that our focus had to be upon faculty development. If we are to be concerned over student learning, we needed to reexamine and re-evaluate our teaching.

Using the example of the Lexington Seminar retreat as a model, we had four faculty retreats in which we brought in outside facilitators to guide our conversations. These were all overnight retreats and one was a two nighter in which we invited spouses also, using this as an opportunity to rebuild the seminary's sense of community with the new faculty and new president. Two retreats were held at Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. One was held at the Laws Lodge on the campus of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, and the two nighter was held in New Harmony, Indiana. These retreats were used to bring everyone else on board with our theological issue and to respond to the suggestions that had been made in Maine. Faculty lunches, every Wednesday, also were implemented to carry on this discussion in various ways. We watched a series of nine videotapes from the Foundation for Critical Thinking. We discussed the ways in which we were teaching and how we thought our courses encouraged theological thinking, how all our courses are integrated, and the practical application of thinking theologically. We purchased a number of books some of which were distributed only to the faculty; others to the entire student body and staff. We even had a couple of sessions with the staff to bring them on board with this issue because in a small seminary setting like this, many times the students engage in discourse with the members of the staff. We also brought in a facilitator who worked with us on adult learning issues and methods.

Essentially, the discussion centered around what we are doing and not doing at LTS to encourage critical reflection. Do we need to revise the curriculum, offer a new class, create a learning lab?

The facilitators helped us to examine our mission and how we are addressing it in our classes. They helped us to see the whole picture of reading, writing, as well as reflecting critically. They helped us get refocused at a point when it did seem like we were looking through a kaleidoscope of possibilities. It was at this point that we then agreed to a series of six monthly, two hour strategy planning meetings in which we would focus upon the nature of the curriculum and to reach a common vocabulary for our discussions. In the course of a year we began looking at an introductory course and what it would look like. While we are getting closer to the structure of that course, there are some hangups over pedagogical approaches.

During the course of this project, the faculty voted to make it our Quality Enhancement Project for the SACS accreditation process. This has given us added incentive for working seriously on the issue we chose as well as on the idea of learning based outcomes. Faculty have begun rewriting their syllabi under new guidelines that we have adopted. These will make it easier on us to assess and evaluate what we are doing in the classroom. We also changed the evaluation forms for the courses to ask students how the course helped them to think theologically. We changed the nature of our new student orientation to begin introducing them to the concept and language of critical reflection. We now meet together after our capstone course, the Senior Symposium, has finished to evaluate what changes we are observing, what improvements, or not, and what we need to do to prepare the students for this summative experience. Several library displays have been created around this project and we have noticed the students themselves using the expression *thinking theologically* more often.

We will be having a retreat with faculty of some undergraduate schools in the religious studies area to discuss with them their pedagogical concerns and responses and how they work with students at this stage of intellectual development. We have been focusing on a particular issue, Religion and Aging, and in collaboration with the University of Kentucky Sanders-Brown Center on Aging, have been using that topic as a paradigm for thinking theologically about a particular issue. We held a joint conference with that program this spring. All field education students were required to attend. We will expand that into other areas and topics as we seek to collaborate more with other institutions and other programs at the University of Kentucky.

Because the issue is also our QEP for SACS we will not be dropping it now that the grant dollars have run out. Critical reflection is needed more than ever before in the Church and in society.

Resources

As mentioned in the above section each retreat had a different facilitator from outside LTS to help us stay focused on the central issue. The retreat in Louisville brought in Deb Core to work with us on how reading and writing skills have to be addressed in building critical reflection skills, indeed, how then to teach students to read and write and discuss theologically. Holding the retreat on the campus of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary also was done to acquaint our faculty with their Lilly funded Learning Lab.

The New Harmony Retreat was a great resource for bringing the new faculty and president into the seminary ethos. Plenty of time was allotted for social times together. New Harmony also is a setting that had a lot of symbolism, having once been a center for learning and knowledge

seeking, and also having a garden cemetery that enshrines the theologian, Paul Tillich. Vic Klimoski, our facilitator for that retreat, helped us get centered on what we needed to be doing the next year. We found ourselves coming up with several options and he helped us to narrow in on one critical one and helped us to set a schedule for how we would address our issue.

At Pleasant Hill, retreat number four, we brought in Stephen D. Brookfield, who has written a lot on adult education. He helped the faculty to see many new ways to improve their teaching and course design.

Materials were acquired from the Foundation for Critical Thinking including videotapes and a number of books, some of which were distributed to the faculty, placed in the library. A copy of *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking* was distributed to every student and every faculty and staff member.

A summary of William Perry's *Schemes of Intellectual Development* was distributed to the faculty at one of the retreats as background to our discussions. Also, each member of the faculty received a copy of the book by Gerald M. Nosich, *Learning to Think Things Through : a Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum*.

Books were purchased for the staff of the seminary also as they too were brought into the discussion of our issue. The two titles that were made available to them: *Becoming a Thinking Christian* by John Cobb and *How to Think Theologically* by Howard Stone and James Duke. The dean met with the staff on two different occasions for extended sessions on the project. One session included the videotape, *Why Students—and Often Teachers—Don't Reason Well*.

Project Results

Since the project did become our QEP for the SACS accreditation visit, we do not see ourselves as finished. There is much to do. The faculty have made adjustments in the way they structure their courses, focusing less upon how much content they can cram into a semester, and striving more to facilitate the learning process, to bring students to learning how to reflect critically upon materials brought before them and how to integrate what they learn in all their courses and how to see that as ministers every issue they face in their ministry is a theological issue as well as a political, economic, racial, etc. issue.

We will be seeking some other funding to look at the topic of religion and aging as a theological issue as we work with the University of Kentucky. There are other programs at the University that we plan to explore greater collaboration and conversation and try to restore the theological element of those topics in a meaningful and productive way. We will be working with undergraduate faculties more to explore ways that humanities courses, especially religious studies, can be strengthened at the undergraduate level.

We plan to have more convocations where our faculty and others debate and discuss critical issues of the day, modeling serious reflection in their presentations, even to switching sides and pointing out the merits of the opposition. We will also be seeking funding to help send our faculty to institutes, workshops, conferences, etc. that will enhance their teaching. It is also our

intention to bring in professionals in the area of adult learning to keep us on track with this project. This will help us address the fact that most professors never took any education courses in their training.

We will begin teaching the Introductory course in the Fall of 2005. It will be a course that is faculty owned. While we will come up with a basic outline of what needs to be accomplished, each professor teaching it will have the freedom to experiment with its design, as we do with the senior symposium class. We will revisit its structure on a regular basis and assess its merits.

Something we should have done and will try to implement now, is to do some research in what other seminaries are doing to address this issue. We may stage some retreats with them to carry on extended conversation and share what we are doing and have learned from this effort to renew the seminary's mission. We may even try to keep count of the many times we hear students and staff and faculty use the expression *thinking theologically*. That people are talking about it is an important result and sign that something is beginning to take shape.