

Seminex Remembered—Strange and Wonderful

Warren Rubel, friend of Seminex, says he learned this from his wife on their (first?) wedding anniversary: “Warren, ours has been a strange and wonderful relationship. You are strange and I am wonderful.”

Much about Seminex, like the Rubel marriage, was strange and wonderful—often both at the same time. First of all, it was strange for us to be a seminary without a “mother” church, a supporting denomination. How do you do that? Not just how to pay the bills, but where do the graduates go?

Early on supporters appeared, eventually calling themselves the Evangelical Lutherans in Mission (ELIM). These were Missouri Synod parishes and individuals who claimed that Seminex was still “their” seminary, even though now set adrift by those in power in the synod. Throughout our 10 years of existence—and of raising our own funds—these ELIMites were the largest single source for meeting our one million-plus annual operating budget. Only later did our “denomination” (actually a non-denomination) come along, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). Even though they gladly partnered with us, their modest numbers required Seminex to continue fending for its own funds and finding placements for its graduates. Though initially strange for us, this became wonder-ful, the wonder being that it worked—year after year for a decade!

Another example: The first classes at Seminex were held on February 20, 1974 in classrooms at Eden (UCC) Seminary and St. Louis (Jesuit) University. Strange and wonderful is that both of those schools once were “enemies” of the Lutheran seminary in St. Louis. Eden was originally the school of the “Evangelical

and Reformed" German immigrants, those on the other side of the fence from us Missouri Lutherans and our feisty confessionalism. And when the Congregationalists joined the "E&R" to become the United Church of Christ, their spot out in liberal left field put them even farther beyond the pale of our orthodoxy. Only for athletic duels did Eden and Concordia sometimes get together in olden days—and everybody knew that it was the "true" faith being slugged out on the playing field.

Hospitality from the Jesuits was even more strange and wonderful. The Society of Jesus came into existence after the Reformation in the 16th century to undo what the Reformation had done to the seamless cloak of the Roman Church. But here in St. Louis 4 centuries later the Jesuits were sheltering us Seminex Lutherans after our own Missouri Synod had found us unseemly for its own seamless robe and sent us on our way "to seek our fellowship elsewhere," as they said then. But fellowship with the Jesuits? Strange and wonderful!

Not all of us Seminexers—we were after all "Missouri"—were very ecumenical as we entered this exilic world. We had to learn fast. Complete strangers kept turning up to offer help, thus becoming wonderful friends. And not just other Christians. We had to swallow hard and think fast as Jewish supporters showed up with gifts to offer, such as housing for displaced students and faculty. We benefitted from widespread and mostly positive media coverage, not just here in our hometown, but in the church and secular press throughout the land, and even overseas. We didn't really fit the hero's mold, though often we were cast as such.

Evidence of the international spread of the Seminex story we learned a year or two later, as news came back to us of an Aoyama Seminex in Tokyo (Methodist) and a Korean Seminex (Presbyterian) in Seoul, both of them seminaries recently exiled

who took our name as their own after power purges in their own contexts. A contingent of St. Louis Seminex faculty and students eventually made a pilgrimage to these Seminexes of Asia. You can imagine the encounters—well, maybe you can't! Call it strange and wonderful. One teacher from Korean Seminex, Steven Moon, later on did an intermester as guest prof with us in St. Louis. He was wonderful, though I think he found us a bit strange. We seemed so tame. Korean Seminex was really radical. Both students and faculty had this common denominator: all had served prison terms before they got to the seminary. They had done their confessing vis-a-vis the "Caesars" of Korea in the 70s, and Caesar made them pay for it. Our losses, such as they were, didn't quite compare.

The Seminex story told by the media, even the church media, was regularly disappointing. Conservative vs. liberal Bible interpretation, due process, power politics, personality clashes, academic freedom—these were their regular angles for interpreting us to the public. Granted these elements were in the mix. Granted general readers and viewers could comprehend stories focused on such issues. Granted also that church squabbles are complex affairs. But only rarely did the reporters get to the Gospel issue (better the "law and gospel" issue) beneath the surface diagnoses. Not all of us in Seminex caught on very fast either as to what our story really was, though some saw it sooner than others.

One such early "seer" was Doc [Richard R.] Caemmerer. Unforgettable is his chapel homily early in our history on the text of Hebrews 10: 13ff. We Seminexers are in exile, quoth he, not from the Missouri Synod to which we might be hoping someday to return —though that is what most (all?) of us thought at first. No, said Doc, that would be "looking back, to that land from which they had gone out," which the O.T. patriarchs and matriarchs precisely did NOT do. Not so the Hebrews image of

exile. These ancient believers saw exile as separation from a homeland that they had never yet seen, one up ahead where they had never yet been.

Ours too, Doc proclaimed, is a homeland up ahead, a new place where high priest Jesus is leading his entourage. And it's not just for us; this Gospel notion of exile applies to the entire Christian church. To be bruised and battered by folks thought to be companions on the way, as the Hebrews are in the text, is par for the course. All the more reason to look to the author and finisher of our faith—especially when facing burnout—to get refueled and re-encouraged, and to press on with the journey. Like those ancient folks of faith, we too don't know where the future will take us, but we do know Who is taking us there. That is enough, as the Augsburg Confession says: *satis est*.

More than once our community's internal discussions and debates (I hesitate to say "fights") were on that topic: If exile is following our High Priest toward an unknown homeland up ahead, what's our calling now, as we face a specific sticky wicket, to stay on the path? By my count there were four such extra-sticky wickets, crunch debates, during our ten year existence in St. Louis. Since I was on the "losing" side when each of these four came up for a vote, you will understand that most Seminex colleagues—faculty, students, staff, & board members—saw them differently.

According to my lights these four crunch times were:

1. when we changed our name,
2. when we changed our internal governance structure,
3. when we "chose" seven colleagues for non-reappointment,
4. when we opted to close down in St. Louis and "deploy" to three other Lutheran seminaries as the ELCA merger was coming over the horizon.

It seemed to me that Doc Caemmerer's early "aha" about our exile was central in each of these, and that in these 4 decisions we departed from that image of our calling. Methinks we signalled our exhaustion (and Seminex was wearying), not our excitement (some things were just too strange and not wonderful at all), and hardly any Melchizedekian chutzpah (ala Hebrews) to "keep on truckin'" toward a future we could not clearly see. But Doc had shown us—according to the Scriptures—that we did not need to have it blueprinted for us in advance. Yet the majority vote went otherwise.

More about this next time.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Another item strange and wonderful. [ThTh #6 \(June 25, '98\)](#) did somehow get close to the head office of today's LCMS. So close that an assistant to the synodical president sent off an Email the next day to his "Cyberbrethren" to disconnect any linkage between Seminex 1974 and Augsburg 1530. Our farewell march from the Concordia Seminary campus, he said, was a publicity stunt. Augsburg was about serious confessing.