Overextended: The increasing demands on seminaries

by Louis B. Weeks in the February 20, 2007 issue

Within a single week this past fall I received requests that the seminary I serve staff a youth retreat for a congregation, send a speaker about starvation in Darfur to a conference in Washington, D.C., provide leadership to Presbyterian congregational leaders in a distant city, send curriculum for a seventh-grade class, offer training for Spanish-speaking and Latino lay leaders, open a D.Min. program in another city, and engage with a nearby university in an ethics project on stem cell research. Additional requests came that same week to administrators and other members of the faculty.

Such requests present both a blessing and a curse. The seminary can help nurture faith in new ways among people who are hungry and thirsty for the gospel, for faith development, and for deeper piety and righteousness. People see seminaries as among the few places today where they can partake of authentic spiritual formation, and they sense that seminaries can provide resources for daily life individually and corporately. A blessing of a situation if ever there was one!

The curse is that every additional invitation that a seminary accepts and every good program it begins can distract from its primary mission. Denominational seminaries were invented 200 years ago to train pastors for congregations and to equip evangelists to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to people who have not heard it.

Perhaps we romanticize the past, but in previous generations most students came to seminary already “traditioned” in the denomination in which they had been reared. Many possessed a deep knowledge of the Bible, a love for and experience in the activities of their denomination, a liberal arts education from a church-related college, and experience in leadership and volunteer posts in the congregation and perhaps in the wider church. Now students come from every imaginable background and every degree of “traditioning”—from extensive to none. Denominational seminaries educate students from many other denominations and community

church backgrounds.

In addition to these dramatic changes in students' backgrounds, seminaries are feeling the pull to offer programs and resources for a broader constituency. One faculty member mused, "We used to be in wholesale, but we've gotten pushed into retail. Where are the old retailers? Out of business!"

As I struggle to discern the proper reaction of seminaries to all of this, I recall with some irony when the problems seemed more hypothetical and academically interesting. Twenty years ago, the Presbyterians (like other mainline Protestants) were preoccupied with three problems: a loss in membership, an apparent spiritual malaise in the working theology of members and leaders, and a loss of competence and confidence in interpreting the gospel for our times. Researchers pointed to the decline in the Sunday school movement, the demise of Sabbath observance, and the reluctance of most parents to engage their children in what was called "family devotions."

The scrutiny of these formal and informal institutions, considered by early-20th-century leaders to be the "three legs of a stool without which no church could stand," led scholars to explore the complex "ecology" or "ecosystem" for faith development. I joined 70 other scholars in identifying additional questions for study, and we gained many insights. But we worried the most about the loss of the crucial elements: Sabbath observance, family times with the Bible, prayer time and nurture in faith within congregations.

We explored the ecology or ecosystem for Protestant faith development in the series "The Presbyterian Presence: The Twentieth Century Experience." In the final volume, we addressed "the thinning of the ecology for faith development" among Presbyterians. The cradle-to-grave interdependence of scores of institutions had been for the most part waning throughout the 20th century with the decline of religious kindergartens, Protestant-dominated public schools, Presbyterian colleges with religion requirements and cohorts of like-reared students and faculty, parochial campus ministries in public institutions, and leadership development regionally and nationally for lay leaders—all buttressed by a Protestant "establishment" with a clear hegemony in the media of most communities. Many more such ingredients or elements were part of the ecosystem. "These structures and exercises of piety not only nourished one another but also, more importantly, stimulated and sustained individual faith and discipleship, denominational identity, and a favorable

environment for mainstream Protestant churches in the larger society" (*The Re-Forming Tradition*).

So if seminaries had completed the formal work of congregations and wider church involvement in the forming of leaders in a thick ecosystem, what did it mean to have lost so many of the elements as the ecosystem thinned? What parts of the formation of leaders are indispensable? If no one else now makes those parts available, should seminaries begin to include them by default?

These questions precipitated real dilemmas and issues for Union Seminary in Virginia, where I became president in 1994. Faculty members lamented that nondegree offerings at Union were thin. We had the Sprunt Lectures every year but little else. I met with leaders in presbyteries and local congregations, and most complained that Union offered few or no direct services for congregational life. Congregations and presbyteries believed that the seminary could offer them such resources.

Union began considering establishment of a center to focus on the relationships of the sciences, arts and theology. The Carl Howie Center attracted significant financial support. We highlighted relationships and resources already in place—longstanding events such as caravans to groups of local churches and Adopt-a-Student programs with churches.

Due to fiscal necessity, the seminary sought federation with the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, the last independent, accredited school in the country for training professional church educators. PSCE had trained mostly women in Christian education, congregational leadership, music, social work and the classical disciplines of Bible and theology. These people populate congregations with a vision for ministry and the work of the church. PSCE had always offered recreation workshops, a demonstration child development laboratory, a center on aging, a parish nurse network and other resources.

Out of the federation came ideas for additional resources for local congregations, especially when the Lilly Endowment invited us to begin offering programs for high school students who might be gifted and called to ministerial vocations. Project Burning Bush has challenged more than 300 high school students to consider full-time Christian vocations in ministry.

A second Lilly program invited us to “enhance the capacity” of theological institutions beyond the offering of degree programs. We responded with an Institute for Reformed Theology that would draw together pastors, educators, students and scholars to study great issues and doctrines in sustained conversations over a year or more. The IRT, which gave birth to the Reformed Institute of Theology for metropolitan Washington, D.C., also sponsored public lectures and a bulletin.

Other programs soon followed, including an Asian American Ministry and Mission Center. We began additional partnerships with Episcopal, Methodist and Presbyterian congregations and church bodies, and initiated an Advocates for Ministry program in which volunteers share with college students across the country about the joys and challenges of Christian service. We offer resources for groups that encourage gifted college graduates to consider ministry. In response to requests from congregations and judicatories, we offer enrichment experiences in nondegree education.

As part of the “Rehoboth Project: Wide, Free Spaces and Refreshing Waters with No Hassle,” selected pastors and educators from ten presbyteries receive funds and direction for self-governing, self-disciplined continuing-education experiences in small groups. Two students from Union-PSCE share the responsibilities of director, and we offer administrative services for accounting and logistics.

The multiplication of centers and projects and educational efforts for laity seems to stretch across the universe of American seminaries. Catholic seminaries address the educational opportunities of laity. Younger and more tuition-driven Protestant seminaries seem to have engaged in multitasking from the beginning, as well as creating extension sites and offering online instruction for degree programs. Other traditional seminaries also offer the kinds of associated programs that Union-PSCE does.

A few months after Katrina, I chaired a seminary accreditation team. We learned that New Orleans Baptist Seminary, tested by storm and flood, displayed remarkable resilience, and we found the school’s ancillary programs bouncing back as quickly as the core degree programs—a youth ministry institute; centers for global missions, archaeological research, evangelism and church health, and church planting; and a partnership with Baptist colleges. As we learned more about these auxiliary programs, we could see that each had come from an expressed need and that most had previously existed in state conferences or other institutions.

At a faculty workshop at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, I marveled at new elements in the education panoply. A serious program of coaching for pastors from around the country was most intriguing, with seven curricular modules in the formal program and weekly sessions with coaches for accountability. Any pastor anywhere could apply. Bethel also offered a “Leadership Enrichment Seminar Series” with a focus on team ministry.

Over the past seven years, funding by the Lilly Endowment has encouraged scores of seminaries to initiate programs that thicken the ecosystems for faith development and faithful ministry in a wide variety of denominations and churches. I sense other forces as well, especially the diminished capacity of denominations and other governing bodies to maintain programs and corporate practices previously significant for faith development of members and leaders. If my analysis is correct, the pressures for expansion of programs and even of mission will continue.

Though my institution carefully considers each new program, the sum of the efforts does recast us as a “retailer” as well as a “wholesaler.” We now provide many services to congregations, pastors and individual Christians that were not provided a generation ago. Some say, “We’ve been pushed too fast into too many things.” Do our programs undercut others run by congregations and judicatories? Perhaps. But we have exercised considerable restraint in the face of opportunities, because the seminary is perceived as one of the few remaining dependable resources for Christian nurture beyond the local congregation and the limited leadership experiences afforded in presbyteries.

What guides our selection of the programs that go beyond our degree-offering “wholesale” work? First, we have tried to be clear with everyone that the financial resources of the seminary are for the bread and butter of theological education—preparing pastors and educators for congregational leadership. We already stretch endowment resources to accomplish that mission, so all additional programs and partnerships should be self-sustaining. Insofar as possible, the “retail operations” should “pay rent” by attracting money for overhead, shared personnel and other financial needs.

We have adhered to this principle in almost every case—discontinuing programs that did not receive designated funds for support. When the parish nurse program had no more funds, we discontinued it. As promised resources for the center on aging did not materialize, we ceased its activities but maintain the benefit of having

a professor on aging on the faculty.

Second, and equally important, each associated program” offers real synergy with the core programs and mission. Project Burning Bush not only attracts students for future matriculation, it also affords internship experiences for current students and teaching opportunities to sharpen our skills with young people. The Institute for Reformed Theology gives invaluable experience to current students in working with pastors, educators and scholars in cooperative endeavors. The various associated programs all lift the image of Union-PSCE, sometimes regionally and sometimes nationally, permitting additional cultivation with donors and visibility for recruitment.

Third, and also equally important, each program must contribute to the ecosystem by being unavailable elsewhere as a resource for church and society.

Fourth, faculty from the seminary must give leadership to the programs, and the programs must be in accord with the general direction of our theological education. Benedictine analysts might say that programs must be accepted as good ones by the *consensus melior partes* (consensus of the better part) of the community.

Fifth, the associated programs are most effective when each supports the work of other associated programs and shares scarce resources to serve in more than one area.

In the seminary I serve—and, I am certain, in all the seminaries of North America—we pray that our decisions both keep faith with the churches that support us and nourish theological education for proclamation of the gospel.