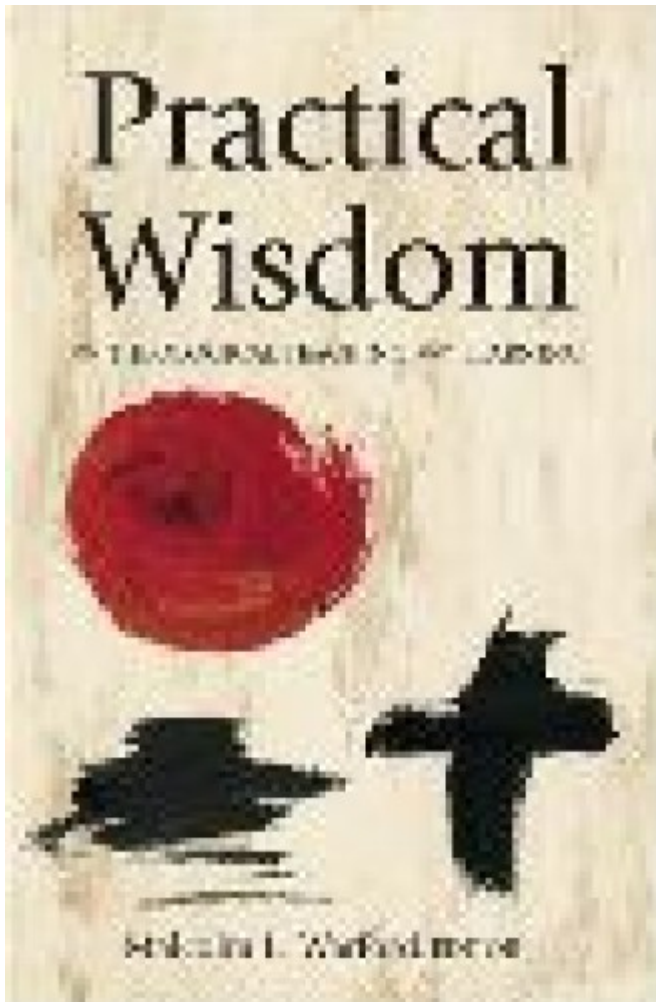


Practical Wisdom

reviewed by [Carol E. Lytch](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Practical Wisdom: On Theological Teaching and Learning

Malcolm L. Warford, ed.

Peter Lang

I believe I had a rare experience in my doctoral program in theology. I was given a seminar on the art of teaching. Often the challenge of mastering a discipline is so

great that no attention is paid to this main activity of the theological professor's vocation. I still remember a comment that was made during the seminar: "Teaching is imparting knowledge; helping people to learn means teaching them to teach themselves." That valuable distinction became increasingly important to me as I entered the teaching profession. *Practical Wisdom: On Theological Teaching and Learning* offers theological educators the opportunity to reflect on their vocation.

This collection of essays is the fruit of conversations among faculty representatives from 35 seminaries who participated in a Lilly Endowment-funded project called the Lexington Seminar. At multiple summer meetings in Maine beginning in 1999, participants presented case studies and gleaned lessons from analysis and dialogue with colleagues from other schools. This book captures the best of the conversation about a variety of topics: the vocation of teaching, the changing context of theological education, and practical guidelines for teaching and learning. Authors represent Catholic, mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant institutions, as well as various racial and ethnic minority perspectives.

The volume is rich with provocative statements and nuggets of wisdom: "Teachers prepare students for an unknown future, and neither teachers nor students should forget that they do not learn in order to know; rather, they know in order to learn, which is always the forward movement in real education," writes Raymond Brady Williams.

In theological education, academic learning is complemented by the critical task of formation to cultivate the spiritual depth of character that is needed for ministry's multiple demands. Victor Klimoski concludes that formation is "about processes and practices that sharpen one's attentiveness." To have its transformative effect, he says, it "cannot be relegated to a chaplain or the pastoral care office but must flow throughout the institution and find expression in the classroom as well as the chapel."

The stories are rich, especially Stephen Ellingson's description of curriculum revision at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. With colorful and frank portrayals of the struggle to create honest and engaged dialogue about change, he documents how those involved in the revision succeeded in forging a more cohesive faculty and a more integrated curriculum. In the wake of the 9/11 crisis, the language of scarcity and fear initially dominated their sessions. Over time, however, they shifted to a more positive focus on the institution's strengths. Movement toward incremental

change in both the curriculum and the institution was achieved despite many obstacles.

A recurring motif in these essays is the “then and now” scenario. In the past, students were better prepared academically, more formed within their traditions and more homogenous. They resided on campus instead of commuting, were less distracted by part-time jobs and family life, and were more committed to the pastoral vocation. The changed reality of today’s student body challenges theological educators to transform themselves to better serve this new population. The authors address the contemporary issues of online education, demographic diversity, assessment of outcomes, and the changing nature of ministry as Christianity’s status in American society alters.

This is a text for faculty members who care about helping students learn as much as they care about imparting knowledge of their subject area, and it is an ideal text for a faculty retreat. Victor Klimoski recommends that seminaries devote six days each year to discussions of teaching and learning because “substantive change in teaching and learning—indeed, in institutional life generally—will not occur until sustained conversations become integral to faculty life.” We may not hold our discussions in a peaceful seaside setting in Maine, but we can enter into the practical wisdom of these important conversations.

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