Theological Education in the Twenty-first Century

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Educators like to imagine that education matters. We like to believe that the leadership of a congregation is improved when that person has a graduate degree and three years of study. We like to think that pouring resources into education is worthwhile. We argue that the more resources we devote to theological education, the better the clergyperson, and therefore the stronger the congregation.

Yet one challenge for the leadership of theological education is this: the traditions that spend most on theological education are declining, while those who spend much less are getting stronger. So, for example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has some of the finest seminaries in the world (Princeton Theological Seminary and Columbia Theological Seminary), but the Presbyterian Church lost two hundred thousand members from 1999–2004, which is more than any other mainline Protestant denomination during that period.\(^1\) Contrast this with Pentecostalism, which as David Martin explains, “includes about a quarter of a billion people”\(^2\) and in the United States alone has some ten million members and growing.\(^3\) The training for these pastors is often very limited and informal. Much of the congregational leadership is raised up from within and learning is limited to the Bible college. This comparison seems to suggest that the better the theological education, the less effective the congregational leadership.

In this article, I shall argue that theological education needs to allow the issues of denominational health to be much more central to the curriculum and program of the seminary. Leadership in theological

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1 Data taken from Perry Chang’s report “Recent Changes in Membership and Attendance in Mainline Protestant Denominations” (November 2006), found at www.pcusa.org/research/reports/denominational_size.pdf.


education should have less to do with the survival of this or that institution and instead should involve a commitment to producing a stronger and more creative graduate who can make a difference to the nature and size of a congregation within the Episcopal Church (or whichever tradition the seminary is linked with). This argument will be constructed under three headings: the first is the importance of the theological underpinning; the second is the willingness to learn from congregational studies, globalization, and technology; and the third is an imaginative curriculum that weaves theology together with the insights learned from congregational studies, globalization, and technology.

To make this article manageable, the area of exploration has been limited to the following. First, the focus is theological education in seminaries. I recognize that there are many forms of theological education beyond the seminary—in congregations, in dioceses, and in lay programs. All of these forms are important (and parts of my argument can apply to these areas); however, my expertise does not extend to a full exploration of these areas. Second, the focus is on the Episcopal Church. Much of the argument can be applied to other mainline denominations, but the context out of which I am writing is the Anglican one.

**Theological Underpinning**

Creating a bigger congregation is never a goal in itself. If a leader wants to be in the business of building up a large organization, then he or she should organize a presidential campaign or join a major global corporation. Instead, this is a gospel work. As a priest in the Episcopal Church, I believe that the Eternal Word was made flesh, and that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, humanity can discern the nature of the Creator—a creator who loves humanity and seeks to live in relationship with each and every person. Any vocation to the priesthood must arise from a belief in the truth of the gospel.

The Episcopal Church must be careful to retain this commitment to the core Christian narrative. The American church scene already has a denomination specializing in supporting those who seek to create their own theological identity, which can be taken from any source or tradition. The Unitarian Universalist congregations welcome everyone—from those who are skeptical of God through the pantheist
to the theist. There is no boundary. In the marketplace of American religion, the Unitarian Universalists have found their niche and are doing well in it.

The Episcopal Church is in a different place. The Anglican way is to engage with modernity because we believe, not because we are skeptical of the truth of the gospel. While there have been movements within Anglicanism whose skepticism about the Bible led to a denial of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, and even a questioning of the existence of God, these are the exception. The tradition of Richard Hooker is deeply committed to discernment within a boundary. The oft-stated three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason clearly recognizes that Christian discernment is a work within a framework—one that takes seriously the text of Scripture, gives an appropriate voice to the communion of saints who have gone before, and takes the God-given gift of reason into account. When we decide to engage with modern culture (for example, by including our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the leadership of the church), we do so because of our beliefs, not despite them.

Any effective theological education needs to be a good training in the tradition. Given the social reality of knowing, we must work within a framework of texts and community. Each one of us is born into a family and learns a particular language. From day one, each person looks at the world in a certain way. Knowledge is the result of the hard work of communities that struggle with the complexity of the world and start arriving at a more plausible account. Alasdair MacIntyre’s work looms large over theological education, and it was MacIntyre who captured the danger of modernity. For MacIntyre, the modern illusion that we can somehow transcend all the options in the world and from some “objective” vantage point determine which tradition is true needs to be challenged. This effortless knowing that denigrates other communities and texts has led to a confused relativist culture. The liberal project started at the Enlightenment, promising an effortless truth separate

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4 For an excellent discussion of this tradition, see Terasa Cooley, “It’s Not All about UUs: Growth in Unitarian-Universalist Congregations,” in Martyn Percy and Ian Markham, eds., Why Liberal Churches are Growing (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 60–70.

from a particular culture or tradition, and arrived in the twentieth centu-
ry at a Nietzschian individualism. The liberal project spent its time
denying traditions without recognizing that it really was a tradition.
MacIntyre wants us all to recognize that we are “tradition-constituted.”
Being “tradition-constituted” means working within a particular tradi-
tion and formulating a coherent, thoughtful understanding of the
world that compels and persuades those who discover it.

Theological education that is truly in the Anglican tradition must
reflect the following characteristics. First, it is creedal. The Apostles’
and Nicene creeds are properly foundational. These express the tri-
une nature of God and make the story of Jesus central. It is interesting
to note what is not included in these historic formularies of the church:
we do not have a commitment to a particular understanding of the
atonement, for example, or a particular interpretation of Scripture.
Instead, like the rabbinical “fence around the Torah,” the creeds are a
fence around a mystery. They are an attempt to exclude inappropriate
God-talk; they are the rules of Christian grammar. In the creeds we
learn of the self-disclosing God. In the creeds we learn of the second
person of the Trinity being made flesh. On what basis do we know
what God is like? The answer given in the creeds is “through Jesus of
Nazareth.” Our primary Word is the life of Jesus, from whom we learn
of a God who loves and includes. This primary Word stands in judg-
ment on everything (including the Bible, from which rather paradoxically
we learn of the primary Word). In short, the creeds are our
epistemology.

Second, Anglican theological education is liturgical. We keep
company with those traditions which believe in the importance of the
work of the people taking a structured form. The logic and flow of the
service of Holy Eucharist in the Book of Common Prayer of the Epis-
copal Church is based on ancient tradition, and is exceptionally well
thought out. So, for example, as we learn of the nature of the God we
are worshiping (through the hearing of the written word and procla-
mation of the Eternal Word), so we then reaffirm our faith, before
entering into the presence of God for prayer. We bring our petitions
to a God we are confident will hear them. We are confident because
through the reading and preaching of the Word we know what God is
like. This is just one illustration of how remarkable the liturgy can be.

At this point, it is important to recognize that we do have our fair
share of “seekers,” people who sit awkwardly with this or that asser-
tion in the creeds and who are not sure of the extent or nature of their
faith. It is important to recognize why their presence is welcome. Once again, we include the seeker because of what we believe, not despite it. It is because we are a creedal church that believes Jesus shows us God that we believe God meets people where they are and whatever their belief. It is because we are a liturgical church that the liturgy can do the hard work of affirmation for us, especially when we are in doubt and confusion. The centrality of the Psalms in our worship, for example, is an explicit biblical affirmation that God welcomes us in the midst of the countless moods, fears, confusions, and problems we all experience. Seekers take many forms. Some have arrived at a fairly settled sense that this or that aspect of the creed is unlikely to be true. Others are seekers in the sense of searching—open and generous—thereby challenging accounts of the faith that are closed and less generous. The instincts of this type of seeker are captured in the third characteristic of theological education in the Anglican tradition: the commitment to engagement.6

Anglican theology is intrinsically engaged—engaged with all the main trajectories of human knowledge and understanding. Thus we learn from the “orthodox” method embodied in the work of Augustine of Hippo or Thomas Aquinas that our obligation as Christians is to learn of God’s truth wherever that truth is to be found. Augustine engaged throughout his lifetime with Platonism; Aquinas learned from Muslim and Jewish scholars to shape a theology that continues to dominate many conversations. In addition, Anglican ecclesiology is in continuity with the catholic church, as we have positioned ourselves between Geneva and Rome, recognizing truth in both the historic Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed traditions.

It is also an intrinsic part of our tradition that we continue to listen to scientists, scholars of the political and social sciences, and theologians from liberationist traditions. Such hard work is not a betrayal of our tradition, but a manifest act of fidelity to it.

Thus effective leadership in theological education in the Anglican tradition must remain rooted in the tradition of Anglicanism, in liturgical experience, and in the human quest for knowledge and truth. An emphasis on any single characteristic will be distorting. If a graduate from our seminaries leaves believing that the best way to handle Romans 1 on human sexuality is to delete the text from the

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6 For a more substantial argument around the theme of engagement, see my *Theology of Engagement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).
canon, then we have failed. This is not the Anglican way. Instead we draw on the Anglican emphasis on the Incarnation; we learn from a Christ who called us to be different, yet never gave up on anyone; and we accept the truth about “orientation” as an insight that needs to be accommodated. In short, we are the tradition that lives with Scripture and struggles to interpret the text, in and through the context in which we live.

*Congregational Studies, Globalization, and Technology*

We turn now to the second part of the argument. It is in the spirit of the third characteristic of Anglican theology that we are “engaged.” Part of this engagement is with these three trends—congregational studies, globalization, and technology.

The church growth data is now fairly settled and clear. We know what makes a congregation grow; we also know why some congregations get smaller. There are, of course, factors beyond the control of a congregation. For example, the location of a congregation can be important—a growing part of the town is much easier to work in than a section that has suffered a decline in population. However, there are plenty of factors that are under the control of a congregation. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce have written two volumes that outline the key factors that determine growth. They explain that of the ten strengths of U.S. congregations, “three congregational strengths are positive predictors of numerical growth: Caring for Children and Youth, Participating in the Congregation, and Welcoming New People.”

Getting these three elements right is not easy. It takes considerable skill to organize a strong Christian education program; it takes imagination to find a way to take the newcomer into the wider life of the parish; and it is especially difficult in a congregation where attendance is erratic to welcome new people without offending the occasional attendee. Theological education needs to start teaching these areas. There is nothing un-Anglican about Christian education, welcome, and participation. We can do this. In fact, we need to do this.

The second area is globalization. Mobility of labor is now a given. The mixture of demographics, economics, wars, and famine mean

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that families are often on the move. In the thirteenth century in Europe, the vast majority of people did not travel more than ten miles from the place they were born. Extended families were the norm: everyone knew everyone else. Today, the norm is for siblings to be scattered around the United States (and in some cases around the globe). People move often in their quest for employment and higher living standards. Theological education has an obligation to recognize the impact of this reality, which is considerable. Our towns and cities are much more diverse. All urban centers in the United States have significant numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. English is not the only language spoken. And there is some evidence that even a bilingual person finds it easier to worship in one language rather than another.

So what does globalization mean for the leadership in theological education? Graduates of seminaries need to be able to relate to diverse communities, so some awareness of other faith traditions is important. In addition, they should be able to converse and provide a basic liturgical experience in another language—Spanish is the most likely choice of a second language in the United States today, which is increasingly a bilingual culture. This is important for mission reasons. In addition, as Anglicans from African countries such as Nigeria, the Sudan, and Liberia settle in the United States, it is important that they make the Episcopal Church their home. However, the Episcopal Church needs to be able to welcome and communicate with them, and this can be difficult.

The third area is technology. The lifestyle options that technology has made possible are remarkable. People can spend a day at the computer doing a day’s work by telecommuting, and then spend an evening in a virtual world. Effective organizations use the web, e-mail lists, and video conferencing to connect individuals and communities. Social networking is increasingly common. The Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey revealed that growing churches use technology very well (partly because as a church gets larger it is the only way to stay in touch with everyone). We know from the megachurches the effectiveness of paperless services. Recognizing this part of our life together in theological education is important.

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8 For the FACT survey data see http://fact.hartsem.edu.
The argument of this article is that we need clarity of continuity, running parallel with dramatic change. The importance of Anglican identity and rootedness points to the need for continuity. We still need our graduates to love the Bible and to understand the development of the creeds. Our graduates must be theologically articulate, and able to explain the Anglican tradition in a compelling way to those whom they serve. Courses on the Bible, liturgy, and theology remain as important as ever. Yet we also need dramatic change—and this is perhaps where it is most interesting. The traditional seminaries have had an aversion to teaching courses explicitly on church growth or church planting. This must change. We need to move “congregational vitality” to the center of our curriculum. Every graduate must know the basic literature. And as a result, we need a body of practice to emerge (perhaps through D.Min. projects) that applies this literature to the distinctive challenges of Episcopal and mainline congregations. There is rich and creative work to be done in this area.

Given our mobile society, we need congregational leadership that knows about the rest of the world and the different traditions people inhabit. A residential program that does not involve an immersion experience elsewhere in the world is a failure of formation. Too often, we assume a particular experience of the world (say, white and middle class) is the norm; it is important for this perception to be challenged. Learning to live in a different subculture is an important part of effective theological education. It would be good to see the teaching of Spanish to be required along with a biblical language. Learning the sensitivities of living with diversity is important.

On the technological front, we need graduates who not only know how to use technology, but see the potential for using technology in worship, administration, and mission. Teachers have an obligation to model this. A seminary website should be a good model for a congregational website. In this and a variety of other ways, we start to shift the curriculum so that in a very Anglican way we relate more effectively to the culture of the twenty-first century.

_Criterion and Conclusion_

By what criterion do we judge successful leadership in theological education? There are obviously many contenders—for example,
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financial, growth, innovation, and impact. All of these are both legitimate and important. But the problem with them is that they are local; we are judging success solely in terms of the particular institution or program. We are not judging the leadership in terms of a global outcome.

Perhaps rather recklessly, given that I write as a leader of a seminary, I want to suggest a completely different criterion. It is this: Successful leadership should be judged by the impact made on the wider denomination. In other words, if the Episcopal Church grows stronger, then the leadership has been successful; if the Episcopal Church continues to decline, then the leadership has not been successful.

The reason why this criterion may be helpful is that it ensures that the ultimate goal of theological education is kept central. Theological education is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. We educate to transform the world; we educate to make a difference to congregations; we educate to enable mission that brings the gospel of our Lord Jesus to the world. To meet this criterion, the leadership will have to develop partners. The partners will need to be in congregations and other institutions; the partners will need to include bishops and lay leaders. Theological education will have to mesh in with the strongest and healthiest trends that support the denomination.

Good leadership should be constantly asking the following question: How do the decisions being made in this place support the national and international church? It might mean some risk-taking—perhaps an imaginative partnership overseas. It might mean working more closely with sister seminaries. It might mean looking at the shape of the faculty and resisting the temptation simply to reappoint in the same area.

The hardest part of leadership is finding the time and space to think from this vantage point. Administration can often be completely absorbed in day-to-day tasks. This is the reason why strategic planning is so important. A process that encourages the leadership to locate the immediate administrative problems in a wider context allows a vision for the future to emerge.