

What I wish I'd known: Six students on the seminary experience

by [Michael Kirby](#)

This article appears in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue.

What have I learned that I wish I knew before I came to seminary? I wish I had known that I'd be enriched far beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge by learning *in community*, particularly in *this* community. By engaging scripture, theology, the church and the gospel through the eyes and perspectives of my fellow students, faculty and staff, I have experienced the Spirit moving among us, molding mere knowledge into something that, hopefully, approaches wisdom.

The flippant response is that I would have saved myself a very embarrassing moment if I had known that professor emeritus and theologian Shirley Guthrie—a Columbia Theological Seminary legend—is a man.

The gut response is to wish that I had actually known *less*. As a middle-aged deacon and elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who has spent a fair amount of the past 38 years in one church or another, I arrived at seminary with far too many opinions about how the church should be the church—from what constitutes proper worship to the appropriate roles of laity and clergy to the best kind of Christian education. Thirty months later, I understand that those opinions were preventing me from allowing the Holy Spirit to do a new thing, both in the church and in my future ministry.

But that doesn't really answer the question.

Ultimately, I wish I had known enough to have had realistic expectations of my seminary. I've had to learn that a seminary is not a congregation—no matter how faithful its board and administration, or brilliant and devoted its faculty, staff and students may be. Let me be clear: I love it here. I regularly experience this seminary community as one where the Spirit draws women and men together to love, nurture, support and serve God and one another—but that community is not the seminary.

Seminaries are unique institutions. While ideally their chief constituency is the church of Jesus Christ and their chief goal is to provide leaders for that church, in reality, seminaries serve many additional constituencies—denominational governing bodies, contributors, the faculty, the academy, alumni, ecclesial activists of every stripe, cranks, naysayers, students. Of all of these, only the students are transients, passing through in regular three- or four-year cycles. Paradoxically, we are both an essential “product” of the institution and, usually, its least influential constituency.

Recognizing this imposed humility is a hard lesson, but perhaps the process of building community within this context is the best training for future clergy—don’t we go from this place to “transient” positions in the institution that is the church? Perhaps our status here will help us to more selflessly and faithfully join the Holy Spirit in the ongoing mission of crafting Christ-centered communities of love, justice and peace within that institution.

— *Michael Kirby, a student at Columbia Theological Seminary.*

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he answered in part, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind.” In seminary, our minds are stimulated as we discuss Christology, epistemology, ecclesiology and many other “-ologies.” These are the most exciting topics (really!) and stimulate much thought. However, I did not realize that the very love of these subjects can actually deter us from loving the Object. We are called, after all, not to love thinking with our minds, but to *love God with our minds.*

As a United Methodist ministerial candidate, I am frequently asked by various committees and boards to describe my “call to ministry.” Like most of my fellow seminarians, I felt that my call contained a strong spiritual element. This element is fundamental to the decision to attend seminary in the first place. Why else would an engineer, a doctor, a retiree, a college student or a stay-at-home parent completely upset his or her life to attend? Seminary, however, presents the dangerous irony that we may subvert this same spiritual element in the very process of analyzing spirituality. Fortunately, this is not an inevitable process.

What I know now is that the very process of learning about God must be transformed into an intentional spiritual discipline of knowing God. Great professors teach about God, but knowing God comes only from the Holy Spirit. We can read great theology, yet we need to remember that “these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:10)—not through Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Barth

and Hauerwas. Paths to the depths of God are paved by Christian pioneers, but the way is lit by our relationship with God.

I could pore over records of my wife's life and talk about her with experts in psychology and women's studies. All this would be interesting, informative and enticing. I could spend a career, if someone would pay me, writing scholarly papers and giving edifying talks (sermons) on how we could better our lives by examining the example of my wife. Yet despite all this effort I would still not know her if I did not spend time *with* her.

Our theological questions can become more intense, deep and overwhelming in seminary. We spend our time trying to make the journey from the simple to the complex before we emerge with the simple again. If we pray, "Lord, let me know you while I study about you," we can transform seminary from learning to knowing. Then, we too can say with Job, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). Indeed, seminary requires great effort, energy and time in thinking about God. Christianity? That takes great effort, energy and time *with* God. One can be the most fascinating experience of your life. The other gives you life.

— *Douglas Fox, who is in his third year at Perkins School of Theology.*

I am up against the deadline for submitting this article because I have been scrambling to arrange my schedule in light of academic and family obligations, to keep up with copious amounts of reading and other assignments, to write a statement of faith and prepare forms for my upcoming annual consultation with denominational leaders. Of course I will travel to that meeting, after spending a week in Louisville learning more about the workings of the PCUSA's General Assembly, and three days attending lectures about the relationship between history and faith.

I wish I had realized before coming to seminary that there is so much more to this experience than managing study time, internships, family life and personal spiritual formation and growth. Yes, these are all major facets of the seminary experience. But I have also dedicated a lot of time and energy to the demands and requirements of the ordination process, and to life as a member of a connectional church. There have been reports to write, meetings to prepare for and attend, ordination exams to prepare for, and a whole system of polity to navigate in moving toward a first call in ministry.

Sometimes I have wished that I could simply focus on my family, the academic work and personal spiritual growth. Sometimes it seemed as if the additional demands related to ordination or involvement in the life of the denomination complicated or interfered with my preparation for ministry. But now I realize that these other aspects of my seminary experience have been critical dimensions of preparation for meaningful ministry. I have learned that seminary is not just about my intellectual endeavors and my personal life and growth.

In the last three years I have become a part of something that is much greater than me—the larger church which I have been called to serve in ministry. Establishing and maintaining connections with churches, presbyteries and their committees has connected me to the larger vision and ministry of the church. Investing time and effort into a larger faith community with a long tradition of polity and belief has given me the roots and foundation for my ministry.

These “extra” demands are often challenging, tiring, tedious and stressful. I wish I had known there would be so many. I especially wish I had known how important and enriching it would be to meet these demands and to become ever more rooted within the larger church. I wish I had known that being called to seminary (and beyond) is also about our corporate life as followers of Christ, our ministry together, holding one another accountable, supporting one another, and adding our voices and our actions to the chorus of witnesses both before and after us.

— *Lucy Harris, who is studying at Union-PSCE in Richmond, Virginia.*

What denomination . . . ?” is inevitably the third or fourth question asked when fellow divinity students meet, but I still don’t know how to answer it. Often as not, I stammer, “Er, . . . good question.” For a stretch last fall, I identified myself as a “Free Church-Baptist-Presbyterian-Episcopalian who’s dating an Orthodox-Methodist-Charismatic-Catholic.” Usually I claim to be a “Protestant mutt.”

Someone like me—who has been nurtured in congregations in several Christian traditions and has come to appreciate their distinctive forms of worship and theological emphases—might seem to be uniquely prepared for study in an ecumenical divinity school. In certain respects, however, it feels as if the divinity school isn’t prepared for me. The ecumenical model of “diversity with integrity” that we celebrate presumes that students already know what sort of Christians they are. Students are expected to bring the distinctive contribution of their own traditions to bear on their theological conversations. Instruction in the unique polity and history

of different traditions, and even vocational discernment and ministry formation, tends to take denominational identity for granted.

For me and for many of my peers, however, this model doesn't quite work. It's not that we have no sense of where we fit in the spectrum of Christian beliefs and practices. But our loyalties tend to lie more with particular congregations (congregations that may represent several different denominations) than with larger ecclesial structures. Maybe we're flighty commitment-phobes, trapped in a consumerist notion of religious choice. Maybe we're victims of lowest-common-denominator ecumenism, inadequately catechized in our confessional distinctives. Maybe we want to faithfully pursue our vocations in an increasingly postdenominational religious scene, but we're not quite sure how to do it. Maybe all of the above.

We have a lot in common with the parishioners we hope to serve, whose church affiliation is determined by many things other than denomination. Many faithful people are struggling to find the right church for their families in a new setting, and are wrestling with how to discern the appropriate criteria for their decision. They have the freedom and the burden to change religious identity with every move. Those of us considering a vocation in church ministry, however, have to be *something*—we have to make a choice, even if that choice is to be unaffiliated. At divinity school we find a myriad of resources for learning about various Christian traditions, but it's easy to complete an M.Div. degree without finding much help in evaluating the theological, cultural and personal dimensions that go into making a wise choice about one's own denominational affiliation. In a sense, the thing I most wish I knew before I began divinity school is something I *still* wish I knew—where in the church do I belong? In what context can I best serve? The last three years have aided me in this discernment, to be sure, but the ultimate answer remains an open question.

— *Rachel Maxson, a student at Yale Divinity School.*

Not long ago a young man asked me what he should do to prepare for seminary. I recommended he take the months before entering school to reread all his favorite books, the ones that made him love learning and language and theology. Then I told him to pick the best of those and bring them along to his dorm room to keep on the shelf as reminders of what and who had brought him to this place. I also told him to stock up on multivitamins.

I could have told him that seminary is hard, that not only are the academics rigorous, but the subject matter also connects with the deepest, loveliest and most troubled places of the human spirit. I could have told him to be prepared to pack new languages and terms and concepts into his brain, or to prepare to grow and suffer. I might have explained that everyone here would look confident and put-together, but that if he had the courage to admit his own fears and weaknesses, he would find a comrade at every table. I could have told him that the friends he would make here would astound him with their intelligence, compassion, mistakes and good humor, and that he would need them. I could have said that were he honest, he would question all he held true, and discover that God is truer and more faithful than he had ever imagined.

I considered admonishing him not to fear those who differ from him, but to listen for God's Spirit speaking through them and to relish the clashing of bright minds. I might tell him about a good coffee shop far from campus where he could hear what other, perhaps more normal, communities discuss. And I might have encouraged him to set up a counseling appointment for two months into the school year, since he would be wanting one by then anyway, along with his whole entering class.

But I told him to read and bring his favorite books. I also said: Just show up being you. Bring with you the things that have made you excited to minister in God's service. Bring with you your home, your ideas and hopes and even all your prejudices. This place, like the church of Christ, is made of people and their ideas, and each person contributes. So if you want to be prepared, think carefully before you come about who you are and what your best thoughts are. Then show up for the test. I was trying to tell him that seminary, like most of life, cannot be predicted or prepared for. What each person learns here is her own, and comes as a surprise. You walk into seminary hoping you know something, trusting you are led by God. You leave knowing you learned something more, but not everything. And you pray that as you leave, you will have to find more shelf space for all the new reminders of why you came in, and of Who is leading you out.

— *Christy Lang, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary.*

Each Advent season, I eagerly anticipate displaying my nativity scene. I've been collecting the figures since childhood, and I experience childlike wonder as I position each figure. Their faces stir my imagination; their awe-struck silence peaks my curiosity. This year when I got on my knees and gazed at the scene, my eyes focused on the Magi. As I near completion of my seminary journey, I identify with

these “wise men.” Like them, I am a sojourner, and their story offers wisdom as I reflect on my seminary journey.

For years, these priestly sages searched for something unexplainable. They yearned for . . . what, exactly? Peace? Fulfillment? Rest? In their restlessness, they gazed into crystals, searched tarot cards and maybe even called the psychic hotline. They read books and studied at far-off universities. And then they saw that mysterious light. Like many seminarians, they responded to God’s call away from the familiar, from “career advancement” and from their well-laid plans. They let go of their need to “make sense” and possess knowledge, and journeyed into the unknown. The Magi remind me that I need not have all the answers; they invite me to follow *the* answer. They encourage me to fully experience the journey. I wish I’d been there to experience their wonder and exhilaration in being led by the divine hand.

The Magi didn’t journey alone; they traveled in community. They did not respond to God’s call alone but navigated the route together. At seminary, I too have been nurtured by a community, by others who embody God’s love and hope. We have shared in a sacred journey, and encouraged each other when fears and doubts clouded our vision of God’s guiding light.

When they saw the child Jesus, the Magi bowed together before him and fell to their knees in corporate worship. They were transformed on their knees, and their encounter with the Living Word left them speechless. At times, my seminary experience has brought me to my knees and left me speechless. In those moments, I am transformed. Oh, that I could have shared the Magi’s experience, glimpsed this amazing love, embodied in community and experienced on my knees!

Finally, the Magi remind us that we are called to live as people of joy. Matthew 2 tells us that “when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy . . .” Theirs was the same joy experienced by the women who discovered the empty tomb. My seminary journey has enabled me to share this joy. Countless voices within the Christian tradition have inspired and challenged me, reminding me that ours is not a superficial joy, and that Christians are called to rejoice even in the midst of suffering. Seminary has offered me a language to communicate this joy to the world. I wish I could have known before I began—although I could not have fathomed—the joy that is found in the seminary journey.

—*Amanda Miller Garber, a student at Duke Divinity School*