A seminary’s calculated risk: CBTS president Molly T. Marshall

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an interview by David Heim in the February 17, 2016 issue

Photo courtesy of Central Baptist Theological Seminary

When Molly T. Marshall became president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in 2004, the school was facing declining enrollment, millions of dollars in deferred maintenance, and major revenue problems. Over the next few years she led a refashioning of the institution, which began with cutting faculty by a third and the staff by half.

The seminary, affiliated with the American Baptist Churches, developed new degree programs as well as partnerships with Korean Americans, refugees from Myanmar, and a school in Myanmar. It sold its Kansas City campus and relocated to suburban Shawnee, Kansas. Finances have stabilized, and over the past five years enrollment

has grown by nearly 180 percent.

Before joining the CBTS faculty in 1997, Marshall taught for 11 years at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville—the first woman to teach theology at a Southern Baptist seminary. Her books include No Salvation Outside the Church? A Critical Inquiry *and* What It Means to Be Human.

Freestanding seminaries are under huge financial pressures these days. Do you think your experience at Central offers any broader lessons for seminary leaders?

A key ingredient at Central was the willingness to seek a clear-eyed assessment of our financial situation and to risk our old identity for the sake of a renewed mission. Although this effort was personally and communally painful, I was intent on thinking about a sustainable future.

Truth telling is critical for seminary leaders, and we must resist the temptation to spiritualize financial realities. Neither a president nor a board can afford to be surprised about the actual costs of their institution’s mission. And we cannot shrink from taking a calculated risk. Creativity is also crucial in responding to the current challenges for theological education, just as it is necessary for ministers.

For many congregations, the bricks and mortar of a building have become more of a burden than an asset. Does that hold true for seminaries?

Both seminaries and congregations can cling to spaces for the wrong reasons. They need to ask how their facilities collaborate with their mission, and if they do not serve the mission, make the faithful decision to mobilize resources in a more constructive way.

Moving our school was absolutely necessary not only because of the weight of deferred maintenance, but also because of the shifting demographics of the learning community. We no longer had a residential community, and we needed to adapt to new forms of preparing ministers.

Central’s former campus is now occupied by three ministry organizations—a medical clinic for the working poor who lack insurance; a transitional housing agency for the homeless; and an ethnic congregation that uses the former library for its worship space. Its venerable property was given to redemptive purposes. I would not have

approved a casino being built there!

Much of the current demand for theological education is coming from ethnic minority communities. How can that demand be met, and what does it require from existing institutions?

A significant portion of Central's rapid growth has come from serving ethnic communities, both in the United States and Myanmar. A great deal of cultural competency is required. Moving from benefactor to partner is a journey fraught with potential misunderstandings. The disparity in financial resources may keep ethnic communities from speaking up about their concerns.

Scholarship money is needed, because many prospective learners lack financing and are without access to loans. Competency in English is also an issue. Central has a Korean studies program offered in the Korean language and certificate programs offered in Burmese and Karen, a tribal language in Myanmar. Because facility in English is the ultimate goal for immigrant communities, Central employs a coordinator for developing language skills.

Collaborative ventures of this sort demand theological hospitality. Christians from other parts of the globe may live in a more spirited universe than Western Christians.

What do you mean by "a more spirited universe"?

I'm using a term that Daniel Aleshire, head of the Association of Theological Schools, used in a conversation on global partnerships. I call the universe of Myanmar Christians "more spirited" in the sense that they regard all things as animated by spirits. Teaching a theology of the Holy Spirit to those students requires cultural sensitivity. Ethnic communities also often have a very different understanding of sacred space. Moving a place of worship is seen as much more than a new allocation of resources, for spirits inhabit such places.

Much of theological education has moved toward short-term classes, confined to a week or a weekend. How do you assess what's gained and lost for students in such formats compared to a traditional semester setting?

The delivery method of theological education has shifted seismically. Many seminarians are already employed as leaders in congregations or other venues, and they do not have the time or flexibility for a full week, daytime schedule stretched over a 15-week semester. Central is inaugurating a trimester system (Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time), with each semester lasting 12 weeks, and with breaks between terms. A full-time student will take two classes per semester. Faculty members are engaging these new formats with insight and creativity by assigning work prior to the beginning of classes and supplementing classroom time with digital resources.

The advantage of a traditional semester setting is that it can allow a more cumulative and integrative impact. But a narrower focus on fewer courses can achieve the same result. Some weeklong classes, such as an immersion course in Benedictine spirituality at a nearby abbey, or a class on the church and disabilities, are well suited to an intensive format. Crafting clear and achievable outcomes for these classes is critical.

The model of “learning while doing” has long been invoked in theological education, but now it seems that practical necessities are moving educators more toward an apprentice model. Are educators and church leaders getting any better at realizing the benefits of this model?

I believe that churches and seminaries are strengthening their collaboration in forming creative ministers for diverse ministry contexts. Churches that are hospitable to this form of learning are enriched, and their investment in the untried minister is incalculable. What concerns me is that many congregations are unwilling to provide even a rudimentary stipend to the student and do not see the value in being a teaching church alongside the seminary.

An exciting academic innovation for Central is the requirement that every student receive both coaching and mentoring as a part of their M. Div. or D. Min. program. The personal, spiritual, and professional formation that occurs as seasoned and beginning ministers open their lives to each other is significant.

Your career is closely bound up with women’s struggle to have their gifts for ministry fully recognized in Baptist (and for many years Southern Baptist) settings. What’s the current state of that struggle in the church, especially as it concerns theological education?

I have been away from Southern Baptist life for over two decades, but from a distance it appears that women are relegated to subordinate status in church and home because of the stubborn patriarchal stance of the SBC.

Many seminaries still have too few female professors, although it is drastically different in mainline schools from when I completed my M.Div. in 1975. The presence of women in seminary administration is growing, but it is still slight in the whole landscape. Minority women are gaining positions in executive leadership, but at too slow a pace given the number of qualified candidates.

Central has a Women's Leadership Initiative designed to empower women to pursue their calling in freedom, with little financial encumbrance. Part of the curriculum focuses on entrepreneurial leadership, which includes the skill of grant writing. Many women, especially women of color, do not have the same pathway to ministry that their male colleagues enjoy, so specific training can smooth the way. Mainline seminaries tend to think that the theoretical work on the issue of women in ministry has been done, but they have not prepared women sufficiently to compete in the job market. Mentoring and coaching are essential.

A seminary president's job is to raise money. What do you find makes donors excited about investing in theological education at this time of such flux and uncertainty?

A seminary president can never outsource fund-raising! It is critical for the office, and the president must be relentless in pursuing those who will sustain the seminary's mission. I have been called "the importunate widow" who will wear the donors out with her incessant requests.

Donors are excited by Central's willingness to be creative and to meet needs that other schools ignore, as we do in our collaborative program with a seminary in Myanmar. Donors are excited when they see fiscal sobriety on the part of seminary leaders, and they are enthusiastic about investing their funds where they will have an impact.

As faithful church members, donors know the difference between competent and incompetent congregational leaders—especially when it comes to preaching! They long to be a part of preparing leaders who will inspire coming generations to faith and service. They believe that an innovative seminary is essential to this pursuit.

Your own career in ministry has included work as a youth pastor, parish pastor, teacher, and administrator. As you look back, can you say who or what made the most difference in your formation?

I have forebears in ministry on both sides of my family, so I grew up with the compelling lore of pioneering pastors in Texas and the Indian Territory. My home church in Oklahoma stressed a theology of Christian vocation, and when we sang "Wherever He Leads, I'll Go," I thought it meant girls, too.

All along the way, caring persons encouraged my unfolding sense of vocation, even though it was an inchoate longing for a time. Key professors—and one seminary president, Roy Honeycutt—saw promise in me and helped open doors, even while I pushed a bit myself.

Two Benedictine vows have helped me sustain my vocation: the vows of stability and *conversatio morum*. I regularly spend time at Conception Abbey in northwest Missouri; it is a spiritual home for me, and I am shaped by its liturgy and adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict.

I also think that adversity has helped hone character. My way has not been particularly easy; life has presented me with some hard challenges. The supply of the Spirit has made it possible for me to welcome them.

Could you say more about the vows of stability and *conversatio morum* and how they shape your work and life?

The vows of *conversatio morum* and stability are unique to the Benedictine tradition. The vow of stability is what ensures my ongoing commitment to my seminary, my church, and my vocation. A rough translation of *conversatio morum* is "conversion of all ways of life," which means that I continue to grow and mature within that stability. These twinned vows support each other. Stability without growth and development could be deadly in its routinization of life; *conversatio morum* without stability has no enduring framework.

I have found that these vows sustain me—to not abandon my community when a better job offer came along, to not leave my church when conflict arises, and to not forsake my vocation when the pressure of opposition was great. These vows have kept me faithful to the calling to lead as seminary president. These practices could enrich any Christian vocation. Persons outside cloistered life can adapt them

profitably, and they can contribute to mature assessment of one’s context and personal character.

Discussions about the future of the church, especially in mainline Protestant circles, return again and again to the characteristics of the millennial generation and what they portend. What’s your perspective?

The millennial generation has much to teach and much to learn, especially in regard to the ecclesial expressions of Christianity. The church needs the protest and energy that younger adults bring; the millennials (do they really want that label?) desire thoughtful tradition that has a social impact. They have little regard for institutions preoccupied with preservation.

This demographic segment may be more open than popularly perceived to the beauty of liturgy, sacramental ritual, and the arts of worship. Their longing for beauty is akin to a longing for God. The longing of this generation can kindle deeper longing in the congregations they inhabit, albeit partially, and with hesitance. Their insistent questioning of the received tradition sharpens and strengthens the articulation of the heart of Christianity.

The future of the church is always at question, and the traditioning process of teaching and practice depends upon faithfully conserving the theological heritage while finding new ways to express the grace of the gospel.