

Why Seminary?

Colleagues,

Kathryn Kleinhans was a keynote speaker at the big Crossings gathering at the end of January this year. She returns for this week's ThTh post with a message she gave earlier this month to the entering students at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota). In real life Kit is a prof and department chair in Religion and Philosophy at the ELCA's Wartburg College, Waverly Iowa, a couple hours' drive south of the seminary. Also wife and mother. Her husband, Alan R. Schulz, serves as pastor at Messiah Lutheran Church in nearby Charles City, Iowa. Both are SemineX alums.

I asked her a while back to "send me something sometime" for a ThTh posting. Couple days ago she sent this. Here's her note about how it came about:

I was invited to give the opening address at Luther Seminary's "Week One" orientation for incoming students. I was given this assignment: "The working title for the address is 'Why Seminary?', which is meant to address why theological study matters in a world where our 125+ talented new students might have done many other things with their lives."

You'll be edified, as I was, by what she says.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Luther Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota. 4 September 2007

WHY SEMINARY?

How tempting it is to say “Why not?!” and sit down. Or better yet, to invite each of you to the podium, to share with us the story of your unique journey to this place on this day. Why seminary? Perhaps because someone saw your gifts and nudged – or pushed – you in this direction. Perhaps because you have questions that are best wrestled with through study. Perhaps because the call of God in your life has been unrelenting, no matter how often you’ve tried to find a ship sailing for Tarshish rather than Nineveh. Perhaps in your own life the question has not been “Why seminary?” or “Why not?” but “Why me?!”

Well, here you are. So in some way, it seems that you’ve already begun to answer the question, at least for yourself, at least for the time being.

Why seminary? Our ancestors had a practical answer. In the early days of what would become the United States, clergy were imported from “the old country” – whichever old country happened to be yours. In time, an apprenticeship model developed for training and approving pastors. A young man – and it was a man – trained with an experienced clergyman, studying the texts and learning the practices of ministry from one who had already demonstrated mastery of them. Eventually, American Lutherans – and other denominations as well – formed seminaries, pooling both their human resources and their financial resources to create formal schools of theological education.

You may know that the root meaning of the word “seminary” is seedbed. Just as one tills the soil and tends a garden to provide conditions for the growth of plants, so a seminary is a place for the cultivation and growth of leaders. You students

fill multiple roles in this horticultural image. You are the seeds planted in the soil of this place, this seminary, this seedbed. For the duration of your studies, you will be nurtured, weeded around, carefully pruned, and well fertilized, until you are ready to be transplanted into the soil where you will take root and serve, whether as pastor, teacher, or some other kind of leader. But it is also true that you yourselves are the soil, the good soil in which the seed of God's Word has already been planted, and watered, and in which that seed will continue to blossom and bear fruit during the course of your studies – and during the course of your life and ministry.

Why Luther Seminary? I'm sure the Admissions Office has a collection of standard answers to that question: the right size, the right location, enough financial aid, a compatible theological orientation. But those are "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" answers to the question. "Why Luther Seminary?" is a question best answered by the mission statement:

Luther Seminary educates leaders for Christian communities

- called and sent by the Holy Spirit
- to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ
- and to serve in God's world.

What has always struck me about this mission statement, especially when one sees it printed out with its phrases set off by those cross-shaped bullets, is its grammatical ambiguity – or, better said, its complexity. In the English language, with its lack of case endings, it's not clear whether the qualifiers

- "called and sent by the Holy Spirit"
- "to witness to salvation through Jesus Christ"
- "and to serve in God's world"

describe the leaders whom the seminary educates or the Christian

communities for whom they are educated. Is this a lack of clarity? Or is it rather a surplus of meaning? Why Luther Seminary? Because Spirit-called and Spirit-sent communities created it and continue to support it – for the education of Spirit-called and Spirit-sent leaders – for such communities.

But let's get down to basics.

Why seminary? Each of you has come to this place with certain gifts and skills, but you will leave with more. You are, after all, here to learn. And there's a lot to learn. Biblical languages, exegesis, church history, systematic theology, the theology and culture of other religions, preaching, pastoral care, worship; the list goes on and on. There is, frankly, much more to learn than you can possibly pack into the two years or the four years that you will be students here. Every generation of practitioners quickly becomes aware of "all the things they didn't teach us in seminary."

But your seminary studies will lay in you a solid foundation of knowledge; your seminary studies will require you to practice what you preach and teach, both inside and outside the classroom; and your seminary studies will cultivate in you the attitudes and behaviors of life-long learners, so that "all the things they didn't teach us in seminary" are not a dead end but an opportunity for continued study and growth.

In this place of theological education called Luther Seminary, it's appropriate for me to lift up the example of Martin Luther himself as theologian. In the classroom, I like to describe Luther as an occasional and contextual theologian, in contrast to the more traditional concept of a "systematic" theologian. Unlike John Calvin, with his Institutes of the Christian Religion, or Thomas Aquinas, with his Summa theologia [Ed: in American idiom, "theology, the whole ball of wax" – a work he

never finished!], Luther never wrote an encyclopedia of Christian theology from A to Z. Instead, he spoke and wrote in response to the occasions that presented themselves: the abuses within the medieval Catholic church, the Peasants War and the Turkish threat, the excesses of other reformers, a barber's request for advice on how to pray, a soldier's request for career counseling, and of course let's not forget the many, many classroom lectures and sermons.

Luther had a system, to be sure: a core understanding of the Gospel of God's grace for sinners through faith in Christ Jesus along with a commitment to communicate that truth in such a way that people could hear it. But Luther's writings took the form of "applied theology" rather than a "systematics." His tireless engagement with the issues of his day suggests Luther as the model of what today we call a public theologian, speaking not just to the church but engaging multiple publics on a wide variety of public matters. Note too that Luther spoke and wrote fluently in two different languages, and by that I don't just mean the languages of Latin and German, but more importantly the language of the academy and the language of the common people.

However, Martin Luther was no Athena springing fully formed from the forehead of Zeus. Luther was once – wait for it – a student like you. Many of you are familiar with the dramatic story of Luther's thunderstorm pledge, "Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk." Whatever other factors may have been at work in Luther's decision to leave law school and enter a monastery, this story makes it clear that Luther's personal experiences played a central role in shaping his sense of calling – as I'm sure is true for almost every one of us here today. Luther describes his early life in the monastery as being tormented by doubts and anxieties – which, if you haven't experienced yet, don't worry, you will.

Luther's Christ-centered faith and his vocation as a theologian were shaped by his study of the Scriptures and by mentors and advisors, particularly the vicar general of the Augustinian order Johann von Staupitz, who sent Luther to pursue doctoral studies in theology – despite Luther's own reluctance to do so. Over the course of his ministry, Luther had the advantage of working with other gifted colleagues in Wittenberg, Dr. Philipp Melancthon at the university, Pastor Johannes Bugenhagen at the city church, and others. Personal experience, challenging and nurturing mentors, faithful colleagues, and study itself – all played a role in making Martin Luther who he was – just as those factors have played – and will continue to play – a similar role in shaping you.

Why seminary? If not to learn everything that can be learned, nonetheless to learn the language of theology, its vocabulary, its grammar, its regional and historical dialects. To a certain extent, I view theological education as “practicing speaking the Gospel,” so that one becomes fluent in it and can speak it to different people in different circumstances. A story might help to illustrate my point: The summer after my first year of college, I went to Europe (mostly for a Lutherland tour, but we also stopped in Paris on the way home). I saw a swimsuit I liked in a Parisian department store, and although I had studied French for five years, I actually made several laps around the floor of the department store rehearsing the conversation in my head before I approached a saleswoman. “I'd like to see this in green, please.” “I need size such-and-such.” “Where may I try it on?” And, of course, I had to think through the possible responses to my questions in order to anticipate my next move. The point is that after five years of straight-A French, I shouldn't have had to take those laps just to buy a swimsuit!

Well, my friends, in the real world of ministry and mission, there is not always time to take a few laps around the store

first when one is called upon to speak. One must be fluent enough to communicate – both listening and speaking – when the situation calls for it. Even in preaching, where time for sermon preparation is assumed, if you have to take too many laps around the store in order to put the words together, there will be no time left for the other tasks of ministry.

So a seminary must be a language lab, whose goal is fluency (the ability to interact meaningfully with the native inhabitants) rather than good grades. A seminary teaches the vocabulary and grammar of Christian theology (and critically analyzes the vocabulary and grammar of the world which we are to address). A seminary provides practice partners (one's fellow students) and language coaches (the faculty), and structures immersion experiences (the curriculum) in the language and culture of the faith. The end result is more than a diploma but the ability to communicate God's Word both creatively and faithfully, in the variety of dialectics and contexts that are necessary for our witness actually to be heard and understood by real people.

Sixteenth-century Christendom posed a particular set of challenges for the witness of the Reformers. Our postmodern, post-Christendom context poses a different set of challenges for our work today. In *The Once and Future Church* (Alban, 1991), theologian Loren Mead gives an insightful description of the emerging postmodern context. During the apostolic era, the church found itself in a context that was often hostile to its message. With the coming of Christendom, the church's environment was at least nominally supportive. But today's environment is a more complex mixture: in some places, still supportive of Christianity; in other places, again hostile to it; and increasingly, uninformed and just plain indifferent.

The complexity of this environment in which we are called to witness and service requires both flexibility and strong

interpretive and communicative abilities. Jesus Christ may be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but the ability to translate the Good News that we are saved by grace, through faith, for Christ's sake into a language that 21st century women and men will find both understandable and persuasive strikes me as a much tougher interpretive challenge than merely translating the New Testament from Greek into German or English. The Gospel may be a stumbling block, but we must not let our own inability to communicate God's Word effectively become an additional stumbling block.

Let me give you an example of the challenge of communicating effectively. When I was in graduate school, I taught a course on the theology of Martin Luther at ITC, the interdenominational predominantly African American seminary in Atlanta. During the second or third week of the course, I was explaining the theology of the cross, when one of the students said with clear excitement: "Luther was christocentric, wasn't he?! I know the Black church is christocentric, but I didn't know any of the white churches were." You can laugh, or you can cry. For a passionate Lutheran like me, it was painful to realize that the treasure we hold so dear is one we had communicated so poorly that a Christ-centered Lutheranism should come as such a surprise to another Christian. I know that on the first day of class I had laid out justification by faith as the central theme of Luther's – and Lutheran – theology. But the technical phraseology – useful shorthand in some contexts – had been impenetrable jargon, a stumbling block, at least initially, to one raised in a different Christian tradition.

At times, we must unlearn the familiar in order to communicate in a new way. When I first began to study German in college, I kept filling in the words I didn't know in French. I had to put aside those old familiar language patterns in order to acquire the new vocabulary I needed. Similarly, your theological

education will require you to unlearn some of the Sunday School images and the bumper-sticker sound bite theology you come in with, and yes even to put aside at times the denominational shorthand you will surely learn and, I hope, come to hold dear. You will be at a loss for words. You will feel inarticulate for a while. But it is the only way to become multilingual.

Whether as preachers or as teachers, we must keep learning to communicate the Good News in ways that it remains both “good” and “new.” This is not something that occurs naturally. We come to the task of theological education already formed by the languages of consumerism, egoism, nationalism, you name it. These are simply inadequate for expressing the depth of the theological tradition. Indeed, they are often in conflict with it. So you will need to learn new languages and develop new fluencies. But you will also need to remember your languages of origin, so that you can translate the fruits of your theological study into the language of your cultural peers.

And translate you must. The spoken Word takes on flesh in and through you. The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the importance of what we might call faithful adaptability, communicating the one Gospel, but in as many ways as are necessary for our witness actually to be heard by real people, people who may not be like us. How odd that today we so often hear people say, “I can’t be all things to all people,” as a kind of disclaimer or excuse, when the New Testament suggests this precisely as a model for evangelism. Paul writes:

“For though I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, ... to those under the law I became as one under the law ... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... To the weak I became weak ... I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for

the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” (1 Cor 9:19-23)

All things to all people, for the sake of the Gospel.

You come to this place with differing gifts. While you are here, certainly you will specialize, learn some things better than others, complete the requirements of one particular degree program (even though you might change degree programs along the way). But beyond these particularities, the challenge – your call – is to be able to communicate with anyone and everyone. Language teachers will tell you that one of the most important characteristics in learning a language is the ability to risk. Just say something. You need to be willing to make mistakes – in the classroom, in your contextual education sites, and beyond. You need to be willing to make mistakes – and you will – but only in that way will gain fluency.

And so, as I said, a seminary is a kind of language lab, in which you will learn and practice the language of theology, analyzing its deep structures, and applying it in situation after situation so that you will be able to speak the Word authentically, fluently, and persuasively when you leave this place. As you embark on your studies, it is our fervent hope that – like Martin Luther and others before you – you will become a thoroughly contextual, radically public, and multilingual theologian.

You know, I was struck by this statistic on the Quick Facts page of the Luther Seminary website.

Q: What percentage of the faculty is ecumenical?

A: 22%

Now, I assume that “ecumenical” is being used here as a

euphemism for non-ELCA (much as sometimes the word “multicultural” is used to refer to any non-Caucasian constituency.) If everybody else is ecumenical and multicultural, what does that make the rest of us? Parochial? Insular? Having served as one of the white pastors of an African American Lutheran parish which was often pointed to as “one of our multicultural congregations,” this is one of my pet linguistic peeves. Being ecumenical, like being multicultural, is not something that one can be independently. It’s a corporate concept, a corporate reality, requiring all of us together.

I think it’s fair to describe Luther Seminary as having deep Lutheran roots with broad ecumenical branches. The historical self-understanding of Lutheranism as a confessing reform movement within the church catholic means that the Lutheran voice is never exclusive of other Christian voices and dialects. That means, I think, that the better answer to the question, “What percentage of the faculty is ecumenical?” is 100%. And to the extent that ecumenism is understood (at least in part) as having fluency in multiple languages, then the goal should be that by the time you graduate, the student body too will be 100% ecumenical. We might even say 100% Pentecostal.

Let me shift now from the question “Why Seminary?” to the question “How Seminary?”

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has undertaken a major research project examining Preparation for the Professions. The first volume in the study, published just last year, is Educating Clergy, by Charles Foster, Lisa Dahill, Lawrence Goleman, and Barbara Wang Tolentino (Jossey-Bass 2006).

I know people who balk at the unspiritual sound of the word profession or professional – although pastoral ministry is arguably the quintessential white collar job. Although

professionalism has come to be associated primarily with a certain level of education and expertise, it's helpful for us to remember that historically the professions – medicine, law, and theology – were those whose members took public oaths of accountability, to the profession itself and by extension to the common good. The term “profession” carries within it personal and interpersonal connotations well beyond the basic notion of “job.”

Philosopher William Sullivan, in his introduction to the *Educating Clergy* volume, states:

“Professional training has its roots in apprenticeship. Learning as an apprentice typically meant exposure to the full dimensions of professional life – not only the intricacies of esoteric knowledge and peculiar skills but also the values and outlook shared by the members of the profession.” (p. 5)

Sullivan goes on to identify what he calls “the three apprenticeships of professional education” both classically and today:

- a cognitive or intellectual apprenticeship of knowledge
- a practical apprenticeship of skill
- and an apprenticeship of identity formation

These three apprenticeships are not discrete stages occurring in chronological sequence, but ideally are interwoven throughout professional education. To speak with reference to the M.Div. students for a moment, it is simply not the case that you learn content in your first two years on campus, practice skills out on internship, and pull it all together during your senior year – nor is it the case that you acquire cognitive knowledge in your Bible, theology and church history classes and practical skills in what used to be called the “practical theology”

division. As seminary students you are not each apprenticed to a single master teacher or experienced pastor.

Instead you benefit from the resources of the entire seminary and the wider church. Your learning is shaped by what the Educating Clergy study calls interwoven pedagogies of interpretation and of contextualization, pedagogies not only of performance but of formation. You will learn by reading and by doing. And at a foundational level you will learn by being part of a mentoring, modeling community of professional theologians. And make no bones about it, regardless of your degree program, regardless of your envisioned form of ministry, you are a theologian too, although at this point something of an apprentice theologian.

Let me lift up for you two examples of the products of theological education, one less successful than the other.

John Updike's novel *The Beauty of the Lilies* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) begins with the description of an early 20th century Presbyterian minister named Clarence Wilmot losing his faith. Wilmot has been reading the books of atheists and skeptics, in order to refute them, but one day he simply stops believing. "To put it in mathematical terms [Clarence says]:

it has been bearing in upon me for some time that God is a non-factor – all the equations work without Him... The universe is a pointless, self-running machine, and we are insignificant by-products, whom death will tuck back into oblivion, with or without holy fanfare." (pp. 74-75)

After confiding first in his wife and then in one of the elders, the Rev. Mr. Wilmot eventually goes to meet with Thomas Dreaver, the moderator of the presbytery, who insists that Clarence spend a full year continuing to serve his congregation – to test, if

you will, his lack of vocation – before he can be released from his responsibilities. Clarence is not nearly as upset by this as my students are when they read Updike’s novel. After all, Clarence feels, the tasks of ministry are familiar and not unpleasant. It’s just that he doesn’t believe anymore.

In the framework of the Carnegie study, Clarence has mastered the practical apprenticeship of skill, but what he lacks is a deeply formed identity sufficient to sustain both him and his ministry for the long haul. Alas, what Clarence needed is not Mr. Dreaver saying “Stick it out, man” but a Johann von Staupitz pointing him back to Christ.

But if knowledge and skill are insufficient without a deeply formed identity, so too identity and skill are insufficient without knowledge.

Several years ago, I was at a conference where Bishop Stephen Bouman of the ELCA Metropolitan New York Synod spoke. He described many exciting, contextually-effective ministries in Metro New York, particularly in poor and ethnic and immigrant communities. During the question and answer period that followed, one of those in attendance asked: Given the need to be responsive to changing contexts, languages, and cultures in ministry, do we need to rethink the structure of seminary education as a kind of pastor-factory spitting out a standardized product at the end of four years?

Bishop Bouman’s response came as a surprise, I’m sure, to the questioner. He said something like this (I’m paraphrasing): If the seminary hadn’t forced me to learn all kinds of things that didn’t seem particularly relevant at the time, I would not have had any of it to draw upon when I stood at Ground Zero.

Let me share just a few lines from one of Bishop Bouman’s published sermons:

At Ground Zero, breathing lightly through my mask, I searched for hope. Then this came to me like a gift: we are already buried. "Do you not know that you have been buried with Christ Jesus by baptism unto death? So that as Christ was raised by the power of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life."

"It came to me like a gift," Bishop Bouman says – but this gift comes not out of thin air, but out of the depth of theological education and pastoral experience that had formed him to be who he was and prepared him to speak in that moment. It was not an unmediated gift of the Spirit but a no-less-inspired gift mediated precisely through the foundation of a classic Lutheran seminary education. The things you learn here that may not seem relevant today will prepare you for ministry in places and situations that you cannot possibly anticipate.

So here you are at seminary – ready to learn, ready to do, ready to grow. As you begin your studies, remember that you are not just here to prepare for a calling that you will exercise at some point in the future. You have a current calling precisely as students. You have other callings as well, perhaps spouse, perhaps parent, citizen.

Don't attempt to juggle all these roles and responsibilities. The juggler's task is to keep all the balls in the air. Your task is to live out each of your callings faithfully. As Jack Fortin wisely reminds us, the Christian's goal is not balance but a "centered life," centered in God and in who God has created you to be

For your fundamental calling is as a child of God. It's something of a cliché that people in seminary spend more time talking about God than talking with God. May this not be so for you. Take to heart the double sense of the suffix -ology in the

word theology. The academy tends to take the word at face value, as “the study of God,” as with biology, psychology, etc. Don’t forget that theology also bears the sense of Logos, “the word of God.” Theological education is a both/and – both our study of God and our encounter with the living Word of God, in classroom and text, in worship and relationships.

William Sullivan writes in the introduction to *Educating Clergy*:

“A significant part of every seminary student’s intellectual task is to come to grips with the meaning God will have for his or her own life as well as for his or her future professional career.” (p. 4) One of the seminary faculty members interviewed for the study expressed the hope “that students will come to see that loving God with the mind is not an alternative to loving God with the heart, but is essential to [our] final integrity.” (p. 43)

One last word: While the journey you are beginning is deeply personal, ultimately none of this is about you. I chose as the Gospel text for my ordination John 4, Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. I chose it for its ending, when the Samaritan villagers say to the woman, “It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” (4:42) The task of theological education is to form leaders who can speak the truth about God and about God’s world so that others can hear it for themselves.

God bless you in your studies, for God has promised that the Word will not return empty.

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