

Seminex Remembered – Faculty Reductions/Closing Shop

ThTh 14 concluded: “That’s two of the four [sc. name change and internal governance] episodes where I think we strayed from our exilic calling. Next time, d.v., faculty reductions and closing shop in St. Louis.”

FACULTY REDUCTIONS

Seminex began classes on Feb. 20, 1974 with something like 450 students and 45 faculty, a 10 to 1 ratio. The May commencement that year depleted the student numbers by one-third. Finding new students was a priority agenda item. In the “old days” back at Concordia Seminary student recruitment was no big deal. New ones came automatically—through the pipeline.

The Missouri Synod’s educational system for pastoral training—a half dozen junior colleges regionally spread throughout the USA, whose graduates then moved on to a two-year “senior college” in Ft. Wayne, Indiana—had always brought 150-plus new seminarians each autumn to the St. Louis seminary with little or no effort on the part of the seminary. But when we became Seminex, and thus “unkosher” for students in Missouri’s educational system, that pipeline was turned off, and we had to scramble on our own. Initially a fair number of the senior college graduates, ignoring the synod’s sanctions, did come our way, but their numbers diminished fast in subsequent years.

We all became recruiters in some fashion, and some new students came our way on their own, both those with Missouri roots and those without. One example of the latter was Harriete Baggett, Roman Catholic wife and mother (maybe even grandmother), deeply involved in social ministry in the St. Louis archdiocese. The

local RC seminary was closed to her, of course, so Harriet signed on with us. Why? "So I can get my M.Div. degree," she said, "and be ready for ordination when the rules change in Rome." You can imagine what leaven such Harrietes added to classroom give-and-take.

But even with the addition of many blessed outsiders, after three commencements (74, '75, '76) our numerical decline demanded attention. Also demanding attention was a decline in financial support. But what sort of attention? What was the demand to be read from the numbers?

The Seminex board read these numbers to be demanding staff reduction, and so did many of our faculty and students. The board asked us to assess the "optimum and minimum teaching and administrative faculty, executive staff and supportive staff by which the work of the school could be carried on," and to do so with two scenarios in mind: if student body numbers stayed around 300, and also if they should drop to 250. Both student and faculty member classes heard them saying: "there must be reductions. You decide how much and who goes." A few of us challenged the "must" in the board's directive. If the N.T. image of exiles heading for a homeland up ahead somewhere really was the truth about us, how could we ever say to anyone: time for you to leave the pilgrimage now and head out on your own? If it was "only" money, and "only" shrinking student body statistics, wouldn't lowering our salaries and branching out for other teaching venues be another option in keeping with the image of a pilgrim band? Tossing some of the marchers overboard can't possibly be grounded in the gospel, can it?

Here I think Tietjen's theology of institutions willy-nilly carried the day. Although he fought to keep the number of those set adrift to a very few, the board finally overruled him and authorized pink slips for 12 staffers. That constituted one-

third of the faculty. At its regular spring meeting a day before the 1977 commencement it terminated 7 colleagues and put 5 "on waivers." Apparently the board thought we understood this as one possible outcome. We did not. Though the board's decision was made just hours before the commencement and its attendant hoopla, the news was not publicized until after diplomas were granted. The effect was shattering to everyone in the community. The shock generated such expressions as "the May massacre," "Seminex's suicide." Expressed in Tietjen's own retrospective words: "doing to ourselves what all the forces marshalled against us had not been able to do to us: close Seminex." (Memoirs 281)

How did it happen? Although the board initiated the process and called the final shots, we really did do it to ourselves. Before long we no longer challenged the "must" in the board's view of reductions. We set aside our exile-model for this issue, and saw it as a problem of arithmetic: too many staffers, not enough students, not enough funds. No one disputed that the Lord had marvelously brought us thus far, and could surely be trusted to provide, but we nevertheless proceeded as though on this one we had to take our fate into our own hands. It still seems insane to me that we even went one step farther to apply triage to ourselves, categorizing ourselves—A, B and C—according to our judgment of each person's value for Seminex. If you are all pilgrims in Christ's exilic parade how can you even do that? Could be that Grandma Schmidt who sweeps the classrooms is Christ's key agent for our pilgrimage. But we did divide ourselves, like Caesar's Gaul, into three parts. Category A were those staffers absolutely necessary; category B were those one-step down from that—very important but not absolutely necessary; category C were those "who would be counseled & helped to find ministry elsewhere."

When it was all over, 7 wound up in category C and 5 in category

B. The board's action made it official. Tietjen's job was to inform each of these twelve later in the day when the commencement festivities were over. A president's job is not a happy one. And "there was no joy in Mudville" as word of this "strike out" spread to the rest of the Seminex community. Worse than that, it was chaos. Students had already gone home, so only the faculty was around to deal with the uproar. At subsequent meetings the board heard our protest against their perceived draconian measures. They did decide to offer contracts to the five staffers in category B. But since, as they said, we had offered them no "new mathematics and new wisdom" to alter the fate of the 7 category C colleagues, that action stood fast. It was our own failure. We failed to transmit to the board the "wisdom" of exilic theology so they could see the non-sense, even un-faith, of jettisoning fellow pilgrims. So that left only the mathematics, and those numbers couldn't be fudged.

I said above that Tietjen's view of institutions—and therewith his version of two-kingdoms theology—carried the day. The board must have had the same perspective, although I have no documentation to verify that. Expressed in the words of one board member: "sometimes you just have to do what is shitty to be faithful in your God-given calling." Tietjen's own epilog to this trauma in his Memoirs is more sophisticated, but the perspective is the same. The "institution that is essential for the church's ministry is also inimical to it. That was a hard lesson for an organizational person like me to learn. Institution is not neutral but is predisposed to evil. Each institution is pervaded by the principalities and powers against which Christians wrestle. Institution is a part of what it means to be human, and it participates in the fallenness of our human condition. Institution dehumanizes, perpetrates injustice, and opposes God even when it is in the best of human hands, even when it is in the hands of Christians. . . . At Seminex,

preserving the institution required that we tell some of our faculty and staff that they could no longer work with us in the community they had helped create. Institution requires the compromise of integrity.”

I think this pessimism about institutions is one that is often ascribed to Luther in American theology. But really its roots lie in Ernst Troeltsch’s (mis)reading of Luther’s two kingdom paradigm. That view of Luther’s 2KP gained a following in America, I suspect, via the Niebuhr brothers, who had learned it from Troeltsch. Tietjen may have picked it up from the Niebuhr heritage at Union Seminary in New York while doing his doctorate there. But it was also present in the neo-orthodoxy that many of us “Missouri” seminarians inhaled in the 1950s when we started reading “forbidden books” on our own and found them such a refreshing alternative to our own Franz Pieper heritage in systematic theology.

No one who had ever read Luther’s treatise “On Secular Authority” could designate institutions as such necessary evils, and still claim Luther’s support. Luther says it is Anabaptist, not his theology, to label institutions as “predisposed to evil” and “pervaded by the principalities and powers.” His claim is that institutions are God’s good creations, not demonic at all. In that treatise his aim is to show the crown prince (soon to be ruler of Saxony) that God is gifting him with an institution the exact opposite of one that “dehumanizes, perpetrates injustice, and opposes God.” Luther even makes bold to say that the Christian prince is one who can indeed make it happen so that the institution humanizes, perpetuates justice, and serves God.

But this theological perspective was a minority voice, as I’ve said in earlier installments, in Seminex. Though students found it winsome by virtue of their classroom exposure, only a handful of faculty moved from Troeltsch-Niebuhr to the real Luther on

this one. And whether it ever got presented to the board I don't know. When they told us that they'd heard "no new wisdom" from us to alter their decisions about staff reductions, I imagine we were getting their answer. This two-kingdom theology and Scripture's own exilic theology did not commend itself to them as the need of the hour.

This self-inflicted wound to the Seminex community has no happy end, as far as I can see. Of course, it is "practical" to sever seven staffers when mathematics dominates the paradigm. But Gospel-grounding offers a variety of different options. Even good "left-hand" kingdom praxis has other possibilities. The departure of our seven colleagues was "required," it was said, to preserve Seminex as an institution. It can also be seen as an ironic big nail in our institutional coffin, whose lid came down 6 years later when we closed shop in St. Louis.

CLOSING THE SHOP IN 1983

Institutional pessimism continued. At the same time as the board was coping with the aftermath of the staff reductions in 77-78, they authorized (ordered?) us to revise our internal governance. Here the MBO model (management by objectives) described in ThTh 14, moved in and replaced our 2KP "regula" for life together, another measure to preserve our institution that put another nail into the coffin. The theology of the Letter to the Hebrews became even more relevant, for like those ancient Christians we were on the verge of burn-out on our exilic pilgrimage. But we grabbed for coping mechanisms from the landscape through which we were marching. We didn't hear much good news coming from the voice of the Author and Finisher up ahead of us on the trail.

For some the prospect of the church merger coming over the horizon, which eventually became the ELCA, looked like the homeland where our journey was to end. Thus Seminex's merging with other existing seminaries in other church bodies, the ALC

and LCA, looked like ecumenical heaven. After our history of Missouri separatism you can understand that it did look celestial—even with our institutional pessimism still around. Many of us faculty were tired, just plain tired, of having to do so many other things to keep Seminex afloat besides doing our teaching. So to have our calling restored to being “just” profs must surely be the oasis at the end of the line, right?

The process was long and complicated and replete with institutional politics of every sort. For one reason we were a plum ripe for picking with a constituency that contributed upwards of a million dollars each year to keep us going. Who wouldn't want to “merge” with us? You can read the tale of the zig-zag negotiations with ALC and LCA seminaries and bureaucrats in Tietjen's Memoirs. It is a narrative with strange analogs to Tietjen's own years on the ramparts within the Missouri Synod.

I was privy to none of the inside stuff, and as the merger-mania unfolded a few of us 2KP folks pushed for an alternative. That was in some way to take Seminex into the new merged church intact as a fully operational seminary, but different in many ways from the standard institutions that all the others were—owning no real estate, receiving no subsidy from church headquarters, functioning internally and externally on this exilic theology, etc. But we were probably deceiving ourselves and not seeing that Seminex, despite its many “strange and wonderful” features, had pretty well become a “normal” institutional seminary on its own. Nevertheless the issue was debated internally beginning already in 1979. In one preliminary vote four of the faculty member class and a large percentage of the student member class voted against the merger in favor of an alternative that would continue an intact seminary to be offered to the new church. But the handwriting was on the wall. In May 1983 we graduated our last class. Faculty were deployed (that was our technical term) to three new venues “ABC,” the LCA and

ALC seminaries in Austin (Texas), Berkeley (California) and Chicago and took up their duties there for the fall term. We'd already forgotten the grim meaning those 3 letters had had in the days of our near suicide. A handful of the faculty didn't deploy for different reasons. I was one who stayed in St. Louis to pursue Crossings. Seminex students—those not tied down in St. Louis—also moved in the ABC directions to continue their education.

Seminex in St. Louis was history. Did it end with a bang or a whimper—to use St. Louis-born T.S. Eliot's alternatives? Probably neither. The final ceremonies were a mixture of joy and sorrow, the latter especially for our feisty St. Louis supporting constituency. And for many among the faculty another sound was heard—a sigh of relief.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder