

Seminary scandals

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

October 14, 2014

When I served a church with a columbarium, I imagined where I wanted my ashes. It's morbid, I know. But it's a professional hazard. It's the sort of thought that we have when we bury people so often. I want to be spread in nature. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. I want to become a part of the life and soil of the pulsing ground. But then I knew there was so much of me that was tied up in institutions, and there might be a time when family would want to go to a place to remember. So I imagined my seminary.

I tell that little story, so you can understand the importance of seminaries in the life of a pastor. Of course, different people have different experiences, but for most of us, it's a place full of revelation. Our faith was dismantled and put back together. Worlds opened and languages became known to us. We had this book that we had been reading all of our lives, but it suddenly had new heft, depth and meaning. We struggled with our history and understood new resonance in our liturgies. We made friends who would carry us through those days of learning, as well as through the years of professional challenge to come.

So, it's always devastating to read about seminaries on the verge of collapse or scandal. There is the everyday stuff of seminaries trying to cope with the changing nature of the church, understand their life and mission when many of their students leave with debt, but they might not leave with a pastoral position.

But in the last couple of weeks, we have heard about scandals that not only affect the lives of those who are closely related to the institutions, but ripple out with reverberations that affect us all. In one aspect, they both have to do with the power of Seminary Boards and Presidents. I don't have time to go into both scandals in depth. I have no inside track. I only know what has been reported.

The first is the [firing of eight General Theological Seminary professors](#), who asked for a meeting with their Board of Trustees. Faculty reported that the President and

Dean, Rev. Kurt Dunkle, used racist and vulgar language (i.e., referring to Asians as “slanty eyed” and remarking to a female faculty member that he “loves vaginas”). The faculty went on strike until they could have a meeting. The board fired them instead of meeting with them. The Board maintains that they did not fire them, but accepted the faculty’s resignations.

There are only ten full-time faculty positions at the seminary, and the board fired eight, assumingly evicting them from their homes with seeming disregard to labor laws, academic tenure, or the students. Students, who have invested years of their lives in learning, who have taken out student loans, are now stuck with a poorly stitched together patchwork of unprepared adjunct faculty.

The second is the admission of Andover Newton Theological School’s President, the Rev. Martin Copenhaver, that he had an [affair](#). Copenhaver was asked by a third party to confess it to the board of Andover Newton Theological School, and he did. The confession came before the Inauguration service. Copenhaver said that he would be willing to resign, but the board of the seminary thought that he should go ahead and be inaugurated.

Rev. Copenhaver has written for the *Christian Century*. I have read his work and met him. He is a lovely man who served ANTS for years on the board. I really want to look the other way. I’m like most people. I don’t want to go dredging into someone else’s muck. No one is perfect. We are all human. But for the grace of God... Yet I also know that there are implications here for the larger church that we need to think about, apart from my fondness of Copenhaver.

[Rev. Victoria Weinstein](#), an alumna, has looked at different angles of this. There are a lot of important questions in her post. To engage in an affair, there has to be a web of deceptions that one has to spin. She is concerned with a seminary president’s ability to raise money in this situation.

Another question has to do with the relationship between the seminary and the Church (large C, meaning denominations). Churches started seminaries. People who are heavily invested in Church have funded these institutions. Churches entrust their candidates to seminaries so that they might be equipped to pastor, teach, and lead us. Since Dunkle and Copenhaver are ordained ministers, should the Church be consulted? Should the boards listen to our denominations? Of course, the lines are blurry. Boards and Churches are often members of one another. But I’m wondering

about the relationship on an official capacity, should there be more mutuality in place when making such major decisions? Decisions that could have a major impact on the seminary's future viability?

Churches have worked hard to make sure that standards in place, particularly when it comes to women, people of color, and a variety of sexual orientations. If the reports are valid, Dunkle has acted far outside of the Church's professional standards. Should a seminary president (who is also ordained) be held to the same standards that we expect of the pastors?

Churches have worked hard to make sure that standards are in place when it comes to sexual relationships. We all have friends and loved ones who have been caught in scandals. Forgiveness and love are extremely important. The Church has figured out ways in which pastors are cared for and brought into reconciliation with their community and calling. This looks different in different circumstances. Sometimes the person needs to step down from pastoral duties, consent to spiritual direction, or go to therapy. Pastors work to make amends with their families and their communities.

In both cases, it seems like there has been a disregard of the Church. The wisdom that we have built up, the investments that we have made in these institutions, the students we have entrusted to their care have been ignored. (Unless, of course, there are things that are not being reported, conversations that I don't know about.) The leadership has acted outside the standards that we have set up. And so all of this has left me wondering—should we, as denominations, be asking for more accountability from our seminaries? Should seminaries acquiesce more to denominational standards of ethics, labor practices, and reconciliation?

(Edited on 10/16: An earlier version had a claim that was not substantiated and so it was deleted.)