The Practice of Theology in the Theological School: Reflections from the 1997 Oxford Institute

Pamela Couture, Association of Theological Schools

The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada evaluates and seeks to improve the quality of theological education in its 230 member schools. It also sponsors special projects designed to invigorate creative teaching and learning. Its globalization project has introduced issues pertinent to the global community into member schools and has attended to issues of quality theological education throughout the globe. Last year the member schools approved new standards of accreditation that, to my mind, hold out a vision of theological education as a practical theological endeavor. The themes of the Institute may assist a Wesleyan interpretation of the general theological themes of the new standards.

The standards emphasize:

Theological schools are communities of faith and learning guided by a theological vision... Their educational programs should continue the heritage of theological scholarship, attend to the religious constituencies served, and respond to the global context of religious service and theological education... (23) A theological school is a community of faith and learning that cultivates habits of theological reflection, nurtures wise and skilled ministerial practice, and contributes to the formation of spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity. Within this context, the task of theological scholarship is central. It includes the interrelated activities of learning, teaching, and research. Learning and teaching occur in the classroom and through experiences outside the classroom; the responsibilities of teaching and learning rest with both students and faculty; the collaborative nature of theological scholarship requires that people teach and learn from one another in communal settings and research is integral to the quality of both learning and teaching. (25).

Further theological vision is developed under the headings of "learning, teaching, and research" and "characteristics of theological scholarship" that include "collaboration, freedom of inquiry, relationship with diverse publics; and a global awareness." The theological curriculum should foster "spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community, and acquiring the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry in that community... The entire curriculum should be seen as a set of practices with a formative aim--the development of intellectual, spiritual, moral, and vocational or professional capacities--and careful attention must be given to the coherence and mutual enhancement of its various elements." (29) (Theological EducationXXXII:2, Spring, 1996.)

This vision, like the United Methodist Social Principles, is specific enough to create a common vision but vague enough to await its completion in the particulars of the theological traditions represented by individual schools. To schools who seek to practice a Wesleyan theology, the plenary sessions of this Institute might suggest the following. Theological education is a means of grace (Allen Moore); as such, both the practice of theological education and the persons in theological education are gifts given to us by God (Doug Meeks). The vitality of theological education, like the success and failure of the Methodist revival, depends on the ability of participants in the full ecology of the school--administrators, faculty, students, support staff--to
pass the gift of education from one to the other. The practice of gifting in theological education stands in parabolic witness to the market society in which it must make its way.

When theological schools have administrators who act like CEOs, faculty who become middle managers, and students who are treated like consumers, their theology and philosophical underpinnings may be that of the market: a philosophy that primarily encourages individuals' pursuit of enlightened self-interest. Since theological schools must survive in a market economy their administrators must be able to justify their activities on fiscally responsible grounds. Schools of grace, however, exist in the market but are not of it. The steward of the theological school must attend to the "bottom line," but his or her primary vocation is to find and multiply the gifts of the educational community. While mutuality of exchange may occur between two individuals, more often the gift of theological education is an intergenerational vocation in which the educator risks giving a gift that is not directly returned to oneself. Instead, the most effective gift in theological education is one that is passed from region to region, from generation to generation, eluding those who want to document its contribution to the "bottom line," and transcending the grasp of those who would reduce its mystery.

For Wesleyans, the end of all life, including theological education, is growth in the knowledge and love of God and caring for the neighbor as oneself. The divine means to that end is God's grace. The human practice that orients us toward that end is activity that responds to God's grace. Kant may have urged us to treat persons always as ends and never as means, but Wesley's notion of prevenient grace exceeds even that demanding standard. In prevenient grace God reaches toward all of us as ends in ourselves, inviting us toward God for our own sake, without requiring us to respond or using us to some ulterior purpose that denies our own worth. God's prevenient invitation suggests that we treat people not only as ends in themselves, and never as means, but also as if they are created of the divine mystery of the image of the Godhead itself. If that is truly the case, then when we engage administrators in faculty meetings, colleagues in the library, students in the classroom, and support staff in the halls, we are mirroring to one another the image of God.

At times theological educators will meet these persons as if they are the image of God to whom they owe the fulfillment of a contract (by virtue of our being on the payroll). Dominantly, however, theological educators might first seek in these persons the image of a prevenient God who reminds us that we have already been the beneficiaries of these persons' contribution to the theological school in which we live and hope to thrive. Because of the reality of human finitude, the gift that we have received through this person may not be as appropriate or freely given as we would have liked. In fact, we might have received gifts that were given grudgingly or that missed their mark. And, our temptation will be to remember the tainted gift. However, the state of our souls and theirs will be better if we meet them as persons who have already given us a very tangible gift (Bondi)—a gift that might be returned to them directly in appreciation but, expressing even deeper appreciation, will be multiplied if we pass it on to someone else.

The activity of giving and receiving requires care for the gift to be given and the gift that has been received. The steward helps to identify the best gifts of the community, to nourish those gifts, and to help them multiply. Summer or sabbatical may be a time for special care for the gift of theological scholarship, and hopefully, the excitement that marks the beginning of school indicates that gifts well cared for have created a sense of abundance, generosity, and superfluity, rather than the sense of scarcity that so often marks the months of April and May. In September and October one more frequently hears the lighthearted laughter and appreciative words—those
human exchanges that are borne from a sense of abundance and generosity. September and October may be the months of the most grace-responsive teaching and learning—a time when the permanent participants in the school—administrators, professors, and staff—are energetic enough to offer their most vibrant, creative gifts. In September and October teachers may more actively seek to invite the student’s prior knowledge and life experience in the classroom. An experienced and excellent teacher, however, lives from a sense of grace, enthusiasm and generosity throughout the year.

Over the year administrators and faculty may be seduced into believing that this particularly energy-consuming means of grace—theological education—is an end itself, especially as we strive toward the new catch-phrase, "standards of excellence." Faculty are generally hired to do that which they should do best—scholarship—and to refrain from spending their time on tasks that others can do. However, doing the menial work of the church, doing what we do not do well, or doing what is out of accord with our usual role and status—and doing it regularly and repeatedly as if it were a spiritual discipline, with the risks and boundaries these entail—may help us stay in touch with the end toward which all of theological education aims.

Our knowledge of God's grace arises from God's work in the world. Our responses to grace are marked with the freedom and joy of human finitude—fortunately, we can and must respond partially to God's invitation, creating a diversity that is required for the wholeness that seeks a common aim. Although not constrained by human finitude, the Trinitarian Godhead, according to Miguez Bonino, helps us understand that distinctions among arts of ministry—liturgy, pastoral care, the fine arts, etc.—should not destroy the unity of ministry or its common aim in fostering the love of God and neighbor. By implication, if distinctions among the disciplines of theological education become distractions from our common aim, our focus may be clarified by remembering that distinctions in unity originate in the nature of the God in whose image we are made.

When theological educators meet in retreat for theological reflection, whether it is in the three years of a seminary curriculum, the two weeks of an Oxford Institute, (or the five days of the Council of Bishops' meeting,) we might begin to think of our time set apart as a bracket within which we try to approximate life lived in the realm of God. In retreat, we might imagine that we live as if in the relative "already" of grace, even though we know we live in the "not yet" of the market, including the theological market. What might such time apart look like? In the freedom of the imaginative play of a retreat for the purpose of theological reflection, I had a spontaneous idea for the structure of a curriculum designed for spiritual formation in the practice of grace:

Year 1: Half time in direct ministry listening to the world's most vulnerable who need the word and act of God's grace, those who are repeatedly named in the Bible as persons who are the special concern of those persons who wish to follow God CONCURRENT WITH half time interpreting that experience first through Wesleyan hymns, prayers, letters, and other devotional documents of the Wesleyan tradition; moving on to reading a classic of the Christian tradition, one that the faculty guide finds most meaningful; and finally, reading Scripture: all read as devotional guides to experience in ministry to those outside the church or outside the mainstream of society. Included in both settings is the regular practice of the formal means of grace toward developing a set of formal and spiritual disciplines that would guide one's lifelong theological education.
Year 2: Coursework that surveys in an organizing fashion the Bible, Christian history, theology, ethics, and theology and the social sciences, and interfaith dialogue.

Year 3: Half time in congregational practice doing the arts of ministry; halftime in reflection on the arts of ministry--coursework on pastoral care, religious education, Methodist polity and administration, worship and liturgy, community ministry, and preaching as distinctive activities that serve a common aim.

Graduation would be dependent upon the candidate's filing a learning plan for the next five years, based on habits of learning established in seminary. Continued certification for ministry would depend on fulfillment of the learning plan and participation in a weeklong retreat each year where a classic is read or a theme studied in community, and the person's ministry of the last year is reevaluated.