

Like Movement, Like Seminary

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Robert W. Bertram

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Recently at Christ Church Cathedral here in Saint Louis we, Seminex, presented our upcoming graduates to the Church as candidates for that Church's ministry. Yet "the Church" which received them on this occasion was represented only by presidents of AELC. But AELC, of course, represents only a part of Seminex' constituency—a large part, a favorite part, but still only a part. Those AELC presidents in the chancel that evening are our dearest friends, our "partners" with whom we have been through a great deal together. But even they, as they said, could promise only so much. As Synod President Neunaber reminded us in the ceremony, he could not "speak for the whole Church." He was touching on one of Seminex' foremost needs: how to relate to our whole constituency?

For instance, in that same service many of the worshipers, very many, were from congregations still in the Missouri Synod — in the Synod but not of it. The graduates themselves, as with Seminex students generally, are still mostly from Missouri congregations. More often than not, in fact, our graduates wind up being placed back within that synod — in and with it but not under it. Seminex' own faculty, while eager members of the AELC, are in most cases still members of Missouri's clergy as well — "in a stance of confessional protest," to be sure, and all of us scheduled for early expulsion. Whether, even then, we shall acknowledge the authority of that synod to expel us and to annul the calls it once gave us is by no means automatic. Too many Christians in that synod are still reaffirming those original

calls of ours. They do so even financially. Reckoned by synods, Seminex' largest source of support is still the givers from within the Missouri Synod.

Still, those same faithful constituents have little say-so in the operation of Seminex. For instance, they have no direct voice in choosing members of our board, which is to represent them. AELC, as of course it must, does have such a voice. But not even ELIM, which once had that voice, has it any longer. That is one of our sorest needs: for our whole constituency to be represented.

There is another, a second way we at Seminex must reflect our constituency, namely, by being collegial in our own decision-making – collegial, that is, as opposed to hierarchical or managerial. At least as I perceive our confessional movement, it is pastors and people in the congregations who want to take responsibility for the movement. Especially so, if they are expected to take the consequences of it. And isn't that where the movement right now is being most consequential, not at the national but at regional and local levels? We do not want leaders who are merely responsive to us and who then spare us the responsibility of the final decisions. We want not only to be responded to but to be held responsible, together. One of the most hopeful things about AELC is the way its elected leaders are striving to keep responsibility where it originates, the grass roots. Seminex is working hard at the same goal within its own community. Being at Seminex does have consequences, good and bad. No one has to bear those consequences quite so directly as do staff and students. So they try hard to bear responsibility for the consequential decisions as well, collegially. Like movement, like seminary.

Third, the confessional movement is not in business, anymore than AELC is, to perpetuate itself. Neither may Seminex be.

Seminex, I believe, exists to help the confessional movement toward that nearest possible future when neither the movement nor its seminary are any longer needed as separate entities. For us at Seminex to be separate even now from other good Lutheran seminaries is at best an emergency measure, so that when we do combine efforts we will not come empty-handed.

But the combining of efforts across synodical lines is already happening out in the movement at large, and again more at the local level than anywhere else. In some localities Lutheran congregations from all national bodies, with or without those bodies' blessings, have become wondrously close-knit. So close-knit, in fact, that not even a Missouri congregation in that local fellowship could be attacked by its synodical authorities without the whole local Lutheran community coming to its support. At that point the "confessional movement" can no longer be reduced to a separate synodical phenomenon.

Seminex, too, might hope for something as close to local congregations as that, and as pan-Lutheran. But not yet, not in Seminex' present condition as a separate, almost synodical institution. We are still "between the times." On the other hand, there could be something quite Christian about our announcing that in its present isolated form this seminary plans to die, then to come back alive in new form, as soon as our assignment on this temporary witness-stand is done—the Lord giving us that kind of death and resurrection.

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