



“Word & World: A People’s School”: Alternative Theological Education Between the Seminary, The Sanctuary and The Streets

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On Super Bowl weekend, 2001, fifty faith-based activists and theologians from around the country met in Detroit, MI to discuss the need for alternative theological training for Christians committed to the work of social justice and solidarity with the poor. This ecumenical gathering shared the sense that North American seminaries today are not addressing the task of equipping everyday disciples to overcome their sense of disempowerment and denial in order to engage in the evangelical works of mercy and service, advocacy and resistance, community building and social reconstruction. We also shared the conviction that theological education should be more populist and more nurturing of a critical and grounded Christian literacy in Word and world in order to build capacity for the community of faith in its mission and witness in the world. I. Problems. We identified several major problems with most current institutional expressions of theological education:

How theology is studied: Three decades after Paulo Freire introduced the perspectives of popular education, the prevailing pedagogical practices still tend to: breed dependence rather than empowerment; privilege content over process; and nurture intellectualizing rather than praxis.

Where theology is studied: The social location of most seminaries make them accessible only to educated, middle class persons, remote from the life of the poor, and insulated from social movements.

What theology is studied: Most seminary curricula fail to address the whole range of practical skills needed for contemporary ministry: one can learn preaching, pastoring and theology, but not community organizing, social analysis, or nonprofit administration.

Above all, we felt that the most troubling (yet rarely addressed) aspect is the pervasive ideology of professionalism that characterizes seminary education. In a landmark 1977 study entitled *The Rise of Professionalism*, sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson of Temple University wrote:

Because marketable expertise is a crucial element in the structure of modern inequality, professionalization appears also as a collective assertion of special social status and as a collective process of upward mobility. (Its “backbone” is the occupational hierarchy, that is, a differential system of competences and rewards; the central principle of legitimacy is founded on the achievement of socially recognized expertise, or, more simply, on a system of education and credentialing (pp xvi-xvii).

The production of knowledge has become a “standardized commodity” in the modern university, steadily displacing the older ethos of apprenticeships and guilds with that of credentialing monopolies. Larson identifies the three main components of the ideology of professionalism as individualism, elitism and a psychology of entitlement. Thus “education is now the main legitimator of social inequality in industrial capitalism.” Because of the close relationship between the evolution of the university and theological academies, ministers and theology professors have historically been virtual charter members of this elite class of “knowledge professionals.” Over the last decade North American tertiary educational institutions have been increasingly “structurally adjusted” by neoliberal economic and political forces. This can be seen in such trends as privatization of research, increasing student indebtedness and academic competition. The university is thus becoming less of a community of critical thought and more of a degree factory for the professional classes—and unfortunately most seminaries are following suit. This drift has taken seminary culture steadily further from the life of the church, both in terms of parish ministry and social mission. This does not bode well, since the ascendant values of economic rationalism conflict sharply with the gospel values of a church that is supposed to promote the communal over the private, the economics of gift and grace over that of debt and merit, and the practices of cooperation and consociation over those of competition and individualism. There are exceptions, of course, such as the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education in Chicago, the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, or the Centre for Christian Studies in Winnipeg. Grass roots, non-accredited initiatives are even more exemplary, such as the Maryknoll School of Theology in New York, the Servant Leadership Schools (based in Washington, DC), or the Center for Scripture Study and Ministry at the Margins near Seattle. And there are educational exposure programs such as Witness for Peace, Borderlinks in Arizona or Journey into Freedom in Oregon. But these exceptions only prove the rule. The worlds of the seminary, the sanctuary and the streets generally spin in very different orbits, with little engaged conversation between them—much less accountability. This insulation wreaks havoc in all directions. Professional theological and biblical scholars tend to ignore the demands of practice, and feel increasingly less obligated to interpret their work to lay Christians. Their students feel the pressure to get their degrees so they can get a job so they can begin paying off student loans, and receive little incentive to engage in service among the poor or social advocacy. Meanwhile, faith-based activists and social workers that are immersed in the works of mercy and justice are notorious for neglecting the disciplines of critical theological and political reflection. They are too tired, the needs they face are too overwhelming, and the resources at hand are too thin. And people in the pews—as well as their clerical and denominational leadership— too often ignore both the insights of academics and the challenges of activists, settling instead for the insular confines of religious entertainment. All three spheres are profoundly impoverished by their isolation from each other, and the holistic mission of the church languishes. II. Prospects. The Detroit gathering agreed, then, that a key to the struggle to renew the church today is the task of re-integrating the competences of these three alienated worlds of Christian witness. We proceeded to brainstorm about how we might help return theological reflection to an organic, not a specialized, vocation that focused upon community formation, conscientization and capacity building, in order to rehabilitate the church as a movement of personal and social transformation. We identified four main streams that have influenced the struggle for alternative theological education in North America over the last half-century:

the “freedom School” tradition of the black church, especially as it developed during the civil rights movement;

the “underground seminary” and “School of the Prophets” experiments of First World anti-war and radical discipleship movements, which drew consciously upon the “confessing church” tradition in Nazi Germany;

the feminist pedagogies of the women’s movement and struggles for ecclesial inclusion by sexual minorities;

the base community movements and liberation theology, particularly in the Latin American context.

These strands, as well as the more political models of popular education embodied in union schools, the Highlander Center and the Center for Popular Economics, have profoundly informed those of us who are trying to experiment with approaches to Christian formation that integrate biblical literacy, social analysis, and public witness. We spoke about our common commitments to a pedagogy in which worship, analysis and practice meet again and embrace. By the end of the Detroit gathering we had reached consensus about moving forward to partner with and extend the reach of existing experiments in alternative theological education. This work has flowered into “Word and World: A People’s School.” Word and World is conceived as a moveable, one-week institute to be hosted and organized by local/national collaborations. These Schools are designed for people of faith already actively committed to “movement” work, broadly defined as involvement in some significant way with service, advocacy, or organizing for social change. Each gathering is to be rooted in local organizations and communities, while drawing upon regional and national constituencies and resources. The approach is popular, inclusive and radical—that is, seeking the roots of the problems we are addressing, and the roots of our biblical tradition of vision and nurture. The School promotes the renewal of the church as a movement of transformation, while also reminding social movements and activists of their need to be grounded in spiritual values and disciplines. The School curriculum is broadly structured around “church practices” and “social practices.” Focal points for nurturing competence include: biblical literacy; political, social and cultural analysis; Jubilee/Sabbath economics; the history and ethics of movements for social change; spirituality of praxis; and building alternative communities, institutions and networks. Pedagogical practices are ecumenical, contextual, inclusive, applied, and holistic. A steering committee, made up of representatives from different regions of the country, coordinates the design, resourcing and coordination of the Schools. Regional hosting committees are then responsible for building the necessary local coalition to sponsor a School, securing suitable facilities for housing and learning, undertaking local recruitment and publicity, and organizing and administering the event. Currently there are two part-time national staff persons helping realize this vision. The inaugural School was held in Greensboro, NC in April, 2002, hosted by the Jubilee Institute and the Beloved Community Center, groups with long commitment to justice work. The theme was the African American Freedom struggle as it shaped the second half of the 20th century. Morning panels narrated four crucial episodes in Greensboro’s own history of struggle: the historic lunch counter sit-ins in 1960 that helped birth a nationwide Civil Rights movement; the 1969 North Carolina A&T student strike; the 1979 Klan massacre of union organizers; and the 1996 K-Mart labor struggle. We heard from local people who participated in these events. Afternoon classes looked at Act and Exodus; the theology and practice of “Restorative Justice” and “Truth & Reconciliation” processes; “Layers of Social Oppression” and “Movement History;” and “Spirituality and Struggle” and the “Arts and Social Change.” Class sizes were small (no more than 15) to encourage maximal participation. Other aspects of the week included: daily worship and liturgy; small group reflection and Bible study; evening roundtables; a youth camp; music, poetry and bodywork; field trips into Greensboro; hiking; campfires; and lots of community-building. Vincent and Rosemarie Harding from Iliff Seminary, who worked closely with Martin Luther King, were the “resident elders” in Greensboro. It was a remarkable week, and a strong first step.

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