

Final Report: The General Theological Seminary's Lexington Seminar Project "Enhancing Lay Education at GTS"

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Issue in Context

During the summer of 2001, General Seminary was invited to participate in the Lexington Seminar, a Lilly based program to encourage discussion and cooperation among theological faculty. During the fall of 2001 the General Theological Seminary chose as its topic for faculty discussion the possibility of extending our M.A. program and make it a vehicle for lay education. Historically GTS has been an institution that has focused on full time residential theological education geared for training and educating persons for the priesthood. Our model has been semi-monastic and inward dwelling, indeed the very design of our 19th century English gothic campus centered in the middle of Manhattan, was to put the focus on the inside and not on the outside.

An expanded M.A. program focusing on lay education presented great opportunities yet at the same time great challenges. It would allow the Seminary to expand its mission and meet a growing need in the church. It would also allow the Seminary to make more efficient use of its resources both by enlarging our evening course electives, and increasing our pool of commuting students. However such a change would be a significant departure from the institution's traditional self-understanding. Although our mission statement does now include (by implication) lay education, the institution has historically been a residential community for the educating and forming of clergy. Many of its customs and mores have emphasized this residential and clerical nature. This has made our initial forays into lay education less than problem free. The question that we framed in a "narrative" prepared for the Lexington Seminar was how could we expand in the area of lay education without losing key elements of our institutional culture that gave it its character.

As a result of the June meeting the planning committee (composed of Dean Ward Ewing, Sub-Dean Robert Bruce Mullin, and Professors William Doubleday, Elisabeth Koenig, Judith Newman, and Robert Owens), proposed that the faculty take up four inter-related questions as a focus for our Fall 2002 faculty discussions:

- 1) What is lay education?
- 2) In what ways is it distinct from education and formation for ordination, and in what ways is it the same?

- 3) What is the end of lay education—that is, aside from the most important value of creating a theologically informed Christian, for what vocational jobs could a theological degree prepare lay students?
- 4) What are the costs and benefits, not simply in financial terms, but in less tangible terms, to the institution as currently constituted in expanding its focus from training people for ordination to educating an increasing cadre of committed lay people?

The committee believed that the faculty conversation should be guided by three fundamental goals.

Goals:

- 1) to create a proper venue for the faculty fully to discuss an issue crucial to the future of the institution,
- 2) to assemble necessary information so that faculty could make a reasoned evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of such a course of action
- 3) To begin discussion of how such a plan could be implemented.

Project Design

In order to achieve our objective we recognized we needed to inaugurate a faculty discussion of a breadth which we had not undertaken for a number of years. Hence we designed the project to be implemented in a series of phases.

Phase One: Faculty Discussions

The faculty at its first meeting embraced the proposal of our summer Lexington Seminar participants and agreed to dedicate our monthly faculty discussions to the feasibility of expanding its M.A. program for laity, while maintaining the best of our residential culture.

Our first discussion (September) addressed the question of what is lay education. It focused upon different models for lay education adopted by different institutions. Mary Boys (Union Theological Seminary) served as our original consultant (though she was unable to attend the discussion), and recommended schools we might use as models. Our first meeting was led by Michael Gilligan (of the Luce Foundation) and we focused on models. We looked at programs at Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest (which emphasized professional education), Boston College (which emphasized joint programs), and Virginia Theological Seminary (which emphasized professional and enrichment education).

For our second discussion (October) we invited three of our former M.A. students to speak about what the Seminary did well and what it did not do well. This was the way

we addressed the question of the “end of lay education.” Here we received important information. It became clear that they were enthusiastic about the education they have received, but found the institution not “user friendly.” Their recommendations were three fold. The school must do a better job in orienting lay students. The lack of orientation for part time students was faulted, along with the difficulty of conveying information. Second, they argued that the seminary needed to do a better job in advertising its programs. They were particularly critical of the Seminary’s failure to market itself and to raise its profile in the tri-state area, and its failure to keep in contact with those who had already taken course at General Seminary. They strongly urged that any move towards expanding lay education address the question of communication. Finally they urged that the Seminary be far more self-conscious in being clear what students were being educated for. M.A. students often found it difficult to find employment that put their education to use.

Our third discussion (November) evaluated data collected on the present state of lay education at General. These include a record of what courses part time students are presently taking, and a survey done in the fall of 2001 on part time student responses to the program at General. We are attempting to ascertain what we are at present doing well, to identify areas we can build upon, and what are aspects of our program that would need to be reconfigured in order to make them beneficial for part time lay students. The areas identified where established track records have emerged are: Bible, Christian spirituality, and broadly Anglican studies.

Our December discussion produced a set of focus questions a faculty conference on Lay Education would have to consider (included below). A subsequent meeting offered a model for lay education that might meet the situation here at General, *viz*, the challenge of inaugurating an enlarged new initiative in lay education without harming our current M.Div program.

Questions Generated from the December Meeting

- 1) Does General Seminary have the present resources (faculty, administration, support staff, etc.) to move at present in this direction? If not how can new resources be added?
- 2) Are there ways of shifting faculty workloads that we can move in this direction without burdening an already heavily burdened faculty?
- 3) What sort of lay education is best for General? Training for lay professional positions in the church. Enrichment education?
- 4) How will aspects of long-standing institutional culture have to be addressed in order to achieve success? How will these changes be brought about?
- 5) Where should we begin? Some programs (e.g. Spirituality) are already in place. Do they need to be reconfigured? How do we add programs (e.g., Christian education) with limited resources?
- 6) How will this effect pedagogy? What new demands will be necessary to teach persons with varied backgrounds? Are new teaching tools necessary to met the needs of evening and weekend teaching.

- 7) How do we need to reshape faculty culture to make it more open to adjunct instructors? Not only have we been a residential institution, but the vast bulk of the teaching has been done by residential professors. How do we need to change to be more open to the needs of adjunct faculty?
- 8) What responsibilities do we owe lay students? Do we have in place resources that can help those who are looking for employment to find it?
- 9) How do we communicate? How do we publicize?

Phase Two: The January Conference

Through a generous grant from the Lexington Seminar the faculty participated in conference from the afternoon January 23 through lunchtime on January 25. This was held at the Dolce Tarrytown House in Tarrytown, New York. The faculty of General had not had an overnight retreat in over five years so this was a new experience for almost half of our faculty. We endeavored to reproduce the spirit of Lexington summer seminar with its combination of generous blocks of time for full and open discussion coupled with ample down time so that faculty can socialize together. By scheduling the conference in this way we had one complete day (January 24) in which the faculty devoted itself to the question of “why” lay education, and how to address cultural obstacles. Saturday morning was used in plotting directions and working on plans for implementing the ideas that surfaced the previous day, and drawing up specific curriculum recommendations. The Lexington Seminar members will take the responsibility for facilitating the discussion. From these conversations a vision of lay education at GTS became clearer.

Principles:

- 1) A program of (primarily) part-time lay education must always flow from our mission statement: “The General Theological Seminary is an Episcopal institution called to educate and form leaders for the Church in a changing world.”
- 2) Such an extended program in lay education must reflect certain values deeply cherished by the General Seminary community

Community
Hospitality
Accessibility of all students to Faculty
Centrality of Worship

These are values that attract people to General Seminary

- 3) An extended program in lay education must complement and strengthen our other educational missions (e.g., the training of persons for the ordained ministry)

4) An extended program of lay education must be conceived with a realistic understanding of the seminary's resources.

How can such a vision be implemented?

The faculty strongly supported the recruitment of a Program Manager who would be in charge of both publicity and management. Without an active publicity case the program will not flourish. Without a person concerned for the every day concerns of the students in the program, the program will not flourish.

The faculty in the short run will focus its energy on three foci for an M.A. degree that have already proved attractive to part time students: Biblical Studies, Christian Spirituality, and Anglican Studies.

The faculty proposes in the short run *to make use of as many courses already on the books to meet the needs of the new program.* This would entail shaping courses that would serve the needs of both M.Div and M.A. students and scheduling them at times that would be fair to both constituencies rather than running special (say evening) courses specifically for M.A. students. We propose to test the feasibility of using a late afternoon time slot to teach foundational courses that would be open to both M.A. and M.Div. students. *These are now possible because of plans to revamp Seabury auditorium as a "smart teaching space" that could hold twice as many students as our next largest class rooms.* Faculty have further agreed to teach key foundational courses at regular intervals during these time slots.

The faculty has proposed to reclaim Tuesday afternoon as a teaching time. For a number of years Tuesday afternoons has been reserved for faculty meetings and committee meetings. *Beginning in September of 2003 four foundational courses will be offered annually at a time that will serve both full time and part time students.*

These newly scheduled courses would be coordinated with our already present evening course offerings. These evening electives would be monitored to ensure that an M.A. could be earned on a part-time basis over the course of four years.

The faculty endorse the figures provided by the Business Office as to proposed revenues, and the enrollment necessary to ensure the success of the new program. They urge that these figures be regularly monitored to make sure that the program is meeting the fiscal needs of the institution, and that careful monitoring be also done to make sure that the program continues to serve the mission of the Seminary.

A coordinator for the new program was hired in the Spring of 2003, and began recruitment in the Summer of 2003. The new daily schedule was approved by the faculty (which also pledge to evaluate its effectiveness in the Spring of 2005).

Project Results:

Our results during the first year of implementation were encouraging, though they also indicated areas for improvement. The students who participated in the program were universally enthusiastic about the quality of the education, and the care they received. Special social events were established particularly for these commuting students, and these proved effective. Faculty have also responded well. The presence of lay students provided a different mix for classes. It has led faculty to rethink pedagogical starting points, and has led some faculty to make greater use of information technology to better serve non-residential students.

What was not as successful was the size of the new student body. During 2003-2004 only five students participated in the new program, lower than our expectations. We have attempted to ascertain why the numbers were so low, and during the spring of 2004 we came up with three recognitions.

Market Research is Essential

In the classic old movie Field of Dreams the mantra was offered “If we build it they will come;” yet we have discovered through our process that people will not necessarily come unless there is accessibility. We had assumed that the schedule we had outlined would provide maximum accessibility for potential students. During the Spring of 2004 we began surveying potential students and found that to a remarkable degree a good percentage would prefer early morning classes rather than late afternoon. As one lawyer-student noted, “It is easier for me to come in late than to leave early.” One of the things the new director of the M.A. program has been undertaking is market analysis.

You Can’t Reach Step “D” Until You Pass through Steps “B” and “C”

General Theological Seminary is an oasis in the city, a peaceful bucolic place in the center of the busiest city in the world. When one walks onto the campus it is like entering another world. The problem is that not enough people walk on the campus. The M.A. program can only attract people who know about the institution. How does one attract these people? One of the things the seminary has instituted is a fall and spring lecture series featuring the seminary faculty. During the fall of 2004, for example, the lecture series was on Christianity and Politics, tapping into the election year excitement. These lectures let persons experience GTS with only a minimum commitment. They are low key introductions to the GTS program, and since they end with a reception hosted by the Dean, they are also an introduction to the communal life of the seminary. Furthermore we discovered that a forty-five credit M.A. program is a daunting challenge for a part time student. The goal can seem very far away. Hence we have instituted (beginning in the fall of 2004) a series of certificate programs that can serve as a gateway into the M.A. program. Since these are not degree programs the courses can be transferred to the M.A. degree should a student decide to continue. Thus as we have now reconfigured the program we expect students will start out by coming to the lecture

series, be convinced to take a course, then move into the certificate program, and finally proceed to the M.A. degree. By adding these middle steps we hope to make it easier for people to engage the program.

Institutional Culture is Bigger than Faculty Culture

In our Lexington Narrative we highlighted some of the academic issues that stood in the way of making GTS a hospitable place for non-residential lay students. In our plan we addressed many of these with a fair degree of success. What we have learned in implementing our program is that one cannot change one part of an institution without changing other parts. We now realize that we needed to have included other parts of the institution in the planning of program. To extend the institution's mission in such a way as to reach out to a new constituency needs a broad rethinking of how things are done. Just to take two examples. Historically admissions at GTS has flowed from diocese (since only students under ecclesiastical care can be accepted to the M.Div. program). This led to a view of admissions that stressed more the role of screening than the idea of recruitment. We discovered that a philosophy of recruitment for lay students is markedly different for that of ordination based students. Secondly our communications department has historically been concerned with internal communication. A beautiful poster in the lobby, for example, can and does attract people to a lecture series as they pass through the lobby. But it is ineffective in reaching those persons who do not pass through the lobby. How can they be reached?

All of these recognitions has led the institution to rethink how it goes about doing its business. And this has led to some restructuring. For example the recruitment process of ordination and lay students has been divided and the latter simplified and made more user friendly. Likewise the Seminary has begun to make use of advertising medium that it has heretofore never availed itself of. These medium have been selected to make known our courses to specialized markets that do not usually monitor denominational publications. Finally it is actively researching what new programs could meet the needs of lay students and how can we adjust our scheduling to best meet their needs. This fall (2004) there are sixteen students enrolled in the M.A. program, a 300% increase over the fall of 2003. We have every expectation, that by continuing to fine tune our program it will grow and meet the needs of its student.

Conclusion

General Theological Seminary's experience with the Lexington Seminar has been a positive one. We have learned much about ourselves as an institution. We have learned about each other as colleagues. We have grappled with a key question in our institutional make up. Furthermore in this process we have realized that we are undertaking an endeavor of great importance. We are attempting to open up our institution in a new and dramatic way, so it can better serve the church and the world in the 21st century. But we are trying to do this by building upon our foundation. We have purposely chosen not to reinvent ourselves but to build upon those values and charisms that have guided GTS for 187 years. The conversation that the Lexington Seminar has encouraged and the

resources they have provided have played a crucial role in this process. For this we are profoundly thankful.