

The Hospitable Seminary

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Samuel Carnegie Calian, president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, recently contributed a provocative study to the growing body of literature devoted to the renewal of theological education. In *The Ideal Seminary* Calian analyzes a broad range of contemporary cultural, institutional, programmatic, and spiritual challenges that theological schools must meet if they are to prepare leaders who will become change agents for congregations desperately needing revitalization. Calian is most arresting when he envisions “the essential characteristics of an ideal seminary.”¹ While they vary greatly in scope these characteristics presuppose a hospitable faith and learning environment.

The underlying assumption of this paper is that the ideal seminary will be a hospitable seminary. What will be offered therefore is a case study of how one institution, Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, has sought to be a hospitable community for the preparation of Christian leaders. While Western in many respects has been a hospitable learning environment since its establishment in 1866 by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, this paper will reflect upon the life of the seminary since 1994, when the author was inaugurated as the institution’s tenth president.

It is important to note that Western Theological Seminary is a flawed community, and that far too often the learning environment has been inhospitable. As Calian has pointed out, not one of the scores of theological schools in North America has become the ideal seminary.² Yet, if we are to prepare leaders for the post-modern, post-Christian, contemporary church we must have the courage to articulate and implement our grandest visions for theological education.

The Biblical Ethic of Hospitality

The biblical virtue of hospitality stems from the practice of welcoming the alien or stranger. In the ancient world the plight of the aliens was desperate, for they lacked familial or community status, which provided means of livelihood, inheritance, and protection. Widows, orphans, the poor, and sojourners from other lands were considered aliens. Hospitality, then, means graciously receiving an alienated person into one’s land, home, or community and providing for that person’s needs.

Among the Israelites, hospitality took various forms: the reception of travelers into one’s home for food, lodging, and protection (Gen. 18:2-8, 19:1-8); permitting the alien to glean from one’s fields (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-22; Ruth 2:2-17);

clothing the naked (Isa. 58:7; Ezek. 18:7, 16); tithing food for the needy (Deut. 14:28-29; 26:1-11); and including the stranger in religious celebrations (Exod. 12:48-49; Deut. 16:10-14). Old and New Testament stories demonstrate that those who welcome strangers are often blessed by their guests. When Abraham received three strangers at Mamre, they revealed that his wife Sarah would give birth to a son (Gen. 18:1-15). When the widow of Zarephath offered food and shelter to Elijah he blessed her with an abundance of oil and food and raised her son from the dead (1 Kings 17:9-24). When the two travelers to Emmaus welcomed a stranger to stay with them through the night, he revealed himself through the breaking of the bread as their Jesus, the risen Christ (Luke 24:13-35).

While the biblical notion of hospitality is rooted in the practice of welcoming the stranger in need, it is a concept which carries deeper and richer theological meaning. On the one hand, hospitality should mark the very manner in which we relate to our fellow human beings. To be hospitable is to welcome, embrace, care for, and value those who become part of our lives – schoolmates, family, friends, and strangers alike.

On the other hand, hospitality defines the manner in which God has related and continues to relate to human beings. In the Old Covenant, God is the gracious host, who continually receives the alienated Israelites and meets their needs, redeeming them from Egypt, caring for them in the wilderness, and bringing them as sojourners into the promised land. In the New Covenant, Jesus Christ is the host who redeems aliens through his suffering, death, and resurrection. Indeed, identifying himself with the symbolic elements of the Passover meal, Jesus associated his body with bread offered to the hungry and his blood with the cup of wine, the cup of salvation. As those who participate in the Supper, we are the aliens who become welcomed and adopted as children of our heavenly parent. As Henri Nouwen suggests, the concept of hospitality, when restored to “its original depth and evocative potential,” is a rich biblical term “that can deepen and broaden” our relationships to God and human beings.³

Understood as a relational ethic, hospitality should mark all Christian communities. In fact, the Greek word for community, *koinonia*, finds its root in the Greek term for “participating in” and “sharing.”⁴ To be a community is to share, to have in common. A true Christian community will welcome and embrace strangers and members alike.

Seminary as a Christian Community

We have argued above that authentic Christian communities will be marked by hospitality. Now we must ask whether theological schools in particular should be identified as such communities. After all, a seminary is a professional graduate school and not a church. Is it truly a Christian community?

Critics of mainstream theological education today often argue that formation for ministry best occurs in the context of the local congregation. They insist that seminaries are at best understood as dispensers of courses, but that authentic pastoral training must occur in the context of a church. Hence a chasm grows between denominational leaders and their own theological schools.

It will be argued here that any perceived dichotomy between faith and learning, or between the church and theological education, is false. At its best, a seminary is a Christian community, and persons are most effectively formed for ministry when such a community is constantly nurtured. The best hope for the future of Christ's church is when seminaries and congregations work together to nurture leaders – when they are both truly hospitable.

Western Theological Seminary has a very clear and simple purpose: “to prepare Christians to lead the church in mission.” It is believed that this purpose is best achieved in the context of a hospitable community. If the bottom line of our ministry is to form Christians to lead the church in mission, we do that best when we seek to be the type of missional community we expect our students to lead.

It is important to acknowledge that while we consciously strive to enhance our life together, true Christian community is ultimately a matter of divine grace. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was considering what life together meant for the confessing church's clandestine seminary in Finkenwalde, he wrote: “we belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.” Bonhoeffer elaborated,

It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.⁵

The hospitable seminary will recognize that the community cannot be created or manufactured but that it is given in and through Jesus Christ.

Hospitable Community

If the core of the biblical ethic of hospitality is the welcoming of strangers, how is the practice reflected in the hospitable seminary? Recognizing that all members of a community were once strangers, outsiders, or aliens, hospitality must be extended to every newcomer at a theological school – students, faculty members, and support staff – as well as the temporary sojourners.

It is important to emphasize that in North American cultures and in many theological schools, “stranger” may be persons of color from the United States or Canada, or from Africa or Asia or Central or South America, or women from our

own congregations. Western has found ways to welcome each of these groups. First, it has established a Master of Theology program in which international students are awarded a limited number of tuition, housing, and board grants. Over the years, our community has welcomed scores of students from all sections of the world church who have graduated and become teachers of seminaries and colleges. Second, recognizing the great need for well-trained leaders of churches in North America that are African-American, Asian-American, or Latino, Western has made available full-tuition scholarships to gifted students from minority, racial, and ethnic churches. And, third, Western welcomed women into our degree programs years before the Reformed Church in America began to ordain women as Ministers of Word and sacrament. More recently, because there is still resistance to the calling of women as ministers in regions of the Reformed Church, the faculty has covenanted to pray for the placement of female graduates.

At Western Seminary, incoming students are received and embraced during a week-long orientation, during which they worship with other students, learn of formal and informal rituals and practices, and dine with faculty and staff members. They also spend an evening at the home of the president. The orientation is consummated with a day-long retreat at a local retreat center. That day, all members of the community and their families are invited to share communal worship, communal presentations, communal recreation, and communal dining.

New faculty members are also embraced through a series of formal and informal gatherings. At faculty meetings these “strangers” are welcomed to become full participants in this ritual of decision-making. Short-term appointees are embraced and valued by their colleagues.

Because members of a community may, for various reasons, feel like “strangers in their own land,” hospitality must be ongoing. At Western, the president and his wife invite students to two St. Nicholas parties in early December, and they provide butter lambs and buns for the students during an Easter celebration each spring. Graduates are invited to the president’s home for a pregraduation dinner, where they are presented with a wooden prophet that symbolizes their call to service. The student council sponsors a banquet each April, during which the faculty and staff are gently roasted in creative skits. The seminary also sponsors participation in city recreation basketball and soccer leagues, which attract a wide range of students, staff, and faculty. Most Fridays there are informal invitations to pick-up basketball games and soccer matches. Also on Friday afternoons, two or more faculty members gather with students at Via Maria, a local restaurant, where various issues are discussed over refreshments. And, in

May, following final exams, a seminary golf outing for all community members is traditional.

In December, the faculty and staff and their families are invited to a formal Christmas dinner provided by the seminary. The president also delivers a Christmas card to each member of the staff and faculty, one which has normally included a small Christmas bonus. Throughout the year, the president sends staff and faculty birthday cards with notes of appreciation. These are a few of the many small ways that we celebrate our life together in Jesus Christ.

We strive for hospitality for those who are strangers in our midst. Nearly every day we are blessed by visitors: potential students seeking a taste of seminary, representatives of denominations and congregations, drop-ins from the area or members of our larger seminary family, and sojourners from other lands. While a few of these strangers may choose to sit in on a class or two, many more will join us for the daily chapel service at 9:10 a.m. Following chapel, at the daily coffee time in our commons, these visitors are introduced and welcomed.

Strangers are also welcomed to the Community Kitchen, which operates out of the seminary every weekday noon. More than a decade ago Professor Thomas Boogaart helped to establish the Kitchen as a means of meeting the nutritional needs of the poor and hungry in Holland, Michigan. The Kitchen is run by the Community Action House of Holland and is staffed by a chef and volunteers from local churches. On any given day, between 50 and 150 guests are welcomed by the seminary to enjoy a nutritious hot meal, and they are often joined by students, faculty, and staff. Professor Boogaart also helped establish "The Bridge," a gift store located in Holland's downtown shopping district that sells items made by artisans in developing countries.

Hospitable Worship

A Christian community is a worshipping community. Each morning a member of the seminary community, usually a student, leads a chapel service. While attendance is not required, all members of the community, faculty, and staff as well as visitors are welcomed. Although student leaders meet with faculty advisors to plan their services, chapel leadership is not a course requirement and it is not graded. Our worship varies greatly in style, reflecting the various expressions of liturgy and music in the contemporary church. While most liturgies bear the marks of the Reformed tradition, music on any given day may be traditional, praise, or something in between. It may be influenced by Taize, Iona, or any of the rich music of the international church. The setting for daily worship may be in the more formal Mulder Chapel or less formal Semelink Hall, and instruments may include organ, piano, guitar, flute, or others. Normally our leaders follow a lectionary for their Bible lessons and share messages framed in a

variety of styles. Regardless, at Western, we strive to be a community of prayer. Prayer finds forms which are public and private. Students have formed fluid prayer groups. Furthermore, students and the members of the seminary's board of trustees have formed prayer partnerships.

During public worship each Friday, our community celebrates the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, during which one of the ordained faculty members officiates. In 1968 students from Western petitioned the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America to permit the celebration of the sacrament although it is not constituted as a congregation with ruling elders. This weekly celebration has been a great blessing for our faith community. Our host is Jesus Christ who welcomes all aliens, strangers, and sinners to feast at the table of redemption and new life. Hospitality begins with Jesus Christ.

The worship experience is carried into the time of fellowship that follows the chapel time. As Dr. Leanne Van Dyk has suggested, this daily coffee time is "a sacred time and space in its own way."⁶ This is a wonderful daily ritual in which students, faculty, staff, and visitors converse around tables, the president invites the introduction of visitors, asks for community announcements, and solicits prayers of concern or celebration. The community is then dismissed in the name of the host: "Grace and peace in Jesus Christ."

The Hospitable Classroom

The hospitable seminary is unapologetic about its primary mission: to prepare persons for ministry. The seminary is a learning institution. It is important to note that learning occurs in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts. It takes place in classrooms, in the chapel, and at tables at coffee time, in peer groups, at congregational gatherings, with pastor mentors, in faculty offices, at Via Maria, in the halls, in The Journey: A Center for the Continuing Education of the Church. The best teachers are aware that the most significant learning is often unstructured and informal. The best teachers realize that they are called first to inspire and excite students to learn on their own.

Theological education is often perceived as a hostile and painful endeavor. Perhaps this is so because the subject of our learning pertains to our faith, to the very essence of our lives' convictions and callings. Study of Scripture or theology or ethics raises all those questions of truth and reality that make us vulnerable and defensive.

Therefore, in the seminary context it is especially important for the learning environment to be hospitable. Hospitality is best achieved in a community where all of us, teachers and students alike, confess that we are sojourners seeking divine truth and direction and where relationships of trust may be given shape

outside the classroom. At Western, perhaps, this center of trust and respect may be around the tables during coffee time, or in times of worship when we gather together around the table of our host, Jesus Christ. The common Table overcomes those barriers of status, age, degrees, gender, economic wellbeing, color, or ethnicity which diminish genuine hospitality. We all come to the Table equally in need of the embrace of God – sinners seeking God’s grace. This does not mean that there are no functional distinctions between teachers and students, for example. But it does mean that we respect and value one another as equals before our creator, redeemer and sustainer.

Experts in educational process tell us that learning occurs when there is enough space for mutual trust to develop between those who teach and those who wish to learn. Henri Nouwen writes: “When we look at teaching in terms of hospitality, we can say that the teacher is called upon to create . . . a free and fearless space where mental and emotional development can take place.”⁷ In a similar vein Parker Palmer writes of the importance of hospitality in learning: “It means creating an ethos in which the community of truth can form, the pain of truth’s transformations be borne.”⁸

In building trust hospitable teachers will affirm, encourage, and support their students; they will also recognize that the students have much to contribute in the process of learning. Nouwen stresses the fact that affirmation and revelation of a student’s own knowledge and experiences “show that students are not just the poor, needy, ignorant beggars who come to the man or woman of knowledge, but that they are indeed like guests who honor the house with their visit and will not leave it without having made their own contribution.”⁹

A hospitable learning environment is one which honors a diversity of persons as well as a diversity of opinions. Yet, if a seminary is to be an authentic Christian community it will not endorse superficially any or all beliefs or practices. Calian insists: “In the midst of our debates and dialogues let us never lose sight of our common ground in Christ that unites us.” Calian also argues that the ideal seminary provides “safe space for asking questions, expressing doubts, sharing crises, testing curiosity, and allowing experiences of forgiveness to take place with one another.”¹⁰ This can only occur where the community shares basic convictions about Christ and the Christian life.

Western Theological Seminary unapologetically acknowledges a christological foundation. Moreover it cherishes its Reformed, theological heritage and its identity as a seminary of the Reformed Church in America. “Strangers” from many other traditions and lands are welcomed and embraced, and they are not intellectually or spiritually coerced. True hospitality means that there is an authentic community to be welcomed to and received by. The curriculum of

every theological school has been shaped in a particular context during a particular time, by particular people. This has certainly been true of the Master of Divinity curriculum, which was framed and adopted by Western's faculty under the leadership of its academic dean, James V. Brownson, during the mid-1990s. Leanne Van Dyk, dean of the faculty, has written a very insightful article on this curriculum. She suggests that the formation of the curriculum developed through a three-fold process: guiding vision, convergence, and implementation.¹¹ As this curriculum has now been reframed and will eventually be replaced, it will be important for the community to be hospitable to new ideas and approaches.

Conclusion

Recently, Western Theological Seminary implemented a far-reaching strategic plan that included the initiation of a distance-learning Master of Divinity program and a center for continuing education of ordained and nonordained leaders of the church. The bold plan emerged as a result of the willingness of the board of trustees and the faculty to listen to the expressed needs of the church. In this respect the board and faculty were hospitable to a new community of students within the larger seminary community.

Another phase of the strategic plan called for building a new wing for a seminary facility which had become crowded and inadequate for future needs. Now completed and dedicated, this new wing – the De Witt Theological Center – has taught us the importance of hospitable space. A three-story addition, with the Journey Center located on the lower level, classrooms and The Sacred Page, a bookstore, located on the main level, and faculty and staff offices located on the top level, has enhanced our communal life. An atrium that soars from the main level through the top level and to skylights above has already become the emotional center of the seminary – a bright and delightful gathering space that welcomes strangers and visitors to our community.

It is presumptuous, of course, to present Western as a case study for a hospitable seminary. Ours is certainly not an ideal seminary. It is a seminary striving simply to become more hospitable, always recognizing that our host is Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

¹ Samuel Carnegie Calian, *The Ideal Seminary: Pursuing Excellence in Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 108-111.

² *Ibid.*, 111.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 47.

⁴ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Translated and Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 447-50.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 21.

⁶ Leanne Van Dyk, "The Formation of Vocation—Institutional and Individual," in L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 225.

⁷ Nouwen, 60.

⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 73-74.

⁹ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 62-63.

¹⁰ Calian, *Ideal Seminary*, 108.

¹¹ Van Dyk, "Formation of Vocation," esp. 233.
