As Through a Glass Darkly: Defining Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century

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It seems wise to begin by admitting that the institutions and networks established to provide theological education in North America are, together with the whole church, in the midst of great changes. These changes have already dramatically altered the landscape for mission and ministry—and promise much more. In 1967, *Ministry for Tomorrow*, a special report on the nature of theological education in the Episcopal Church, was published.[1] In the Pusey Report (as this document came to be called), seminaries and other institutions of learning, indeed the whole church, were urged to respond boldly to change. In one sense, not much is different today. In another sense, however, things are very different. It is the character of what has happened in theological education since the Pusey Report and its implications for the future on which I wish to focus this essay.[2]

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[1] *Ministry for Tomorrow, Report of the Special Committee on Theological Education*, Nathan M. Pusey, Chairman, Charles L. Taylor, Director of the Study (New York: Seabury Press, 1967).

[2] An important overview of education in the Episcopal Church since the Pusey Report is being completed by members of the PEALL (Proclaiming Education for All) taskforce, brought into being to do educational advocacy and strategic planning for education. It is entitled "Theological Education and Christian Formation in The Episcopal Church: The Historical Context" and will be available through the Church Center of the Episcopal Church.

From "As Through a Glass Darkly: Defining Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century" by Donn Morgan, in *Anglican Theological Review* 90:2 (Spring 2008).

Two Waves

In the past forty years, theological education has experienced at least two major and distinct waves of cultural and ecclesiastical change. One of these waves is essentially over, though its effects continue to have important roles in establishing ministry and mission priorities for the church. The other wave is upon us now. These two waves of change contain many common elements. Indeed, many ominous aspects of the second wave were foreshadowed in the first wave. But the effects of each of these waves have been and promise to be quite different.

The first wave was predicted, at least in part, by the Pusey Report. The changing roles of women and of ethnic minorities were a part of this wave's concerns, together with other issues related to diversity, multiculturalism, inclusivity, justice, and much more. Many of these changes were flash points for American society writ large. A very large question asked frequently in trying to address the implications and effects of this wave of change was: How can the church respond and minister positively in a changing world?

The second wave of change contains some issues that were part of the first wave, but which were either avoided earlier or developed into problems at a later time. Regardless, they are now immediately before us. On the international scene, power shifts in the Anglican Communion, to say nothing of the whole "next Christendom" to be found in the southern hemisphere,[3] can no longer be avoided; indeed in some instances their effects have come directly into our country and our churches. Closer to home, the continuing decline in congregants in the Episcopal Church promises to have dramatic effects on the character of ministry in the future, and with it, on the nature of education and training necessary for such ministry.[4] Because so much is still uncertain, however, the question this wave sets before the church appears to be: What is ministry in a changing church? As these two different questions suggest, the first wave dealt primarily with the

[3] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[4] Kevin Martin, "What Attendance Numbers Say about the CHURCH'S FUTURE," *The Living Church* (December 2, 2007), 19–20.

church's role in a changing culture, while the second is addressing the shape of ministry in light of a changing church.

In assessing theological education in the present while looking toward the future, two basic observations should be made. First, as a result of both waves of change, there has been a blurring of the definition of theological education. Some of this has been intentional: "theological education" no longer refers to seminary education alone, but to efforts on the part of the whole church to learn from its rich traditions. With many different locations and agendas now associated with theological education, it is natural for some blurring to occur. Second, the second wave of change has the potential to be much more incisive and ground-breaking for theological education and the seminaries. It's easy to see the generic similarity between seminaries of the 1960s at the time of the Pusey Report and seminaries today; there is a fair amount of continuity and variation on a theme. However, it is not immediately clear this will be true for much longer. The first wave of change affected theological education and challenged it and the church to adapt to many fundamental shifts in contemporary society and culture. The second wave now upon us is threatening systemic change within the church itself, and therefore the educational institutions that serve it. Since one distinctive and enduring characteristic of theological education is that it serves the mission and ministry of the church, fundamental change appears to be on its way. The result will probably bring more than blurring.

Theological Education Today: Variations on a Familiar Theme

Seminaries have been a central part of theological education in the American church for a long time, although theological education has certainly taken place in other institutions as well. Ideally, there should be a healthy dialogue between church and seminary concerning the education needed for ministry and mission. There are indeed several indications that such a dialogue is occurring, with some signs of continuity with the past and some signs of radical change and newness, sometimes in response to the first wave of change, sometimes in preparation for the second.

Students and faculty, two primary human resources in theological education, exemplify both continuity and newness. The majority of seminarians, at least in denominational schools, continue to prepare for ordained ministry, usually envisioned in a parish setting. This reflects a

long-standing central purpose of theological education. But there now are fewer of these folks, and they are joined by students in other degree and certificate programs. Such a phenomenon points to both waves and their effects: inclusivity, diversity, and breadth (as a result of the first wave), and attrition and an increasing inability to afford a three-year residential program for ordained ministry (as a result of the second).

The faculties of seminaries continue to be strong and well prepared for teaching and research. In this sense there is much continuity with the trajectories set forth in the Pusey Report. At the same time, faculty members are being asked to teach in different ways (for example, online) or different places (extension programs, affiliated centers, and so on) and to have a particular focus for their work attuned to the needs of the local setting. The clash between a residential model for teaching, where the professor stays put, and a more peripatetic model challenges traditional definitions of seminary educators. The willingness and the ability of faculty and seminary to move toward this second model of teaching and learning may be critical components of theological education's ability not merely to survive the second wave of change but to thrive.

All of this introduces another series of challenges revolving around the value of residential education. Traditionally, bouncing off either an academic "ivory tower" or an ecclesiastical monastery or convent model, the value of spending some intense time studying and worshipping with a special community of peers and teachers was unquestioned, even if sometimes seen to be unaffordable or, in certain extraordinary cases, unnecessary. This ideal continues to be important, but now the formation that occurs through such a residential setting is being critically assessed in terms of its value for the local church. Put another way, if folks at seminary are being formed for ministries in the church which are non-existent, or incompatible with diocesan and parish realities, then the seminary residential model loses its appeal pretty quickly. Further, the notion of "residency" has changed. Many seminary campuses are essentially vacant for large parts of the traditional work week. Given students' need for jobs outside seminary, the great number of part-time students, and the special class schedules for particular programs (among other things), there seem to be a few intense times of study on campus, punctuated by many times when hardly anyone is around. Again, the seminary's ability and willingness to address these issues, in dialogue with the church, will be critical for the future of theological education.

One of the new developments in theological education since the Pusey Report has been the creation of partnerships and networks involving seminaries and other church educational groups. The intent of these networks has been in part to share and broaden the definition of theological education and all that it entails, moving it from seminary classroom to diocese and parish, sustaining what was already present but making it explicitly applicable and pertinent to many more.[5] At the same time, mixing together seminary and diocese sometimes creates a special emphasis on the particularity of place and institution, setting up potential turf wars or competing notions of education, ministry, and mission—something which must be dealt with constructively as the second wave washes over us.

Throughout all of this has been a *continuo*—the specter of limited, even fragile, financial resources—at the parish, diocesan, seminary, and national levels. Surely, on the one hand, limited resources push toward new visions and new opportunities for sharing. A lot of this happened in the first wave. On the other hand, in the second wave, institutions in financial crisis are often guilty of a "silo" mentality, too preoccupied with their own problems to have much inclination or ability to dream bigger dreams, dreams which might offer new and better ways of doing education. These new ways might also bring a loss of identity, a loss of doing things "the way we've always done them." Such dreams often ask for a commitment to the new at the very time when resources are diminished and stretched—another challenge for theological education today.

Most assessments of theological education in the seminaries over the past forty years will certainly highlight many accomplishments: the increased presence and role of women at all levels; the continuing excellence of faculty, especially in the disciplines and areas traditionally associated with theological education; the diversification of programs, and with it an increased diversity in the student body; a commitment to multicultural ministry; new relationships with other institutions of learning inside and outside of the church; and a strong and continuing affirmation of the value of the residential models for doing theological education. Overall, despite financial challenges and declining numbers in the church, the desire to be involved in and maintain the same kind of theological education as in the past continues to be a big part

[5] See, for example, www.TEforALL.com.

of the present shape of seminaries and other institutions charged with teaching and learning in the church. Yes, change has pushed theological education in new ways, but with very few exceptions, most seminaries are still in the residence business and are prepared to make a strong case for it. By and large the structures and values associated with residential programs continue to be primary—at least for those in seminaries.

Theological Education Today: The Center Cannot Hold

While many gains have been made in theological education since the Pusey Report, we have also seen ominous signs for the future. For example, we have often celebrated diversity in many of its manifestations, but viewed from another perspective the celebration of diversity can be seen as the failure of church and society to live into a healthy pluralism.[6] We have lifted up and celebrated difference and particularity, but only when we thought we could tame it, only when it was difference we liked. Instead, therefore, of finding a common matrix upon which to relate serious differences of opinion, we see many who feel they have no home, no place of comfort and acceptance, sometimes no sense of identity grounded in the church's history and tradition. We are a church and society filled with polarities, with an unwillingness to sit down at the table and have fellowship, to talk with and learn from one another.[7]

Nowhere is the failure to see diversity as a unifying force or concept more visible than when we speak of God, when we think and speak theologically. Indeed, the tendency of such talk to divide is so great that many educationally-oriented organizations go out of their way not to talk about God or beliefs stemming from a particular theological perspective. Here is another irony, that the primary basis of our belief and value systems is something we do not or cannot share. The implications of this for unity or comprehensive approaches to education for ministry in churches filled with diversity and difference are great.

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[6] Peter Wood, *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept* (San Francisco, Calif.: Encounter Books, 2003).

[7] Donn F. Morgan, *Fighting with the Bible: Why Scripture Divides Us and How It Can Bring Us Together* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

While financial resources are surely not the only indicator of health and well-being, it is clear that the present state of support for theological education in the church mandates a significant change. A declining number of full-time students cannot justify or sustain the present infrastructure of seminaries and other residential resources devoted to theological education. Moreover, the costs of that education continue to increase as the church's ability to pay these costs decreases. Issues of maintaining aging physical resources (from dormitories to classrooms to libraries) also challenge theological schools. For a long time now many seminaries have been forced to rent parts of their property to others, or to sell off parts of it, or to develop other new income-producing uses for existing buildings. While such efforts often succeed in maintaining the seminary as an important physical resource for both church and society, the implications for the overall nature of the educational mission are far from clear.

Finally, it is becoming obvious to many that the Episcopal Church cannot support a system of independent seminaries, all of them looking the same, all of them trying to do approximately the same thing with programs and faculty, all focused more on institutional survival than on the educational mission of the church. Something needs to change, and soon—this is the mandate coming from the second wave. Happily, the Episcopal seminaries (and others) are moving in some directions that will, I hope, change this pattern.

What is the goal or the end of theological education? More often than not, "leadership" has a central place in the answer. And yet there may be no place that reflects more disparity between church and seminary than here. It has become almost a truism for those of us in seminaries to say we are educating the "future leaders of the church." At the same time, many feel that what leadership must look like in the future is changing more rapidly in the church than in the schools training people for that leadership. In the church we often hear calls for congregational vitality, calls that want and need more than a specially trained ordained parish minister to come in and fix things.[8] A growing number

[8] The change in focus from clergy to congregation has an interesting parallel in educational assessment, with its increased focus on the student rather than the faculty member. In both cases the ones who receive services are seen to be central indicators of the health of the institution's mission. How might these two changes be put into dialogue with one another to the benefit of both seminary and church?

of small parishes not only cannot support full-time clergy, but are asking for different skills and roles for clergy. Education in the parish is changing. Leadership in the parish calls for the skills of community builders, for apologists, for folks willing and able to be mobile and responsible to many different communities. All of this is a monstrous challenge to existing paradigms of leadership presupposed at many seminaries. To move in these new directions will require changes for faculty, for students, for all involved in theological education.

Where does theological education go from here? Whatever else theological education does, whatever it looks like, wherever it is found, its primary goal must continue to be to help understand and live out the ministry and mission of the church. Here another characteristic of the first wave is seen—the polarity between a sense of the whole with a focus on inclusivity and hospitality and the ministry of *all* the baptized, and a push toward particularity and special identities shaped by context and ethos. Whatever "we" do, it must include both the particular and the universal, the whole church. How can we gain a clearer vision of the nature and role of theological education for the twenty-first century, taking seriously the changes that have already blurred its definition as well as the changes that seem certain to transform it? Whatever the answers may be to this question, they rest with the whole church, and not with any special group.

Highlights of Theological Education in the Future

Presupposing a continuing commitment to the basics of theological education's theory and praxis, surely technology will play an important role in the future. Technology today allows students to partake of the richness of educational resources far from wherever they may live. Access to libraries, to distinguished faculty, to creative ways of learning online: all of this is a part of the richness of possible technological solutions to educational delivery issues. At the same time, questions of formation, of community, of supervision, of assessment, of quality—all of these issues are raised as well. Technology can bring people together, and it can isolate them. New technology can and should be an important part of theological education in the future, but the limits of its use must be carefully determined through conversations among church, academy, and seminary.

Theological education will need to acknowledge and devise strategies for learning in the context of a decentralized church, working

within many special centers in particular geographical and jurisdictional contexts. Local ministry development and the education associated with it will increase in importance and quantity, and theological education must be a part of it. With this comes the challenge of envisioning and embracing the whole, of providing education which equips leaders for many different contexts.

Seminaries and other institutions of learning must produce graduates who are multilingual in ministry, understanding many different models necessary and possible for effective leadership and community formation across the whole church. Building on a commitment going back to the effects of the first wave to be educated in a multicultural way, seminaries can and must take the next big step, educating for multi-theological understanding as well.

Theological Educators in the Future

In part because of the constituencies represented by the readers of the *Anglican Theological Review* and in part because I know them best, my concluding comments are directed to theological educators wherever they find themselves—in seminaries, dioceses, parishes, hospitals, colleges and other schools, national and international church centers, and others. Assuming the central work of teaching and learning, without which there is no raison d'etre for our work, there are at least three special roles theological educators must take upon themselves as we move forward.

First and foremost, theological educators must be *advocates for education*. In an ideal world this advocacy will transcend the boundaries of the institutional settings in which we operate. So, for example, diocesan educators will be advocates for seminaries, and vice versa, and both might be advocates for education at, say, the secondary public school level in their particular contexts. Such a role is all-important, as it begins with the recognition that education is not now a high priority for our churches or our society, and this will not change without some explicit and intentional work. Whether it's telling the story of theological education and the difference it can and does make, or doing more politically-oriented work, advocacy is critical.

Second, theological educators must be *communicators*, in at least two different ways. They must be willing and able to provide all sorts of information about the character and concerns of theological education. They must also be actively involved in networking, in finding

partners and collaborators, in putting folks in touch with one another, in facilitating cooperation and collaboration.

Third, theological educators must be *visionaries*. Theological educators need to have vision and imagination at the level of implementation, in moving from Plan A to Plan B, when sometimes neither was developed by the educator. Educators can and must help with issues of quality, of values, of integrity, of the "so what" and the consequences of particular educational models and proposals. Sometimes, of course, educators will be called upon to be prophets, to say "no" to suggestions or proposals because bad education will result. More often, however, the educator will try to figure out the best way to get all the goals achieved well.

Concluding Confession and Hope: An Autobiographical Postscript

Some of the older readers of this essay will recognize the phrase "through a glass darkly" as the King James translation of a portion of 1 Corinthians 13. That language, though surely found no longer in contemporary translations, is very much a part of who and what I am today. It reminds me of a short but very formative time when I was a sojourner with Wesleyan Methodist and Christian Missionary Alliance churches, when I was a member of Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, when I was a regular congregant at a black Southern Baptist church. I remember the hymns, the sermons, the altar calls, the emotion, the motivation, and the excitement about Christianity. All of these things pushed me toward formal theological education, albeit, finally, at an institution whose theological leanings most of these communities would not be comfortable with or accepting of. I share all of this here because it explains my greatest disappointment and my greatest hope concerning theological education. Most of the time, it's not okay for me to share my conservative background, unless I intend to dismiss or denigrate it. But I can't! If my greatest disappointment is that theological educators all over the church find it difficult to talk with one another about their theological differences, then my greatest hope is that we will be given the grace and insight and courage and whatever else it takes to do so in the future.

The second wave of change now upon us promises radical transformation. Theological education, itself resting on much diversity articulated well, holds a vital key to this kind of transformational change—whether in a seminary classroom, or a parish Bible study, or

an online class, or a diocesan gathering. My fervent prayer is that a central part of that transformation, that change, will be our new ability to affirm difference, not in ways which divide, but in ways that motivate us to share, to learn from one another, to dare to cross theological boundaries for the sake of common mission and ministry.