Seminaries and the ecology of faith: An interview with Daniel Aleshire

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Daniel O. Aleshire was elected last year as executive director of the Association of Theological Schools. The primary purpose of the ATS, an organization of some 237 graduate schools of theology in the U.S. and Canada, is to improve theological education. An accrediting agency, it also offers programs and services to member institutions. ATS members represent a wide range of denominational affiliations and theological perspectives, including Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox schools of theology, both university-related divinity schools and free-standing seminaries.

From 1990 to 1996 Aleshire served as the ATS's associate director for accreditation, and from 1996 to 1998 as its associate executive director. He is also a coeditor, along with Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara G. Wheeler, and Penny Long Marler, of Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools*. In that book the authors looked closely at how seminary culture contributes to the education and formation of students. The two schools examined were pseudonymously named Evangelical Theological Seminary and Mainline Theological Seminary. His longstanding and close involvement with North American theological schools provides him with a unique perspective on shifts and developments in seminary education. We talked with Aleshire in the Pittsburgh offices of the ATS.*

Spiritual formation is not a term one would have typically heard at mainline seminaries 25 years ago, but now it's a subject of much discussion and activity. In 1996 the ATS even added spiritual formation to the criteria for seminary accreditation. What do you make of seminaries' current interest in this?

"Spiritual formation" is obviously a term borrowed from the Roman Catholic community, and it has a clearer meaning in that community. In mainline Protestant contexts it probably means three or four different things. On an elementary level, it refers to personal formation. Ministry is a relational kind of activity that requires certain interpersonal skills. A computer programmer or accountant may have had a religious awakening and perceived that he or she is called to the ministry, but that

person needs a whole set of interpersonal skills to be an effective minister—skills that may not have been so crucial in computer programming or accounting.

At another level, spiritual formation has to do with socialization. There's a lot to learn about being a conference-appointed United Methodist minister that isn't learned through taking the denominational polity class. Part of the seminary's task of spiritual formation is taking the older student who has thought about ministry only in a general way, or the recent convert to Christianity who knows relatively little about ministry within a denomination, and teaching them how to function within the context of a particular ecclesial community.

A third meaning of spiritual formation is related to the diverse religious backgrounds that students bring to seminaries—which includes none at all. Seminaries try to help students think about being Christian people in the world in a way that moves beyond their limited experiences either within a particular religious community or in the absence of one. Yet another way of thinking about formation has to do with how one matures in one's own sense of being Christian. What is growth in faith? How are persons who lead communities of faith spiritually centered? While these last two characterizations of spiritual formation reflect the most common use of this form, the activities in ATS schools that are part of spiritual formation frequently reflect the first two characterizations.

Is it the task of seminaries to help form students on all these levels?

A significant debate is going on now about just that question. ATS's accrediting standards are pushing schools to assume accountability in these areas. The ATS requires that member schools address the issue of spiritual formation in a manner appropriate to the school's context and tradition. Of course, we can't define that agenda. What formation means in the Unitarian context is dramatically different from what it means in the Southern Baptist context.

Why is spiritual formation such a high priority for seminaries?

Much of it is related to the kind of people who are coming to seminaries, and ultimately to changes in North American Christianity. According to the old conventional wisdom, the typical seminary candidate had been in church since baptism or before, and had been acculturated within a particular denomination to particular patterns of piety and theological understanding. Maybe this student had started thinking about ministry in high school or college, in which case, if the local

pastor knew it, the student was called upon to read scripture or lead public prayer or take responsibility for the devotions at a youth retreat. A congregational formation took place. Those who came to the seminary, therefore, were persons who had been thinking about ministry, who perhaps had served as part-time youth ministers while they were in college, and who had taken some preseminary courses in undergraduate school. A broad spiritual formation of the person who was to become a church leader was shared by the church and the seminary. The seminary's task was to, in a sense, deconstruct certain of the students' theological perceptions in order to reconstruct a more intellectually viable way of understanding their own sense of being persons of faith, as well as to deconstruct and reconstuct their understanding of life and ministry in a particular denominational context.

That's old conventional wisdom.

Yes. According to the new conventional wisdom, the typical seminary student is in his or her late 30s, is probably attending a church of a denomination in which she was not raised—even if she had been in church in childhood and in her adult years. This student probably did not think about a church vocation until recently, as a result of some kind of stirring, or a sense that what she could do in church is more rewarding than what she is doing with the rest of her life. For a variety of reasons, most of these students don't have the kind of formation that the church provided in an earlier time. The seminary may in fact be her point of entry into the faith tradition.

The seminary then has a choice. It can say, "We will provide students with an education in the disciplines of theological inquiry and other areas that pertain to the ministry, but it's the churches' responsibility to nurture them in leadership." Or it can say, "We have to assume part of the formation responsibility, because—if for no other reason—these students only have 20 career years left when they graduate."

Clearly, there has been a change in the ecology of ministerial call and formation. More of it is located in the life of the seminary, and the seminary is struggling to do a good job. The seminary is being asked to do things it really hasn't done much before. Seminaries are trying to figure out how to be appropriately rigorous intellectual environments, while at the same time they are being asked to provide remedial work on what it means to be a believer before God and a community of believers, and what it means to be, for example, a Presbyterian—that there are things called presbyteries that make certain kinds of decisions, and here's how you

participate in presbyterial life. Seminaries are not going to be able to do the job of spiritual formation as well as it was done by the church and the seminary together.

So seminaries should say to churches, "Don't place all the blame on us if a graduate doesn't meet your standards for a thoroughly formed and tradition-grounded student." Presumably, churches would have something to say to the seminary in return. Are you looking for a new, perhaps less adversarial, conversation between denomination, congregation and seminary?

I think there should be such a conversation. There is a tendency among Protestants—both mainline and evangelical—to lay at the doorstep of the theological school many of the problems they're perceiving in ministry. Maybe seminaries need to say to the church, "We're doing the best we can with the students that you send us and that our recruitment officers find." Those discussions don't go very far, though. Seminaries begin to look defensive.

And churches would probably counter that seminaries have lost sight of the requirements of the church.

They will say to seminaries, "If we do find good candidates for church leadership, we're not sure we want them to be exposed to some of the stuff you want to expose them to." I've seen ATS schools expose some students to everything that worries some denominations, and yet those students become deeply committed to ministry in the denominational context and are much more sturdy in their own sense of faith and commitment and in their sense of what the mission of the congregation ought to be. The reality is not nearly as adversarial as the rhetoric. But the antagonistic rhetoric exists for underlying reasons.

So what is the deeper issue that causes the rhetoric to run as hot as it sometimes does?

Part of it is related to profound worry over the dislocation of mainline Protestantism in North American culture. Pastors are working as hard as, if not harder than, their predecessors 50 years ago, with fewer visible results and with less social prestige. The pastor says, "I'm doing what they taught me, but look what's happening"—or isn't happening. That creates anxiety, not only for pastors, but for congregations, denominations, and seminaries. It's true that new kinds of congregational paradigms are emerging, and the evangelical seminaries in particular are paying a lot of

attention to those new forms. But a school is always a conserving environment. It takes time for innovations of congregational life to find a response in a seminary's curriculum. There's always a tension between the most avant-garde congregational life and the education provided by seminaries.

Is it safe to say, at the very least, that relationships need mending between seminaries and denominations and between seminaries and congregations?

Without a doubt. Seminaries are derivative environments; they are creatures of the church, broadly understood. If every denomination in North America ceased to exist next year, there would be little reason for ATS schools to continue. A few could carry on the intellectual inquiry defined by the historic theological disciplines. But seminaries were started by denominations and religious movements. Historically they function best when their students have emerged out of these denominations and religious movements.

But the seminary now has become responsible for finding potential clergy. In addition to educating on behalf of the church, and doing spiritual formation on behalf of the church, it is also enlisting students on behalf of the church. But remember, seminaries are not just recruiting students, they're recruiting religious leaders. And in the end, theological schools are not very good recruiters of religious leaders. Communities of faith need to call out their leaders.

I often wonder if congregations are attending to their responsibilities for church leadership. What happens in a good, mainline congregation when the bright, talented, able high school junior says, "I'm thinking about ministry"? According to current conventional wisdom, many people will respond by saying, almost by reflex,"Are you sure?" rather than, "That would be wonderful." Which of those two responses the high school junior hears is terribly important for the quality of work that seminaries can do. The systems that nurtured potential leaders, and the circumstances that led people to say, "That would be wonderful," have changed.

How do you explain such hesitancy about the ministry? Earlier you referred to the decline of social prestige associated with ministry. Is that an important factor?

Prestige is an issue, but only in a tangential way. Pastoral work has become very hard work, and many pastors, I think, wonder if they should encourage others to

journey down that path. The generation that entered ministry in mainline Protestant denominations after World War II has been the focus of much attention. The people of this generation were educated in the early-to-mid-1950s, and lived out their entire ministries during a time when the denominations of which they are a part lost approximately 30 percent of their membership. During their careers they have seen wonderful congregations with rich programming undergo significant transitions in their communities—transitions in numbers and in levels of commitment. Those experiences, some of them quite painful, may prompt some to be cautious in encouraging others to enter the ministry.

Mainline Protestants have also asked a lot of questions over the last 30 years about their fundamental religious vision, and ministry is something that grows out of religious vision. What is the religious vision that compels people to do the hard work of ministry? That's a central question. The Peace Corps brings in volunteers by billing itself as offering one of the toughest jobs around. I wonder how clearly the church is articulating a compelling religious vision that the world needs and that inspires young people to take up the ministry despite inconveniences and a growing lack of social standing.

More than evangelicals and Roman Catholics, mainliners have raised important questions about the Christian faith. But the vocation of the ministry requires a persuasive religious vision to which one gives oneself—a vision that requires both critical questions and passionate affirmations. The church has to form and inculcate that vision. Theological education, at its best, is the work of deconstructing and reconstructing these visions; it's not very good at inculcating them, although it does that sometimes.

The relationship between seminary and denomination touches on another important recent development in seminary education—the trend toward contextual education. Emory University's Candler School of Theology, for example, is undertaking a sweeping overhaul of its curriculum in order to integrate theological studies with Christian practices, and it has instituted a new contextual education program. Presumably, one of the contexts for such an education is the congregation. What do you make of this trend?

Good theological education is always multicontextual. One important context is the school. An educational environment and resources are required to learn the syntax and the rules of a language so that people can study ancient texts at a deeper level.

A school environment is also best suited for other areas of the seminary curriculum in which students are accountable for reading and discussion—for a certain kind of learning related to texts, analysis and reflection. One very important context of contextual education, therefore, is the theological school as school.

But that's never enough. Students can't learn what they need to learn in an M.Div. program only in a traditional school environment. They also have to be immersed in a context in which practices of religious leadership occur. The disciplines that compose seminary education have as their goal practices that constitute the activities of ministry and religious leadership. Seminaries, then, must be aware of the context in which ministerial leadership is exercised, and of how the continuous and divergent questions that arise in those contexts are articulated and understood.

In many ways the contextualization movement is a de-disciplining movement. That is to say, theology and church history and New Testament don't run as separate streams in the life of the church. When a minister runs up against a group of people who are fussing over the inclusion of new members who represent minorities in the community, the biblical text and the theological tradition come together in the context of who has power and who doesn't have power in the congregation. Contextual education means helping students understand how ways of knowing related to the disciplines become realized in the contexts in which they're going to have leadership responsibilities. Seminary students, at least M.Div. students, are not learning the New Testament so they can be New Testament knowers. They are learning New Testament so that they can exercise religious leadership—preaching and teaching and helping persons in their corporate and individual faithfulness—in light of their understanding of scripture.

To go back to the issue of formation: the contextual education that most schools are talking about is also a faithful response to students who are uncontextualized. There was a time when seminaries could do more work in a classroom because the students had an intimate, firsthand knowledge of church—they had been there and had stories to bring to the seminary. In the Baptist seminary my father-in-law attended in the 1930s, students had to be ordained to be admitted. Ordination was the responsibility of the local community, and the seminary wasn't going to take students in for postbaccalaureate theological study if they hadn't been confirmed by the church. What those students needed was a classroom.

We now have a generation of students whose classroom needs to be the church. Many of those within the current generation of students have had little leadership experience in churches. They represent the complete opposite of those Baptist students of the 1930s.

Contextual education is also a response to a theological issue. Many theologians now argue that substantive theological issues emerge out of practice, and that, on one level, theology is fundamentally unsystematic. In the context of the messiness and the complexities of real life, it's unreal to focus on tidy intellectual partitions that permit certain ideational structures to exist. I'm not trying to discipline-bash here. I affirm disciplines and sustained, scholarly attention to specific areas of inquiry. But virtually everyone in the academic world agrees that the disciplines need to be complemented by interdisciplinary and contextual learning.

I want to offer one caution about contextual education. I notice an almost naïve perception—especially on the part of those who are mad at the seminary, for whatever reason—that if you could just get students educated in the congregation rather than the theological school, everything would be better. No, it would just be different. Also, such a radically congregation-based education would contribute to the development of a whole new set of deficiencies, and remedying them would probably lead to a shift back to the schools. In fact, historically, theological education moved from the cathedral church to the academy.

Given the changes you are talking about in the areas of spiritual formation and contextual education, how long should students be in seminaries? Is the standard three-year M.Div. program sufficient?

Given the needs that exist now, and all the resources in the world, I could make a compelling case for a five-year M.Div. program. The first two years would be an intensely residential educational environment and would include education in the text and tradition of the believing community. Having schooled students in a hot-house environment of the disciplines—theological, biblical, historical, philosophical, ethical, sociological, behavioral scientific—I would place students in full-time ministry for nine months a year over three years. For three months during each of those years they would return to the seminary and take what would be, cumulatively, the third year of the M.Div.

No matter how you contextualize education, when the seminary temporarily shifts students into the church, it's a very different experience than being at Mt. Pisgah over time, or at First Community where 30 percent of the people are related to each other and where church conflict is family conflict. The quality of contextual education would be heightened if students brought back to the seminary issues relating to the preaching, teaching, counseling, and administrating that they encountered over time in congregational ministry. They could then, over a three-year period, work through those problems and questions with mentors, professors and peers. But they would do it having had a foundation in theological schooling and in the congregation where faith is practiced. There is a wisdom related to practice that is intellectually as rigorous as the wisdom related to the disciplines.

Of course, this educational vision is probably neither economically nor practically viable. Supervision would have to be provided during the years in ministry for the sake of the candidate and for the protection of the congregation. Congregations would have to get by without their pastor for two and a half months every summer.

Are you then talking about an impossible possibility?

Some schools have developed a shortened version of the program I've outlined. Every student in a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America does an in-ministry year between his or her second and third year in seminary. The ELCA has a four-year M.Div. program. Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, a United Methodist school, has had an in-ministry year for a long time. I don't want to say that such an integrated seminary education is impossible. It would be more possible with a younger student body who are more movable. It's less possible when persons are starting seminary at age 50.

You mentioned economic viability. How does the drop in funding from denominational sources, which makes seminaries more tuition dependent, affect their recruitment policies and admissions criteria? Can seminaries afford to turn down students?

In the average ATS school, about a third of the income comes from tuition, a third from earnings from endowments and a third from an annual fund, which includes gifts from the denomination. So most ATS schools are not making it or breaking it on the basis of tuition. (The typical independent undergraduate college in the U.S. is 65 percent or more tuition-driven.)

Having said that, tuition is a bigger factor than ever for most seminaries. Are some schools admitting the wrong kinds of students? Yes—for two reasons, neither of them directly related to economics. While I don't think any ATS school is unscrupulous, seminaries can stretch their pastoral imaginations concerning how qualified potential students may be. Most schools would like to be more selective on academic criteria, but there's another issue to take into consideration: What are the proper criteria for excluding potential candidates from theological study? Is it just intellectual ability? We all know persons who are academically talented but who are less skilled with people and don't do very well in ministry.

Given the personal, intellectual and religious factors that must be considered, it's not always an easy call, especially when there is less contact between church and seminary. In the older system, someone from a church could tell a concerned seminary administrator, "We've tried 14 different things with this individual in our church and it never works." Now we don't have as rich a prior formation tradition to rely on in admissions, so I think schools are admitting students who ought not to be admitted. If schools could figure out who should be refused admission, they would do so primarily for moral and religious but also for economic reasons. The students who are admitted to theological schools but shouldn't have been frequently end up costing the school more than they contribute in tuition.

We've been tossing around the term "religious leadership." It's what we want seminaries to produce. Perhaps we should give the words greater substance.

Communities of faith, like most social systems, have historically identified individuals who would help them do their work. For me, that's what religious leadership is. Notions of religious leadership are articulated differently; in some communities it is defined more sacerdotally, in other denominational settings it's understood much more functionally. But in all these settings religious leadership has to do with congregations looking to certain persons to help them understand and claim what they are doing as a religious community, to provide them with the support and encouragement they need to get their work done as a community of faith, and to celebrate with them as they do this work.

That's a fairly process-oriented description. Could we, perhaps, get such a leader from Harvard Business School?

Religious leaders foster a relationship with God and an understanding of God's purposes within a community. That's not just an administrative or managerial skill. That requires a theological vision and an understanding of the religious vocation of the community. On the basis of such a theological vision religious leaders call people to work on behalf of the community and to give their time and money to this work. The community looks to someone to help it do all this.

I don't think that the religious leader is an enabler who's job is to help the community do what it has already decided to do. The leader, as part of his or her theological vocation, is called to help the community decide what its task is. The religious leader is able to help the religious community go about its task in ways that are appropriate to its religious vision.

There is virtually no social community that doesn't somehow call out leaders. The Democratic and Republican parties scour the countryside for candidates; General Motors looks carefully at graduates and persons within the company for leadership. All social systems depend on leadership. And religious life depends on a particular kind of leadership that isn't just a composite of skills that would make a good general manager or vice-president. Religious communities must understand that they need leadership—a particular kind of leadership. They understand this at a lay level; they elect officers every year. But they also need theologically trained, interpersonally able people who have their own sense of what it means to be persons of faith, who have the capacity to invite a congregation to think about its being a community of faith. Ultimately the task of ATS schools is to cultivate persons who are authentically religious and who are able in their respective communities and contexts to exercise leadership.

It seems that with the emphasis on spiritual formation, the move toward contextual education, the need to respond to a very different generation of students, along with the responsibility to teach courses in theology, Bible and so on, the seminary has a lot on its table. Presumably this means that the seminary faculty has a lot on its table. Are faculty equipped to meet these challenges?

According to the old wisdom, ATS schools during the 1950s were overpopulated with persons whose primary vocation was ministry, but who had been recruited to the academic world of seminary education. The perception existed that ATS faculty were not sufficiently scholarly. I think the work that Barbara Wheeler and her colleagues

have been doing at the Auburn Center suggests that the younger generation of faculty tend more to be educated as theological scholars but may be less experienced in the activities of ministerial leadership than the previous generation. Earlier, ATS faculties contained ministers whom we had to help as scholars. Now we have scholars whom we have to help think about the activities of ministry. Teaching theology at a seminary may not be different in content from a similar course taught in a religious studies program, but its educational goal is certainly different.

Faculty, therefore, need to understand the contexts in which students are going to use the information taught in the classroom. They need to raise questions about the seminary's educational goals, and the impact they have upon the way biblical studies or theology or Christian ethics is taught. I don't think such an adjustment is an insurmountable problem. ATS faculty are very bright, well-intentioned people who care about their students and their disciplines. Caring about one's discipline is not a minor matter. Anyone who cares about a discipline is interested in how that discipline lives itself out. To have seminary faculty with that level of dedication is important.

Caring about one's students and one's discipline is not the same thing as caring about the church. We've talked about vocation with regard to seminary students bound for the pastoral ministry. Shouldn't we also talk about the vocation of the theological educator?

Yes. Barbara Wheeler's recent study of ATS faculties shows that by and large they're a churchy group. At least 85 percent of them report being involved in patterns of denominational or congregational service (on average 15 days a year). It's a misperception that the faculty in ATS schools do not care about the church. They may not be as experienced in congregational ministry as other leaders are, but that difference in experience shouldn't be interpreted as not caring about the church. Because faculty may not have been pastors or associate pastors or directors of Christian education simply means that seminaries and other institutions have to help them both broaden and sharpen their understanding of the issues and challenges of these roles.

In 1996 the ATS for the first time articulated some things about theological scholarship. The pre-1996 accrediting standards did not say anything specific about what theological scholarship is or what it involves. The 1996 standards say that scholarship involves teaching, learning and research. Good scholarship always

includes these three components. The standards also say that research must attend to the academic community, the ecclesial community and the broader public. So seminary scholarship is work that is related to the academic community, but it is not just academy-related research. Nor is it just research that benefits the church community. The scholarship done in seminaries should address broader public issues. A theological faculty may place different emphases on different parts of the scholarly enterprise based on its internal dynamics—of promotion, tenure and so forth. But according to the ATS, scholarship within its schools requires teaching, learning and research that benefits the church, the academy and the public.

A key development issue is helping faculty learn how to write more convincingly to church audiences. Most younger seminary faculty are trained to write for and to academic audiences. William Placher's recent article in the Century suggested—rightly, I think—that mainline Protestants don't have a body of theological literature aimed at the laity. The ATS has to find ways to assist faculty in making their work more available, and to help schools develop internal structures for encouraging such work. Will seminaries support and reward a faculty member who, for example, writes a good book about who Jesus was that, while it may not be groundbreaking research, is read widely and becomes the basis for a lot of study groups in mainline Protestant congregations? That's a faculty development issue that directly involves how one understands the vocation of the theological faculty.

What issues of theological education keep you up at night? What should we be most concerned about when we think about seminary education?

Finances, the quality of students, perspectives on faculty—these are important issues, but ultimately the problems they represent are annoyances. They're the things that can be fixed. If the church becomes unconvinced of its religious vision, that's something the seminaries can't fix. Christianity is represented by rich and diverse expressions in North America, and each community, each tradition, possesses an authentic, centering, powerful, culture-changing vision of the gospel. I do worry, however, that the community of faith, or some communities of faith, will in effect say that, while the gospel message is nice, it may not matter all that much.

If that happens, those communities will not produce good leaders. They will not create the kind of rich contexts out of which theological education emerges and in which it flourishes. Schools can find the money to train leaders, and they will work with the faculty and students to do the necessary development and education, but if

a broadly based religious vision is lacking, then theological educators become curators.

I can't state this too strongly. Theological schools, to the extent that they train and educate religous leaders, are dependent upon the religious vision of broader religious communities. I believe there is an absolutely compelling liberal Protestant vision, a Roman Catholic vision and probably a postdenominational vision. This society, which is struggling with enormous problems, needs to hear all those versions articulated in passionate and intellectually compelling ways, and it needs to see them practiced in ways that are faithful to each. If that happens, theological schools are going to get all the good students they need.