Something old, something new: Innovation in theological education

by L. Gregory Jones in the February 19, 2014 issue

Why is theological education necessary? What are the conditions of its fruitfulness? Such questions are both basic and perplexing. Several years ago I posed these questions as conversation starters to a group made up of seminary presidents and deans of university-related divinity schools. I was surprised and more than a little disheartened by how much difficulty we had in addressing these topics. I had naively thought that such basic questions were regularly on our minds as we interpreted our institutions to students, faculty, staff, donors, congregations, judicatories and the broader culture. I discovered that I was less articulate than I should be in answering my own questions.

Answering the “why” question about theological education is urgent. It will involve creative experimentation rooted in traditioned innovation. I coined the term *traditioned innovation* several years ago to distinguish life-giving innovation from approaches that treat change as good in itself—an approach that suggests that we are just making things up as we go along. Traditioned innovation, Duke New

Testament professor Kavin Rowe has said, is a biblical way of thinking." It is a way of thinking desperately needed in theological education today.

Many experiments in theological education have not drawn on the best wisdom of the past. Meanwhile, many people have put their heads in the sand, refusing to ask the "why" question, pretending that we don't need much innovation. Leaders may undertake a few incremental changes and experiments but try nothing truly disruptive of current realities.

Incremental changes are insufficient. Indeed, some deeply disruptive trends are pressing us toward disruptive approaches to theological education. Seven trends in particular are shifting the tectonic plates of culture and profoundly affecting Christian institutions: the digital revolution; the emergence of a "multinodal" world of complicated ethnic relationships and cultural dynamics, both within the United States and globally; changing patterns of denominations and new forms of congregating; the questioning of—and cynicism about—institutions; economic stresses on Christian organizations that challenge old business models and press issues of sustainability; shifting vocations of laypeople; and the lure of cities (see "Deep trends affecting Christian institutions," by L. Gregory Jones and Nathan Jones at faithandleadership.com).

These deep trends are also interrelated. Addressing them faithfully requires both clarity about why theological education is important and a willingness to experiment—and to experiment in ways richly connected to the best of our traditions.

We can learn some critically important lessons about innovation in theological education by looking at other contexts, both historical and contemporary. These are moments in which church leaders not only felt the tectonic plates of culture shifting, they thought the world was in extreme crisis.

For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer experimented with an innovative approach to theological education in Finkenwalde, Germany, from 1935 to 1937—an experiment necessitated by the Nazis' rise to power and their takeover of German higher (and theological) education. It was during this time that Bonhoeffer wrote his classic works *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. These books are read fruitfully by Christians today; comparatively less attention has been given to the seminary experiment in Finkenwalde that underlies them.

Now, thanks to the appearance of two new volumes of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (vol. 14: *Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935–1937* and vol. 15: *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*), we have detailed background and exposition of theological education at Finkenwalde and Bonhoeffer's further reflections on his work after Finkenwalde was closed by the Gestapo in 1937. Bonhoeffer famously described the experiment at Finkenwalde as seeking not "monastic isolation but rather the most intensive concentration for ministry in the world."

It is important to remember that Bonhoeffer's experiment both built on the classical German context of education, which emphasized academic rigor and mastery of classic texts, and offered creative innovation grounded in "life together." Bonhoeffer introduced an emphasis on Christian formation that was a remarkable innovation for German (as well as British and American) Protestantism in the early part of the 20th century.

The classic modern model of Protestant theological education had focused on learning a profession; Bonhoeffer's emphasis on formation connected more to Catholic and Anabaptist traditions of forming spiritual and moral character and cultivating skills for Christian life and, specifically, Christian ministry.

By necessity and design Bonhoeffer became a practitioner of traditioned innovation. His experiment drew deeply on the wells of Christian traditions of learning theology and practicing Christian life and ministry, and it forced him to address the question of why theological education matters even when it could not be practiced the way he had learned it in the university. He adapted those traditions quite innovatively to address the urgent, disruptive and desperate cultural circumstances of life in Nazi Germany.

It would be too easy to romanticize Finkenwalde as an alternative to academic approaches to theological education, noting the emphasis on communal living and the development of skills. However, the education at Finkenwalde presumed academic rigor. Conditions forced the focus on a new form of monasticism to enable Christian witness in the world. In so doing, Finkenwalde reveals a reframing of theological education's purpose: the experiment emphasized patterns of thinking, feeling, perceiving and living well, all aimed at *practical wisdom* rather than merely academic education.

The dangers of romanticizing Finkenwalde by focusing on formation rather than education are reflected in a contemporary example of Christian educators dealing with significant cultural disruption—the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). As South Africa's apartheid regime collapsed in the early 1990s, the ecumenical Federal Theological Seminary closed as well. It had been focused more on what it opposed than what it was for. The end of apartheid was profoundly good news, ushering in changes that South Africans had dreamed about; but the FedSem collapsed because it didn't have an orienting purpose. People and church bodies were left in crisis, wondering where to turn.

The MCSA and other participating denominations had to design a new approach to theological education. Riding the wave of experiments, the MCSA designed a program of contextual learning based on an in-service model. Much was learned from the intensive focus on action-reflection modes of education, which concentrate on learning in context. The seminary component of that parish-based reflection, John Wesley College, took the form of immersion in the Soweto section of Johannesburg.

Over the course of a decade, however, leaders in the MCSA became convinced that this experiment relied too much on formation at the expense of rigorous education. They discovered that their pastors didn't know enough scripture, history, doctrine and theology. As one distinguished, retired black South African church leader told me, "It is hard to go to church anymore; my pastor doesn't have anything substantive to preach." In 2010, the seminary was relocated to Pietermaritzburg, renamed Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary (in honor of the first black president of the MCSA) and became affiliated with the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The new seminary recognizes that rigorous academic learning, the formation of moral and spiritual character and the development of skills must be integrally related. It draws on the resources of the Wesleyan traditions and the needs of their South African context. The seminary has gone a long way toward thinking about the purpose of theological education in service to the church and its (lay and ordained) ministries, precisely by engaging in forms of traditioned innovation.

The disruptions under way in the United States are less obvious than those in Nazi Germany or in the aftermath of the apartheid era. As a result, leaders have thought we could still focus on the "what" and "how" questions at the expense of articulating why theological education exists at all—much less in its current forms. As a result, we have largely settled for incremental change rooted in fund-raising strategies and

new programs rather than taking a disruptive approach rooted in traditioned innovation. We have not paid enough attention to the deep trends.

Ironically, we in the United States have continued to maintain the status quo or pursue only incremental change, despite more than three decades of intellectual conversation and scholarly proposals about theological education, launched by the publication in 1983 of Edward Farley's *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Scholars across the theological and denominational spectra have weighed in with specific proposals and frameworks.

The theoretical discussions have offered significant ideas and insights. Yet for three decades little has changed. Farley himself reflected in these pages a decade ago on the persistence of the fourfold curricular model of theological education (comprising the study of scripture, theology, history and pastoral practice). Perhaps the deepest problem is that, while there has been a vague awareness that things are not quite right, there hasn't been an obvious crisis to precipitate change.

Theological education in the United States has been like the frog on the stove: with the temperature rising slowly, we have not realized that we are in peril. And so we have tried to continue with business as usual.

Over the past several years, however, institutional crises have become more real and visible. The bellwether indicators have been shortfalls in finances, declines in enrollments and weakened connections to congregations and denominations. Theological institutions have responded, understandably, by redoubling efforts at fund-raising, reaching out to laypeople with new degrees and reconnecting to constituencies.

Some schools have begun to experiment with new models of theological education, though too often this is more an effort to survive than a creative effort to build on strengths. As much as we have learned from Bonhoeffer's books, we have not paid sufficient attention to his experiment in theological education—nor have we been as attentive as we should be to learning from brothers and sisters in other contexts.

The "why" of theological education continues to haunt us. Can those of us in more-established schools and denominations learn from the most creative experiments, historically as well as contemporaneously, creatively adapting their strengths and learning important lessons from their failures? Can such experiments help us discover traditioned innovation in theological education so that we are more adept

at knowing why we do what we do?

One example of traditioned innovation I'm aware of is the Youth Academy for Christian Formation at Duke Divinity School. It was started when I was dean with support from the Lilly Endowment and encouragement from laypeople on the school's board of visitors. At the time I was unsure if it was really worth the effort. It seemed as though it might just be an add-on to our other programs. The Youth Academy combines practices of ancient catechesis, rigorous lectures and Wesleyan patterns of small groups, social witness and the arts. It has had a profound impact on our faculty and our understanding of what we are doing in our master of divinity program. The Youth Academy has become a central feature of the school's conception of theological education.

Duke Divinity School has developed a new approach to forming youth pastors that draws deeply on our Youth Academy. It has become more adept at answering the "why" of theological education by engaging young people through traditioned innovation. Other seminaries have had similarly successful youth programs, also encouraged by the Lilly Endowment.

We will fail our contemporary experience, and our descendants, if we think that we can react to recent institutional crises simply by trying harder at fund-raising, devising new programs and reconnecting with constituencies. All of those are worthwhile activities. But if that is all we do, we will be that frog that dies a slow death rather than an immediate one. We will die nonetheless.

Like Bonhoeffer and our South African brothers and sisters, we need to mine the rich diversity of our Christian traditions in their approaches to learning the Christian faith and forming people for pastoral leadership. As we do so, we will find more freedom for creative innovation. We will also be more likely to hold together the rich intersections of rigorous academic work, the formation of moral and spiritual character and the development of skills. And as we do, we will develop clearer and more cogent answers to the question of why theological education is not only important but critical for the flourishing and witness of the church, its people and its clergy.