“The seminary as apostolate:
Reflecting upon practices of teaching in seminaries who have as their central vision equipping people for mission in the North American context”

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**Purpose**

Three of the four seminaries involved in the following proposal have instituted major changes in their curricula over the past several years in response to the changing context of the church in North America. The fourth seminary is in the process of making such revisions. The primary shift has been to identify the North American context as a mission field into which God is calling the church, and thus to envision themselves as preparing disciples to equip Christian communities in living out the “missio Dei” in the world. This shift has – of necessity – prompted a great deal of curriculum innovation which, in turn, opens up room for reflection upon the actual practices of teaching and learning taking place in each seminary. This proposal supports a two meeting consultative process in which faculty members from these seminaries, which represent a diverse array of traditions (evangelical, reformed, Catholic and Lutheran), will explore together whether, and if so, how, their actual practices of teaching have changed in relation to these curriculum shifts.

**Goals**

1) to create a learning environment in which faculty members from several seminaries who are committed to understanding their role as one of “supporting an apostolate” can reflect together on their teaching practices in pursuit of that mission (this goal being one which considers the teaching practices of the “explicit curriculum” at each seminary);
2) to further identify and reflect upon the “seminary as apostolate” as it emerges within teaching practices (this goal being one which asks what the “implicit and null” curricula of the seminaries teach about their mission);

3) to gather and make available course materials, case studies, and other teaching resources developed by these seminaries that instantiate their vision of the seminary as apostolate, as well as support reflection upon teaching in that context; and,

4) to support faculty members at these institutions in developing a habit of reflective practice in relation to their teaching.

Rationale

There is broad consensus that the cultural context of the Christian movement in the west has changed. As Walter Brueggeman, et. al. note: “Unevenly but decisively, the long sojourn of the Christian religion as the established cultus of the Western world has almost spent itself. While pockets of ‘Christendom’ persist, and while the temptation to religious hegemony and triumphalism is perennial, the process of Christian disestablishment seems likely to continue throughout the present century and beyond” (Brueggeman, 2001).

This change, often described as a ‘paradigm shift’, is commonly summarized as the movement from Christendom to a post-Christendom or post-Christian situation (Wuthnow, 1988; Roof, 1999). This changed situation of the church is evoking a broad discussion focusing on the theme of the west as a mission field, and the challenge to the church to become, again, a missionary church (Guder, 1998). Other discussions address the same challenge by raising the fundamental apostolic definition and vocation of the church, and its implications for the apostolate of the theological seminary (Banks, 1999).
While there is a consensus that there is a changing context, there is as yet little consensus about both the nature and the consequences of this paradigm shift. For some institutions the challenges of this changed context are a motivation to explore new programs and to propose structural changes in order to become more effective. For many others, the issues are profoundly and specifically theological (Van Gelder, 2000). Such a theological assessment is reflected in the three basic questions posed by Craig Dykstra as the necessary agenda for the church in North America today: (1) What is God doing out there in the larger world? (2) What does the church need to look like if it is to be allied with what God is doing? (3) What do seminaries have to look like to relate constructively to such churches? And to which we add a fourth, (4) how do seminaries teach for seminarians to be responsive to this new situation?

The changed context of the church, discerned and explored with this kind of theological rigor, obviously has profound implications for the teaching and learning practices that occur within its seminaries. The theological issues are receiving considerable attention within theological schools, but the conversation remains one with little clear direction for the concrete consequences for teaching and learning of the church’s movement to a post-Christendom context. In fact it appears that while our institutions continue to pursue theological scholarship and research with a high level of academic rigor, they often appear to have very little impact upon the actual situation of the congregations and their ability to address the massive changes within our culture. This finding would suggest that our seminaries are not adequately preparing students for this aspect of their vocation. Academic strength is not necessarily translated into ecclesial impact. Yet, if the North American context has become a mission field, then theological education that generates leadership for the churches in this mission field must take seriously the realities and demands of the missionary church God is calling and sending into that field. The new situation of the church is a new situation for theological education.

This disconnect between what we in seminaries believe we are called to nourish, and what our students are actually prepared to support, is analogous in many ways to the challenges schools of education are identifying as they seek to prepare their students to be
leaders of educational change in a complex and tumultuous environment. There is similar broad public consensus that education needs to undergo substantial reform, but to date there have been only limited successes in identifying factors that actually contribute to sustainable and transformative change. Recent scholarship in public education has thus begun to take very seriously – on both theoretical and practical levels – the language of “cultural reform.”

Gallego, et. al. suggest, for instance, that school reform must focus “on the nature of the relationships that can change educational cultures” (2001, p. 240). They are beginning to weave three substantial theoretical literatures devoted to educational reform, into one more substantial “braided theory” that can help us to “simultaneously examine teacher educators, teachers, and students in relationship to each other and to their educational cultures” (p. 242).

On some very basic level, these scholars are returning to the framework first identified early on within education, that all learning takes place simultaneously on three levels – that of the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor. Yet their “braided theory” provides a subtle and complex frame by which to “see” these levels entwined in the cultures of teaching and learning. There appears to be strong resonance here to frameworks emerging within theological education. Banks speaks, for instance, of “being, knowing, and doing together” (p. 135), and of “a set of practices… a set of attitudes… a genuine understanding” (p. 226). Luther Seminary has taken this tripartite notion further, describing a seminary as functioning as “abbey, academy, and apostolate.”

In this formulation, embedded in the Luther Seminary mission statement and strategic

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1 The three primary literatures they treat are the following. The first concerns questions of “what’s worth knowing, how it should be taught, and how teachers know that students have learned,” and draws upon the work of such theorists as Dewey, Vygotsky, Freire and Foucault (p. 242). The second is the literature that suggests that “teachers require a dynamic understanding of self in relationship to others in multiple contexts to understand the social process of a school” (p. 243). Here they believe that the work of Hidalgo, Chávez-Chávez, Nieto, Greene, Jersild, and Noddings is particularly helpful (p. 243). And finally, they write that “for teachers and teacher educators to be able to reform the inherent biases in school culture requires not only a deep knowledge of curriculum and a knowledge of self and other in relationship [the first two literatures], but a critical understanding of the role of race, class, and gender in schooling, and a commitment to action for equity on behalf of children” (p. 244). Here they draw on the work of such theorists as Casey, Middleton, Miller, Weiler, and Weiner (p 246). Using this “braided theory,” Gallego, et. al. argue that “relational knowing – or knowledge of curriculum and instruction, knowledge of self and other, and knowledge of critical action – must be in place before school and university reform can occur” (p. 240).
commitments, the “academy” denotes teachers as credentialed professors who support students in learning to think and lead theologically; the “abbey” denotes a community gather in worship, with teachers as trusted spiritual guides where seminarians learn to pray and lead in worship; and the “apostolate” describes teachers as proven mentors who support students in becoming disciples who learn to lead and equip Christian communities in mission.²

As general education becomes more aware of the intertwined nature of learning and teaching across these three areas of knowing, research projects have evolved to pay close and reflective attention to the actual practices of teaching and learning going on in specific contexts. The rubric of “the scholarship of teaching and learning” is one such frame that is gaining currency in higher education.³ The research on “professional development schools” is another such frame in use within K-12 contexts. Indeed, the work on PDS’s in K-12 contexts, which stresses the crossing of cultures between university teacher education programs and the schools in which graduates of such programs eventually teach, is highly suggestive for the work of seminaries, which both prepare generations of persons for ministry in the churches, as well as host the scholarship/research which seeks to further deepen and challenge such ministry (Byrd and McIntyre, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1994).

The thrust of this proposal is to attend precisely to such “educational cultures” within these four seminaries. We are interested in the actual, concrete, engaged practices of the faculties of these four very different schools, specifically in relation to how they believe they are preparing students for ministry in the rapidly changing contexts of the Christian churches in North America. Such practices are at least theoretically embedded in an understanding of “seminary as academy, abbey and apostolate.” Given that there is a

² The general tendency to “unwind” these strands, and focus on just one element or “kind” of knowing in isolation from the other two appears throughout the educational literatures (Gallego, et. al. p. 246). This same pattern holds true within the scholarship on theological education. Indeed, a central argument of Banks’ book, Reenvisioning Theological Education, concerns how this unraveling occurred and what might be done to counter it.

substantial body of literature devoted to teaching and learning within theological education from the standpoint of “academy,” and there is a growing body of literature that treats the seminary from the perspective of “abbey,” we are most interested in opening up a discussion about the seminary as “apostolate.” Indeed, such a focus is inevitable, given that the bulk of the theological literature that confronts the changing context of the Christian churches in North America falls under the rubric of missiology.

The four seminaries who have committed to this project are: Catholic Theological Union (Chicago, IL), Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA), Luther Seminary (St. Paul, MN), and Princeton Theological Seminary (Princeton, NJ). These schools are situated in locations across the country, relate to very different Christian communities, and represent very different configurations of faculty and students. Yet all four have undertaken substantial shifts in their curricula in recent years in an attempt to educate leaders for churches in the 21st century.

**Research plan and methodology:**

Given that we are seeking to explore and reflect upon an inter-related set of teaching and learning practices which are focused on cultural intervention, we believe that an action research methodology is most appropriate. As Gallego, et. al. note: “lasting educational reform requires … resources and structures to establish critical relationships which enable educators to learn about themselves as they learn with others, thereby creating the opportunity for the understanding and development of different perspectives… it is the fluid knowledge gained through relationships between educators and students across and outside of educational cultures that determines whether reform will occur or not” (p. 4).

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4 Indeed, most of the literature sparked by Edward Farley’s *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) clusters around this metaphor, even as it strives to move in different directions. Good summaries of this conversation, coming from differing locations, can be found in Rebecca Chopp’s *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), and Robert Banks’ *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring A Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

5 Most of the literature here lies within the rubric either of formation or it is more narrative and descriptive, engaging specific stories and contexts (cf: Breyer, C. *The Close: A Young Woman’s First Year of Seminary* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), or Carroll, J. et. al. *Being There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).) The journals *Theological Education, Teaching Theology and Religion, and Religious Education* all have engaged this metaphor (of “abbey”) in various ways within their pages.
Part of our challenge will be adequately identifying this “fluid knowledge” so as to be able to ‘see’ it in our work together.

These goals suggest that an action research methodology would be the most appropriate way to proceed in this inquiry for four reasons: (1) it assumes as a central commitment the engaged participation of a critical number of actors in a specific situation; (2) it is open-ended and improvisational, allowing for themes to emerge that may not have been imagined ahead of time; (3) its underlying epistemological commitments support rather than contradict the central elements of graduate theological education (Hess, 2001; Martin, 2000); and, (4) its very process is one of reflective inquiry – which is precisely the kind of practice we are hoping to encourage through the proposed process (Wenger, et. al., 2002).

This kind of methodology, however, poses major logistical difficulties when implemented faithfully. Among them are: (1) defining initial research questions sufficiently clearly, but also with sufficient openness so as to invite respectful collaboration; (2) developing relationships with enough depth to support reflective inquiry in which new insights can take root and grow; (3) creating appropriate assessment and dissemination procedures that emerge from the study contexts themselves.

It is clear, for instance, that all four schools believe that processes of “contextualization” are an important aspect of their response to a changing church. At the same time, what each means by “contextualization” is different, nuanced by the specific traditions (including those of higher education) in which they are embedded, and the churches from which their students are called and to which they return. Are students, for instance, paired with local churches from the beginning of their involvement with seminary? Are students immersed in short term cross cultural experiences? Are cross cultural experiences primarily “tourism” or are they also linked to actual mission projects? To what extent is “contextualization” something that a specific group of faculty does (such as a field education office), or something that all of the faculty of a seminary integrate into their teaching?
It is also clear, for instance, that “leadership” is a crucial aspect of these curriculum revision projects. But how is “leadership” defined and modeled in the curriculum? What are the theological foundations claimed in such a definition, and to what extent are those foundations taught in standard systematics courses, biblical courses, arts of ministry courses, and so on?

Or, again, if the goal of curriculum revision is to prepare students for serving communities of faith in a rapidly changing environment, all of the schools agree that supporting active learning that reaches beyond the bounded nature of a seminary degree is critical. Yet how is such learning supported within a seminary curriculum? What are some of the concrete teaching practices seminary faculty engage in to elicit active learning, and to support student habituation in such a stance?

Elliott Eisner has written eloquently about the three curricula embedded in any learning setting – the “explicit, the implicit, and the null curricula.” The primary goal of this consultative process is to help all four schools explore the assumptions about teaching and learning embedded in their curriculum revision processes, and to identify where these assumptions reinforce the apostolate task, and where they challenge it.

The seed for this project grew out of initial conversations between Presidents Richard Mouw (of Fuller Seminary) and David Tiede (of Luther Seminary). They began to recognize the similarity of challenges their schools were facing, but also the uniqueness of the responses each was developing. Both schools had undertaken complex and substantive shifts in their curriculum in response to their perception of the needs of the churches in the changing context of North America. The richness of their conversation -- yet the difficulty of the teaching and learning challenges both schools were still facing—led them to reach out to Darrell Guder (first at Columbia Theological Seminary, now at Princeton Theological Seminary). As he joined the conversation, Robert Schreiter from CTU also became engaged. Out of this conversation grew the real conviction that there was both an opportunity here, as well as real challenges that could be met together. From
that space Robert Schreiter went to President Senior at CTU, and Darrell Guder to President Gillispie at Princeton, and the inquiry continued, with a deepening sense of energy building from the diversity of the theological spectrum that was being engaged.

Still, in some ways, this dialogical inquiry into the impact of curriculum change has remained one that occurs at the highest levels of these institutions, because it is difficult to bridge the many geographic and other divides that isolate faculties one from another. This proposal seeks to spread the seeds of what has been a vibrant dialogue in one arena of these schools into their faculties, and see what emerges. Given the magnitude of the curriculum shifts underway, as well as the necessity of creating time and space for faculty to reflect upon the teaching practices embedded in them, this proposal seeks a grant that would allow faculty members from the four schools to meet with each other twice over a two year timeline.

**Timeline and outcomes:**

We plan for a study group of sixteen persons, made up of representatives of the four institutions (Catholic Theological Union, Fuller Seminary, Luther Seminary, and Princeton Theological Seminary). We envision teams of four people from each school because we want to ensure a diverse mix of representation, both in terms of faculty career (more recent teachers as well as senior teachers) and in terms of faculty role (administrators whose role is to oversee the entire teaching dynamic of the school, as well as faculty members whose entire focus is within their particular disciplinary domain).

In preparation for the first gathering, each school’s team will develop a sketch of the curricular re-orientation already in process at their schools. In particular they will note: (1) the character and details of the assumptions governing the institutional conversations, (2) the shape of the curriculum revision, and specific resistances and obstacles encountered in the process, as well as new opportunities that emerged, (3) any readily identifiable student outcomes that illustrate curricular impact, and (4) the trajectories currently identified in particular institutions for further development.
During the first gathering, the teams will share these sketches and participate in a couple of rounds of mutual consultation, with the primary outcome being the development of a set of questions for further study that are particularized to each institution’s needs and concerns. In particular, the teams will experience for themselves a process of appreciative inquiry, and then work out ways in which to use such a process in exploring teaching practices in their respective schools.

Each team will then return to their home institution with these questions and processes in hand. During the following months the school’s team will interview various faculty, administrators, and students in a process of appreciative inquiry. The teams will then develop case statements for each institution that describe the kinds of teaching practices in place that respond specifically to the challenges of theological education as viewed from the perspective of “seminary as apostolate.” They will also gather examples of teaching processes, assignments, syllabi, and so on that well illustrate such emphases at that school. In some ways this is a gathering of the materials of the “explicit” curriculum in place at each school.

When the entire study group re-convenes, they will have in front of them each school’s case statement with attached resources. This second meeting of the group will provide a process in which the teams deepen further their reflection upon and analysis of the practices of teaching and learning that emerged as specifically relevant in this exploration. In particular, the group process will elicit reflection upon details of the “implicit” and “null” curricula operating in the teaching and learning processes. This process is modeled in some ways upon that employed by both the Keystone and Lexington seminars.

We believe that this kind of process could summarize and clarify some crucial new trends in theological education, and point towards the ways in which new missiological thinking has bubbled up to become a central part of the strategic theological commitments of certain major theological schools. Seeing how these schools are engaging their distinct
traditions of faith and practice in their teaching will be a particularly interesting and important finding, since the theological spectrum is a significant dimension of the project. We also believe that this kind of sustained reflection will inevitably deepen each school’s understanding of its curricular missions, pointing out new opportunities and clarifying specific challenges. Further, we believe it is likely that the major pedagogical innovations these seminaries are implementing have implications not only for other seminaries but perhaps for professional development schools more generally. Finally, we believe that sharing our experience with providing an environment for teachers to reflect upon the actual processes of their teaching, in light of the larger mission of their schools, will also prove interesting and relevant across a variety of professional preparation contexts.

The project will be evaluated in three ways. First, ongoing communication via electronic means will provide a regularly scheduled time for reflection on how the process is proceeding at each school. It is hoped that this communication will also build and strengthen an environment of appreciative inquiry. Second, the process of reflecting upon the resources that each team creates (the initial gathering of materials for the first meeting, and the prepared case statement for the second) will naturally provide several opportunities for evaluating not only how the process is proceeding at each school, but to what extent the joint process is helpful. Finally, the formal dissemination processes we propose will invite evaluative discussion from a broader range of partners.

The dissemination of the project's findings would take place in three major ways: (1) The project would be reported to the Association of Theological Schools as a contribution to their discussion of the implications for teaching and learning in curricular re-orientation as well as to the revision of standards for accreditation. (2) The project would be reported to and discussed within the four institutions involved, serving as a resource for their ongoing pedagogical reflections. We imagine that if this process is sufficiently energizing and reflective with its participants – a key element of the action research methodology we propose to use – it is likely that working groups of administrators and faculty and perhaps even students at these institutions might continue to meet. (3) Finally, a project report drawing on all four case statements will be shaped into an article
for publication in a journal related to teaching and learning (here the Wabash journal will be our first choice), and thereby made available to any other interested institutions as a resource. The case statements developed as part of the research process, as well as the syllabi, bibliography, and any other teaching and learning resources collected as part of the exploration might also be made available through one of the standard sites (Wabash, the AAR/SBL syllabus project, etc.).