

Unbinding Lazarus: Renewing Theological Education  
to Resource a Missional, *Kenotic* Church

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**Abstract and Key Points**

This paper proposes a Wesleyan theological rationale and practical recommendations for revitalized theological education, particularly in university based United Methodist schools of theology. The approach integrates a rigorous life-long learning system that includes curricular and co-curricular programs and contextual learning, with a strong foundation in missional ecclesiology and contemplative, kenotic spirituality. It includes recommendations for unprecedented collaborations between United Methodist seminaries, for the sake of the *Missio Dei*. It also takes seriously the formational needs of practitioners of emergence Christianity such as the new monasticism, missional communities, and the like, so as to reflect upon best practices of theological education to resource leaders of the inherited church while offering recommendations for empowering leaders of ancient/future expressions of church.

Key Points:

- A call to return to missional ecclesiology and kenotic spirituality in the UMC
- Challenges to Conventional Theological Education in Forming Missional Clergy
- Constructive paths forward through kenotic theological education for clergy and lay formation for a missional church

**Introduction**

What I write below requires authorial transparency. I speak as a Christian first and foremost who cares deeply about the soul of the church. Next I speak from my vocation as missional and pastoral theologian. My theological method and content are distinctly Wesleyan. Lastly I write as the Dean of a divinity school anchored in a top tier research university. My hope is that this paper might help my

own institution as well as other United Methodist institutions to imagine new, missional possibilities for our common work. I am convinced that if we take seriously the issues before us and foster missional imagination and innovation in our seminaries, we shall produce *kenotic*, courageous, spiritually grounded, nimble leaders for a missional church.

### **Missional Ecclesiology**

Harkening from the theological stream of Lesslie Newbigin, Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren warn us against trying to define missional ecclesiology. Annoyingly they describe what it is not. “The missional church is not about the church,” they say.<sup>1</sup> It is not a cookie cutter plan of action with seven steps. The missional church is essentially focused away from itself, toward God, who in Roxburgh and Boren’s words is “up to something in the world that is bigger than the church even though the church is called to be sign, witness, and foretaste of God’s purposes in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

To be more explicit, missional ecclesiology is not about a particular style of worship, programmatic commitment, or size of congregation. Missional ecclesiology is neither conservative nor liberal but encompasses and transcends both. Missional ecclesiology is a stance, a habituated orientation, a way of seeing, hearing, perceiving, and then acting. It is a contemplative awareness that leads to Jesus-like engagement in our world.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The missional church is one that habituates itself to show up, pay attention, cooperate with God, and release the outcome of its obedience.<sup>3</sup> Without a deep grounding in practices of prayer and discernment, congregations that hope to be missional tend toward activism at the expense of contemplation. Thus they are vulnerable to burnout and loss of clarity about their call and to drifting away from the actual Gospel. Furthermore, without deep practices of listening and self-awareness the church tends to regard mission as a specialized, somewhat marginal activity of the church that people with material resources do to or for people with fewer material resources. In that case a power differential is kept firmly in place between haves and have-nots. With the very best of intentions the non-reflective church perpetuates a harmful ecclesiology of empire. Such a church does not identify the *missio Dei* as its core purpose.

Rowan Williams states that “It is not the church of God that has a mission, but the God of mission has a church.”<sup>4</sup> Missional congregations practice spiritual disciplines individually and communally that foster the ability to hear what the missional God through the Holy Spirit is saying to the church. Out of these time-tested practices of discernment such as a prayer of examen, *lectio divina*, and cultural exegesis, the church receives from God the love, courage, vision, and capacity it needs in order to participate with what God is doing contextually. In a fruitful church, regardless of its size or social context, the leaders and many of the

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<sup>3</sup> I have written about this stance in several other places, including most recently in *God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2016); and *Five Means of Grace: Experiencing God's Love the Wesleyan Way* (Abingdon, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Roxburgh and Boren, 20.

congregants are attentive and ready to engage in communal discernment and action. There is no substitute for a habituated life of prayer and discernment in order for Christians to be able to live into the rugged demands of the way of Jesus.

This way of being together as church is subversive of much that we think of as contemporary Methodism. Living, working, and worshipping in a contemplative stance exposes and undermines the consumerism and hyper-individualism of postmodern American church culture. It opens us to seeing new possibilities for ministry, and to being willing to let go of habits, behaviors, programs, and practices that no longer connect people with God in a life-giving way. “Learning to see as the mystics see,” to quote a recent title from Richard Rohr, guides us toward unflinching, honest reflection about our religious systems and institutions.<sup>5</sup> It is this quality more than anything else that we need today as we consider the role of theological education in preparing leaders for the church of tomorrow. The other quality that characterizes the great Christian mystics that we need, is *kenosis*, the self-emptying that is inherent to love. In the great *kenotic* hymn of Phil. 2:6-11 provides the template for the *kenotic* church and the *kenotic* seminary.

### **Challenges to the *Missio Dei* in Theological Education**

The 2017 ATS “State of the Enterprise” report, *Transitions*, highlights a range of current trends that impact how theological schools should think about preparing leaders for the missional church of tomorrow. While there has been an overall enrollment decline across ATS accredited schools for the past decade, in the past two years enrollment has stabilized and there has been a tiny national increase of

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: Crossroad, 2014).

122 students in 2016, over 2015. Notable trends over the past decade have been in racial/ethnic students (10% increase), students over age 50 (16% increase), and persons seeking professional master's degrees (11% increase). There has been a 19% decrease in white students, a 6% decrease in students under age 30, and a 14% decrease in the MDiv enrollment. <sup>6</sup>

Fewer young adults, in particular, are interested in seeking an M.Div., partly because they do not see themselves in traditional ordained ministry in the inherited church. Many of them come to seminary with a sense of call, but are put off by the expectation of church officials that their job is to save a failing institution. The more entrepreneurial<sup>7</sup> these students are, the less likely it is that they will fit into a traditional Methodist ordination path, and the more likely it is that they will have to educate themselves for entrepreneurial ministry after they leave seminary, or apart from conventional curriculum. That is, if they stay the course and enter parish ministry at all. Many of them give up, deciding to go into chaplaincy, or go into some other profession because they cannot with integrity give themselves over to what they see as the lost cause of shoring up stuck and failing ecclesial systems.

In addition, our curriculum, student loan debt,<sup>8</sup> our ordination system, and our appointment processes are riddled with blocks against identifying, welcoming,

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<sup>6</sup> Association of Theological Schools, *Annual Report: Transitions*, Fall, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Entrepreneurial is a word laden with baggage because of its association with a secular business world. Notwithstanding the drawbacks, this word effectively communicates the creative enterprise of retrieving a missional ecclesiology for the local church. Missional ecclesiology based upon a contemplative stance leads to all manner of creative engagement with the neighborhood around us. That is, it leads to spiritual and sometimes economic entrepreneurship.

<sup>8</sup> According to a 2014 study the average student loan debt for United Methodist seminarians is \$49,303. <https://www.gbhem.org/article/average-debt-united->

preparing and deploying the missional leaders who could most effectively educate, inspire, and lead a *kenotic* church.

A related set of blocks exists for theological educators who are missional, entrepreneurial, and innovative, for our current system of theological education was not designed to be led by or to produce missional leaders. In some ways it was designed to weed out the innovative gifts that are now needed the most.

The university-based school of theology was designed for intellectuals who could produce more intellectuals whose strongest skill set is research and writing. While free-standing seminaries have always been more focused on preparing practitioners, curriculum in elite schools tends to deprioritize courses in the practice of ministry. For example it is possible for MDiv students at some university-based schools to graduate with honors having never had a course in pastoral care, lay leadership development, conflict resolution, church planting, congregational renewal, prayer, community organizing, missional theology and praxis, or knowing how to nurture community in general. All of these subject areas, which are essential aspects of pastoral work for today's church in fast-changing culture, are considered peripheral to the business of "serious scholarship." The inherent assumption is that in a research university setting, ministerial studies are not "serious."

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[methodist-mdiv-graduate-reaches-49303](#). ATS reports that as of 2016 the average educational debt incurred for all graduates was \$35,625. ATS, Annual Report, Fall 2017. The percentage students borrowing decreased, and the amount of student loans has decreased somewhat in 2016-17. ATS Annual Report, Fall 2017.

In some universities most professors who teach in the area of practical theology cannot earn tenure for this reason.<sup>9</sup> Theology, historical studies, and biblical studies in those institutions are considered “hard” disciplines. Ministerial studies are considered “soft.”

The complex, nuanced, and spiritually demanding work of being a *kenotic* leader who cultivates a *kenotic* church is not yet considered to be a core curricular concern in traditional university based schools. Surveys bear out the consequences of this situation. Graduates in 2016 surveyed by ATS reported that their seminary education was “...somewhat ineffective” in preparing them for the actual work of administering a parish.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the pragmatic aspect of knowing how to conduct funerals, hospital visits, and the thousand other tasks of pastoral work, what is notably most absent in conventional, university-based, Protestant theological education is spiritual formation. The guidance of students’ lives of prayer and discernment is absent or minimal, first because the practices of spirituality do not fit tidily into an established system of rewards and punishments for academic achievement. How, after all, does one grade a student’s prayer? And aren’t intellectual pursuits a form of spirituality?<sup>11</sup> As a result students graduate without skills or knowledge as to how

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<sup>9</sup> A similar situation exists in other professional schools in the university. For example, in the Medical School professors of practice are not tenured, and do not enjoy the prestige, power, and some benefits of tenured professors.

<sup>10</sup> ATS Annual Report, Fall 2017.

<sup>11</sup> These are some of the rationales I have been given as to why spiritual formation is not really a curricular concern and should be relegated strictly to the church or ignored altogether. I have also heard the field of Christian spirituality dismissed outright by faculty who claimed, “The word “spirituality” is so imprecise. How could it possibly be an academic discipline?”

to pay attention to what the Spirit is saying to the church, or have the spiritual discipline and grounding to recognize the difference between God’s leading and the clamour of ego in pious disguise.

As Daniel Aleshire, Executive Director Emeritus of the Association of Theological Schools said to me recently, theological education of the future “must place soul formation at the center of its curriculum.”<sup>12</sup> For a research university-based school this will require a fundamental axial shift.

As we consider constructive forward movement in successfully preparing missional leaders in the university-based school, let us consider these interlocking components: church, curriculum, cost, context, and constituencies.

### **Toward Missional Leaders for a *Kenotic* Church**

As already noted, missional ecclesiology must be cultivated in the local church, district, and annual conference. This will require that judicatory leaders including bishops, district superintendents, boards of ordained ministry, congregational development personnel, and others who constitute extended cabinets have to be grounded in missional ecclesiology. One of the tasks of theological education at this time is to provide continuing education for these categories of people so that they have the theological foundation to make choices that support the equipping and deployment of missional leaders. This is not going to be easy. However with missional theologians from multiple seminaries working in collaboration with practitioners—innovators and pioneers who are already forging a path for the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can collectively map out a plan to

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<sup>12</sup> Telephone interview, January 5, 2016.

provide the retooling that is necessary. For example, Duke Divinity School could partner with missional practitioners in North Carolina to provide continuing education for judicatory leaders. Seminars for bishops, superintendents, boards of ordained ministry, and other judicatory leaders could be designed to serve the Southeast Jurisdiction. The same thing could happen regionally with Perkins School of Theology in the South Central Jurisdiction, Boston School of Theology teaming with Drew in the Northeast, and so on. The various schools could collaborate on some aspects of the curriculum for the seminars, but contextualize the seminars for their particular region.

With missionally committed episcopal leadership, the church in each annual conference could be urged to follow a two year development plan led by teams of laity and pastors from each local church. This plan would include a two year cycle of sermon series, small group curriculum, and spiritual formation opportunities to bring the church back to the missional and *kenotic* spirituality and praxis that sparked the original Methodist movement. Why two years? It takes that long to foster a substantial change in mindset and to help a congregation become grounded in new habits.

For the sermon series it would be best to set aside the lectionary (other than perhaps during Advent and Lent) in order to dive deeply into four books of the Bible: Genesis, Ruth, Luke, and Acts. These four books are superb in mapping out Rowan Williams' premise that God is a missional God. Homiletical resources would draw from these four books of the Bible, Wesley's standard sermons and explanatory notes, Methodist spirituality and doctrine, the best of missional

theology including recent resources written by Methodist missional theologians and practitioners, the founding stories of the local churches in which the sermons are preached, and our current, contextualized socio-political landscape, also known as our mission field.

Small groups would learn to follow a Wesleyan rule of life with covenant accountability throughout the three years as a framing practice for all else that they do. Group foci should track along with the sermon series but with careful planning could include a coordinating, sequenced reading and study of books of missional ecclesiology and praxis. While the work of Lesslie Newbigin is foundational, Alan Hirsch's *The Forgotten Ways* is a more recent resource that, although not inherently Wesleyan, connects well with Methodism. A new corpus of excellent material is now being written by Methodists especially for United Methodist Church planters and missional practitioners. Just a few of the Methodist resources are Michael Baughman, *Flipping Church*, Paul Nixon and Beth Estock, *Weird Church*, Doug Ruffle, *A Missionary Mindset and Roadmap to Renewal*, Amy Oden, *Right Here, Right Now: The Practice of Christian Mindfulness*, and Elaine A. Heath, *God Unbound*.

### **Curriculum for a *Kenotic* Church**

Few topics can inflame seminary faculty more quickly or intensely than a discussion about what should and should not be “core” curriculum for M.Div. students, much less how curriculum is structured. Ed Aponte notes that the dominant fourfold structure for seminary curriculum follows eighteenth century

German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's<sup>13</sup> attempt to "...bring received Christian traditions into conversation with the perspectives of the European Enlightenment, rather than have the two be in opposition."<sup>14</sup> Reflecting on the problems of continuing to use the fourfold structure in rigorous contemporary theological education Charles Wood comments, "As the notion, practice, and context of church leadership have changed, the fourfold pattern has more and more seemed not merely insufficient so far as traditional content is concerned but also inappropriate in its very structure."<sup>15</sup>

Aponte and Wood are especially concerned with the way in which the Schleiermacher structure privileges white, patriarchal, Eurocentric theology at the expense of theological voices and wisdom from women and the global church. Despite the fact that the center of Christianity is no longer in the northern or western hemispheres, that the average Christian in the world is not white and lives in the global south or east, and that a solid majority of the world's Christians are female,<sup>16</sup> it is still common to hear theologians refer to the western European tradition of theology as "theology," and everything else as "contextual theology." The reality is that all theology is contextual theology.

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<sup>13</sup> Schleiermacher was a German theologian and philosopher (1768-1834) whose dream was to bring Christian theology into dialogue and compatibility with the perspectives of the Enlightenment.

<sup>14</sup> Edwin David Aponte, "Friedrich Schleiermacher," in Miguel A. De La Torre, et al, *Beyond the Pale: Reading Theology from the Margins* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2011 ), 108.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/>.

The attachment to Enlightenment norms and ideals holds seminary curricula hostage in another way that effectively suffocates missional theology and praxis. That is, as noted earlier, Divisions 1-3 are seen as the “hard” disciplines that should be “core curriculum” in a rigorous education, and Division 4 with its focus on practical theology and ministerial practice, is labeled “soft.” Thus the essential skill sets and knowledge that equip persons for missional, *kenotic* leadership are marginalized and in some cases, absent. In University based schools with tenure, professors who teach in these critical areas tend to have less political power in shaping the curriculum because they are untenured faculty.

Curricular reform to produce missional leaders for a *kenotic* church will have to take into account the harmful aspects of the dominant fourfold model, and make changes accordingly. This does not mean forsaking what has been thought of as traditional theology, and historical studies, nor does it mean abandoning intellectual rigor. It means owning up to the fact that all theology is contextual, consistently bringing women’s and global theological voices to the table as a matter of course, and moving practical theology into the core curriculum. It means accepting the fact that “rigor” is not limited to purely theoretical work. Moreover, the M.Div. degree should have multiple tracks to equip various forms of ministry including tracks for missional innovators and for those with apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic vocations. (Alan Hirsch rightly notes in *The Forgotten Ways* that these three leadership gifts are largely absent whenever the church loses its way, thus must be reclaimed for the church to regain missional identity.)

United Methodist university based divinity schools should not try to be religious studies departments. Nor should they exist primarily to provide a place for scholars to talk among themselves, in a misguided effort to be sufficiently rigorous. Theology schools are, in University schema, professional schools. The purpose of theological education is to prepare Christian leaders whose profession is to guide the church in fulfilling its missional purpose. Faculty in theology schools, regardless of their disciplines, simply must be committed to the *missio Dei*, and should understand that their vocation is to equip leaders for the church of the future in all its iterations, including the next generation of theologians. That is to say, the church needs scholars who have a *kenotic* understanding of their vocation. Curricula absolutely must be created to serve the mission of the church, not the other way around.

### **Removing Obstacles**

As we consider helping the church become nimble through higher education so that it can reclaim missional identity and *kenotic* praxis, we have to ask ourselves what kinds of roadblocks are in the way. How can we equip more leaders who make it easier instead of harder for Christians to hear and respond to God's missional call?

First there is the matter of making outstanding missional theological education affordable and accessible to more people. This will require innovation in the Course of Study School, which in its current form is not grounded in missional ecclesiology and generally does not produce apostolic leaders. The theory and practice of deliberate bi-vocationality as a missional strategy should part of the curriculum, for example. Entrepreneurship should be a required course. Multiple

tracks could be developed to more effectively prepare students for missional innovation and cross-cultural competency. The delivery methods for Course of Study School also need revision in order to make education accessible for people who have full time jobs, a family, and are often serving the church bi-vocationally.

Duke Divinity School recently launched a pilot program: the Neighborhood Seminary.<sup>17</sup> This model provides laity an affordable two year non-degree program in theological education that is organized around three sets of practices: Spiritual Formation, Theological Formation, and Missional Formation. In other words, this is a holistic “heart, head, and hands” approach. Students attend a monthly Saturday class at an anchor church or other neighborhood location. The class is team taught by scholars partnered with missional practitioners. Students participate in spiritual direction and weekly spiritual formation groups, and experience monthly ministry practicums in which they are mentored by missional practitioners. The hope for this model is that it will produce missional laity who engage in a contemplative stance leading to *kenotic* service within and beyond the walls of the church. They can influence their established congregation so that it can become an anchor church for many missional outposts. At the time of this writing Duke is preparing to scale out the Neighborhood Seminary in partnership with more districts, and has been invited to collaborate with Project Turn, a program of theological education in North Carolina prisons.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://divinity.duke.edu/events/neighborhood-seminary>. The pilot runs through 20

## **An Ecosystem Approach to Theological Education**

The entire ecology of university based divinity schools should be imagined and structured to provide missional, *kenotic*, and lifelong learning. From high school to elder years, the schools should offer curricular and co-curricular resources to support vocational discernment, equipping for ordained and lay ministry, and ongoing theological and spiritual formation for persons engaged in ministry professionally or bi-vocationally. An ecosystem approach to the entire ecology of the school and its University can create synergies so that the interconnecting programs are more effective.

For example, a co-curricular or non-degree certificate program in spiritual direction could become an effective means to equip many spiritual directors across the school's constituencies. Those spiritual directors/alumni then could influence the future health and vitality of the church and its mission. Some of those individuals could, after the co-curricular program ends, sense a call to pursue further education through a degree program where the courses they took for the certificate could translate into credit hours, which would be included in their degree program. After they graduated with the masters or doctor of ministry degree, an alumni-based cohort system for continuing education would provide them with a refresher course every three to five years, designed especially for the graduates in that year's cohort, based on desired learning outcomes the alumni cohort requests through a learning needs survey the school administrators.

In this ecosystem model, alumni would be engaged with the theology school throughout their ministry years and become valuable recruiters for other students

to learn through curricular and co-curricular programs. Such alumni would also be much more likely to be active donors and help recruit active donors to the school.

In an ecosystem approach the school's mission is the driver. Every program, whether curricular or co-curricular, every staff, faculty, and administrative hire, how students are evaluated for admissions, who is invited to serve on the board of trustees or board of visitors, how the school is marketed, these and every other facet of institutional life are measured according to whether they will support and advance the mission of the school. If the mission is indeed, missional, the outcome will be a powerful, missional impact on the church and the world, long into the future.

When the staff and faculty understand and embrace an ecosystem approach to everything that the school does, both in curricular and co-curricular work, the vitality of the school inevitably improves. The culture is healthier and more hospitable to everyone who works and learns in the school. The school is more likely to be open and engaged across its University and with the church at large. Interdependence and collaboration promote health and sustainability for the school. It also models the kind of networked, collaborative environment that today's students will develop in tomorrow's world.

A good metaphor for the ecosystem approach to a theological school's self-understanding is permaculture.<sup>18</sup> In this kind of farm there is intentionality about planting particular plants near each other so that both plants flourish and so that the soil and water also flourish. Light, soil, water, insects, and birds are planned into

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<sup>18</sup> A good introductory website for Permaculture principles and practices is: <https://permacultureprinciples.com/principles/>.

the overall design for maximum health of the whole system. Climate is just as important to the health of the farm as the plants. What benefits the individual benefits the whole, and vice versa. Finally, permaculture is a way of farming that mimics nature at its best. That is, the system is designed and nurtured to be sustainable and self-renewing.

To summarize, a University based school functioning this way looks something like this:

- The school is mission-centric.
- Every curricular and co-curricular program and activity supports and advances the mission.
- Each person who works at the school, whether staff or faculty, knows the mission of the school, can state it, and is able to speak compellingly about the ways their own and others' roles advance the mission of the school.
- *How* the faculty and staff work together—the climate—supports and advances the mission.
- There is a climate of mutual respect, hospitality, affirmation, and joy across staff and faculty, and among students.
- Faculty work culture fosters maximum intellectual rigor in no small part because it is collaborative, curious, innovative, and imaginative.
- The school models and teaches equity and diversity in everything the school does, through employment practices to syllabi. This is because diversity fosters greater intellectual rigor and because it is a core value in missional identity in a diverse world.
- The boundaries of the educational community are permeable, between classroom, university, church, community, and the world. This means that learning takes place within and beyond classrooms, the University, and the church, including cyberspace.
- The school approaches everything it does as an open, living ecosystem in which leaders strategize across programs and activities in order to foster the health of the whole system and not just the health of one program or office,

or the political interests of one group of people, or the agenda of an “in-group” that ignores the common good.

### **Affordability and Accessibility**

One other serious matter has to be taken into consideration in terms of providing theological education for a missional church. The financial cost of a seminary education has skyrocketed in the past twenty years. Many ordinands enter ministry with student loan debt near \$50,000 just for their seminary degrees. A good number of them also have debt from their undergraduate education. This debt combined with typically low salaries in most parish placements ensures that pastors stay in debt for many years. Indebtedness creates a terrible burden for pastors and is one of the reasons people choose not to go into ministry. There is also a lack of institutional integrity in that Methodist ordinands, who are saddled with student loan debt in preparation for ministry, are then questioned by the Bishop at their ordination, as to whether they are “in debt so as to embarrass” themselves in their work. They are, in this way, blamed for indebtedness that is inherent in the system in which students are required to participate.

In the very near future, UM schools that do not have substantial scholarships for every student, simply will not be able to compete with schools that do. Students increasingly will go to schools that offer the best scholarships. Some, if not most of our tuition-driven UM schools will close because of enrollment decline with its financial ramifications. What can we do about this challenge? The answer is to be proactive, collaborative, and wise.

A radical but potentially powerful and workable strategy noted by David McAllister Wilson in *A New Church and A New Seminary*<sup>19</sup> is to strategically decrease the number of UM seminaries and schools of theology, with the resources from the closed or merged campuses going to establish scholarships in the remaining schools. This is how Yale Divinity School is going to provide full scholarships for most of its students in the near future, by using endowment earnings from the assets from the sale of the campus of Andover Newton Theological School, which Yale recently acquired.

For UM schools the best option would be to cluster and merge free-standing schools with University based schools in a regional hub and spoke model. Strategizing for maximum missional impact, some campuses would be closed and sold, with the proceeds funding an endowment for scholarships. Other campuses would be aligned with the mission of the University based “hub” school, to provide specialized foci in a particular setting. Choosing to locate most or all of the “hubs” in university based schools would enable the kind of rich, interdisciplinary work that will be increasingly normative in the years ahead, for theological education for bivocational leaders.

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<sup>19</sup> David McAllister-Wilson, *A New Church and A New Seminary: Theological Education Is the Solution* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 68. As Dr. Kim Cape often notes, however, the University Senate of the United Methodist Church has approved more than forty non-United Methodist institutions for educating UM students. Despite the fact that diverting a substantial percentage of UM students away from UM institutions sabotages the health and impact UM institutions and weakens UM formation for students, many Bishops adamantly resist mandatory UM education for all students who will be ordained in the UMC. The reasons for this resistance remain generally opaque, and there is little accountability for such resistance.

The outcomes: of this kind of collaborative, *kenotic* planning would be extraordinary:

- Each hub and spoke school would have generous scholarships that would make the schools competitive with peer institutions, and would greatly reduce student loan debt
- The hub and spoke schools could collaborate on foci so that they would not compete with each other. These foci would be determined by a combination of resources from the geographic location, faculty strengths, the locations and resources of the “spoke” campus, and University resources. For example, one school could specialize in preparing ministry leaders for rural contexts. Another could focus on preparing students to work entrepreneurially as community developers, and so on.

One other model of unprecedented collaboration that could be developed across United Methodist seminaries, is a consortium program focusing on a semester-long immersion program in missional innovation. In this model several schools would collaborate to develop curriculum and contextual immersion with innovative communities in two locations, one rural and one urban. Students would pay tuition to the host school(s) and a room and board fee to cover the costs of living in the immersive environment. Academic credit would be awarded through the home school.

For example, on the east coast an immersion year in an urban context might include living with a rule of life in intentional community, practicums in community

organizing, urban agriculture, and addressing root causes of homelessness. Three courses would be taken one at a time over 10-12 weeks, taught by faculty from the host school. Courses would use a hybrid methodology so that faculty did not have to be onsite every day. Local practitioners of missional innovation would guide the spiritual formation and missional practicums. The intentional community would be under the guidance of a trained spiritual director who functions as abbot or abbess of the community.

The rural expression of the immersion year might include intentional community, justice work focusing on immigration and farm worker rights, and eco-spirituality in care of the land.

By agreeing to work together as a consortium, the UM schools could offer much more opportunity to the students in all thirteen schools without being redundant. Again, this model teaches by example, how to function collaboratively instead of competitively in emergence Christianity which is inherently networked, collaborative, and creative.

There is no central authority that determines how UM schools collaborate (or not). The deliberate self-emptying and realignment into a hub and spoke model that I have described, will require the Deans, Presidents, Boards of Trustees, and University administrations of the schools to agree to this kind of restructuring. It may be that one cluster should pioneer the way forward in restructuring so that the rest of the schools can learn from the experience. The challenge, however, is lack of time. Unless UM schools work together on this in the near future, economic decline

will remove the window of opportunity that is before us. Schools will close by necessity, without a plan for the strategic use of resources.

### **Context: Our Mission Field**

There are at least three aspects of our rapidly changing context that are of deep significance to how we prepare leaders for a missional, *kenotic* church. First there is the escalating percentage of the population that self-identifies as being religiously unaffiliated. The Pew Research Center has named this group “the Nones.”<sup>20</sup> Almost one fourth of Americans identify as Nones, and as of 2017, 38% of adults ages 29 and below are Nones.<sup>21</sup> The percentage grows higher every year. Seminary curricula must equip leaders to serve missionally in this context, so that they know how to form spiritual community in new ways that connect with the lives and concerns of young adults.

The second factor that has to be taken seriously is the increasing polarization and violence of our society. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate crimes has risen for two consecutive years since the election of President Donald Trump. “The most dramatic growth was the near tripling of anti-Muslim hate groups from 34 in 2015 to 101 in 2016.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.prr.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>.

A number of Trump's executive orders especially target people of color.<sup>23</sup> The President's inability to condemn White Supremacist violence that resulted in the deaths of three people in Charlottesville is only one of many subsequent events that fuel racism in our nation.<sup>24</sup> Draconian crackdowns on immigrants including the separation of immigrant children from their parents at the Mexican border in May-June, 2018, fans the flames of hate and fear. Meanwhile the President steadily rolls back environmental protection laws that have been in place for decades, disastrously increasing the speed of climate change.<sup>25</sup> For many people there is a sense that the United States is unraveling, and with "America First" rhetoric and actions we are rapidly losing influence and respect in the global community.

In this context of chaos, hate, bigotry, international tension, and environmental destruction, the world needs Christian leaders who are both prophetic and healing. Clergy and lay leaders need leadership skills and spiritual stamina to bring diverse people together across religious traditions to work on the toughest challenges facing our world. This hard Gospel work necessitates knowledge and skill in how to bring change in unjust systems, and how to create coalitions that can in the words of Walter Wink, "name, unmask, and engage" the

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<sup>23</sup> <http://time.com/4679727/donald-trump-executive-orders-police>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/23/world/un-trump-racism-charlottesville.html? r=0>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/05/politics/trump-battle-science-epa-energy-climate/index.html>.

powers and principalities of systemic evil.<sup>26</sup> Seminary curricula that do not focus on these contextual realities as core curricular concerns, cannot produce missional leaders. Moreover, if we who are theological educators do not teach students to be missional practitioners in their contexts, we fail them and we fail God.

The third element of culture shift that must inform theological education going forward is the changing racial/ethnic demographic of the United States. Today fewer than half of Americans are white Christians and by 2044 non-Hispanic white Americans will be a minority.<sup>27</sup> Between 2010-2017 the Asian American population grew by 24.6%. Today they represent more than 6% of the population. If their growth trend continues, within two decades there could be more Asian Americans in the US than African Americans, an enormous shift in the size and political importance of the two ethnic groups.<sup>28</sup> How will theological education prepare future leaders for this kind of diversity?

According to Nancy Ammerman, only 22% of Americans are part of a family with two parents and children.<sup>29</sup> This means that 78% of Americans are not in traditional families. Seminaries that wish to equip leaders for a missional church, must become diverse *and equitable*. Healthy diversity will be expressed in equity and opportunity for faculty, staff, and students from minoritized communities.

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<sup>26</sup> Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millenium* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.prrri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>. Also see <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/23/its-official-minority-babies-are-the-majority-among-the-nations-infants-but-only-just/>.

<sup>28</sup> *American Consumers*, June 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Ammerman, unpublished lecture on trends that affect theological education, Duke Divinity School Faculty Retreat, August 21, 2017, Durham, NC.

Syllabi will reflect diversity in required and recommended readings. Field education will reflect diversity in opportunities for all students to learn from diverse practitioners. From a theological standpoint the claims of the Gospel require that Christian theological schools identify and repent of ways in which systemic racism and sexism have shaped institutional policies. Moving toward equity, opportunity, and genuine diversity is not a politically correct action for Christians. It is a moral, spiritual, and missional imperative grounded in the mandates of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Constituencies**

Leadership expert Simon Synek tells us that the “why” of an organization should always lead the “what” and the “how.”<sup>30</sup> The central task of theological education, or the “why” for it is not to provide an interesting and fulfilling career for faculty. From a Wesleyan perspective theological education has a fundamentally different purpose than other kinds of scholarly endeavors. As John Wesley vigorously argued about biblical studies and every other theological discipline, religious scholarship that is undertaken without the explicit purpose of helping people enter into the way of Jesus, is worse than ineffective. It is a travesty. This is true whether the endeavor happens in a local church or a University based divinity school.

The purpose of theological education is to equip people to lead the church in all its iterations and institutions, to fulfill its missional vocation. That mission is

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<sup>30</sup> Simon Synek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action/transcript?language=en).

clearly spelled out in the opening lines of Jesus' inaugural sermon: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19, NRSV).

Our United Methodist schools of theology need administrators and faculty who are deeply committed to the *missio Dei* as defined by Jesus in Luke 4. Our students need to be taught and mentored by scholars who understand the sacred, *kenotic* nature of their vocation. Our faculty need the guidance of Deans and Presidents whose leadership, lives, and character demonstrate the *kenotic* way of Christ. The climate of our schools of theology should be known not just for intellectual prowess but for extraordinary depth of spirituality, hospitality, and community, because the quality of life together is just as formative of students as anything they learn in a classroom.

This kind of *kenotic* stance is especially important today in our politically charged climate in higher education in which claims of academic freedom and freedom of speech are used to justify bullying, hate speech, character assassination, and more. God forbid that schools of theology should mirror the violence of surrounding culture as we engage the hard work that St. Anselm described as faith seeking understanding. Christian schools of theology must wrestle through the deeper claims of the gospel that critique even our cherished democratic value of freedom of speech.

In this climate of rapid culture shift with its related economic and enrollment challenges, it is easy for anxiety about institutional survival to begin to drive decisions. It is easy to lose sight of the “why” of theological education, and out of fear, stifle the creativity and experimentation necessary to adapt successfully to our new environment. When there is anxiety in the system, people are least likely to be open to the very thing most needful: innovation, wonder, creativity, and experimentation.<sup>31</sup> Thus it is important to continue to foster what Greg Jones calls “traditioned innovation” within theological education, especially during the stress of institutional change.

University based schools of theology have unique resources to build interdisciplinary learning models, and are likely to have greater financial stability over the long haul. Whether a school is free standing or based in a university, though, it is necessary to keep asking this question: “Who are we serving?” Our “client” is not ourselves the academicians, nor is it the church, really. Rather our concern in equipping leaders for a missional, *kenotic* church is the world beyond the church.

Paradoxically the greatest obstacle to schools of theology, the challenge behind the economic and enrollment challenges, is to cultivate what Buddhists call “beginner’s mind” toward our ministry field, or to use the language of Jesus, to become like little children among our neighbors. That is, to be open, curious,

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<sup>31</sup> For a systems approach to anxiety and organizational change see Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury, 2007). Also see my book for congregations in the midst of systems change, *God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2016).

teachable, agile, and humble in the middle of our anxiety-producing culture shifts. Indeed, if we make the mistake of seeing the presenting problems of financial stress and enrollment trends as the challenge rather than as indicators of a deeper reality of culture shift, we could miss our opportunity to lead theological education into a vibrant and effective future.

If we listen we will understand that our neighbors hope we will nurture leaders who will guide us to a future in which we become the answer to Jesus' prayer: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." For as Lutheran pastor, theologian, and martyr of the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The church is the church only when it exists for others."<sup>32</sup> It is our responsibility and sacred call in theological education to nurture leaders who lead the church to be the church for others.

I sometimes hear people say that university based theological education is dead. They say this because of the deficits named in this essay. But the funeral is premature. It is time to call the Lazarus of theological education forth from the tomb, to unbind it and set it free for a new day of power and integrity as it equips leaders for a missional church.

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<sup>32</sup> From an outline for a book he hoped to write, after the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* ( New York: Collier, 1953, 1971), p. 382.