

Theological Education as Formation in Wisdom.

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A. Three Conversations about the Character of Theological Education.

Over the past 25 - 30 years, there have been at least three on-going conversations about the character of theological education. I am going to summarize these conversations and suggest that taken together they provide us with a compelling vision for theological education as formation in wisdom.

1. The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education.

The line “the fragmentation and unity of theological education” is the subtitle of a seminal book published by Edward Farley in 1983, entitled, *Theologia*.¹ I became the Dean of a theological seminary in the Philippines in 1985, and this book was just then launching an huge soul-examination within the standard approaches to theological formation, most of which were then simply being taken for granted. All of us involved in the administration of theological schools were reading this book and debating its content.

Two things stand out for me in Farley’s analysis and proposal, in this book and in his subsequent publications. First, his critique of the standard approach to theological disciplines that he speaks of as fragmenting theological education into four disciplines, Scripture, Theology, History and Pastoral Practice); he considers this fragmentation in theological study to be devastating to how women and men are formed for ministry in the church.

And second. He launches an attack on “clericalism” as a goal of theological formation, insisting that the first aim of theological education is not pastoral skills and biblical knowledge that is shared through these skills. And he planted the seeds that led his successors to speak of wisdom as potentially both the integrating element and goal of theological education.

A second benchmark voice and publication is that of David Kelsey, most notably in his *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological About a Theological School*.² This book came out just as I was moving into a deanship of a theological seminary in Canada, in the early 1990’s. If the 1980s were marked for us in theological education by discussions of Farley’s book and proposals; Kelsey’s work was a subject of much conversation in the 1990’s and early into the last decade.

Referencing Farley, Kelsey proposed that the church, specifically the congregation and congregational practices, could and should form the unity of theological education. God is known, he insisted, in community; and the community that defined this “knowing” is the community that is the gathering of the faithful as a congregation of God’s people.

And yet, he also picked up on the theme of wisdom, and proposed that there are four key issues or dimensions of formation in wisdom. He observed that in the history of the church there were diverse understandings and thus approaches to wisdom and thus to formation for religious leadership in congregations, namely: contemplation, discursive reasoning, the ordering of the affections and the actions or virtuous behavior of the Christian. And he observed that each generation or era in the church puts the focus in a different place.

Contemplation dominated early centuries and assumed that if we are to know God and be a wise people, it will come through a contemplative vision of God, which he noted often came at the expense of both the public square and the active life.

Discursive reasoning, Kelsey observed, was the aim of theological education that dominated late-Medieval and early modern approaches to doing theology.

The approach that emphasized the affections was that which Kelsey suggests typified the approach to theology and formation of the Puritans, the Wesleyan-Methodists and later the rise of the Pentecostal movement. [and in a biting aside, he suggests that schools in this tradition “are located in a cultural context marked by the ‘triumph of the therapeutic.’”³

And then, fourthly, he spoke of the inclination to come to wisdom through action. And while he identifies this stream as evident in Franciscan emphases on ‘praxis’, the most influential version of this approach more recently is that of liberation theologies, most notably those voices that link wisdom with the proactive identification with the marginalized and the oppressed and the consequent call to social justice.

While Kelsey affirmed of all four, it would seem that his own social location, within a divinity school of a university, left him inclined to privilege “discursive reasoning” as the anchor for this formative process. And yet he nevertheless affirmed that the aim of theological education is formation in some kind of wisdom, even if in different contexts and for different chapters in the life of the church this wisdom was construed differently, indeed perhaps very differently, depending on how the four – contemplation., discursive reasoning, the affections and actions – were interrelated.⁴ Further, he rightly located wisdom within the dynamics and practices of congregational life and thereby affirmed that wisdom will look and feel different in diverse contexts and settings. The “unity” of theological education does not mean the end of diversity and particularity; he affirmed that the “way to the generally relevant and the universally true passes through the particular and concrete”.⁵ And thus he recognized the need for social and cultural analyses of congregations.

Like Farley, he too launched a critique of the clerical model of theological education, observing that such an approach is both reductionistic and ineffective. It defines theology by roles played (reductionistic); it cultivates a one-sided pragmatic view of theological reflection.

And then also, it is simply not an effective way to prepare for congregational leadership because skills have a short life span; social and cultural factors affect the development of the church and changes in the church soon make the skills learned in seminary outdated.⁶

Yes, we need to move from theology to practice; and yes, we need to develop skills. But when theological formation is “reduced” to training in capacity, it is ineffective. We need to cultivate a theological vision for ministry that can undergird the practices and foster the capacity for learning in-ministry, so that skill development can respond to the context and circumstances of congregational life. And thus Kelsey argues: “It is precisely in being schooled in a way that is governed by an apparently nonutilitarian . . . overarching goal . . . to understand God . . . that persons can best be prepared to provide church leadership “.⁷

Then in 2006 and 2007 two publications came out that have further deepened the conversation about wisdom as the goal or unity fo theological formation – providing us with yet another key benchmark in this conversation: Daniel J. Treier’s *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (GR: Eerdmans, 2006); and, David F. Ford’s *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (UCambridge, 2007). It is noteworthy to me that they come of different social locations from that of Kelsy, with Treier at Wheaton College and Ford at Cambridge in the UK. Both seem to be less bound by the concern of Kelsey to appease the standards expectations of higher education and learning of the American university.⁸

Teier writes from the conviction that theology is essential to the mission and ministry of the church; and more, that this task is the work of wisdom, a wisdom that is marked by an authentic engagement with our contemporary context, for the truth proclaimed by the church is “public” truth. It is neither private or secret, but truth, wisdom, articulated for a particular cultural, social and ideological context. He is quite explicit that his agenda is to understand theological formation as formation in wisdom; and so he establishes his argument by a thorough outline of the place of wisdom in the Scriptures, with special attention given to

Proverbs 3:13 - 18. And he demonstrates that wisdom can provide the church with the unifying element that is needed for theological education. The substantive contribution of this his book is the way in which he provides the reader with this comprehensive analysis of the place of wisdom in biblical revelation.

But then, as Treier notes, it is one thing to say that the end of theological education is wisdom; but then we need to ask: what is the “material content” of this wisdom?⁹ And for Treier, that content, arising from his extended theological interpretation of wisdom, is the knowledge of God, by the Spirit, in and by the Scriptures. And this naturally leads him to probe what it means to read the Scripture as Scripture, as he argues for the unity of the Scriptures, a post-critical understanding of rationality, the insistence that theory and practice must inform each other and, finally, to the conclusion that we can and must speak of a theological interpretation of the Bible.

2. Theological Education and the “Practice of Theology”

A second distinct conversation, distinct but surely overlapping with the conversation benchmarked by the voices mentioned above, has focussed on what could be called the *practice* of theology. David Kelsey spoke about the “practices” of a congregation; others joined him in this conversation and made this a primary focus of how we are formed in the faith,.

The key contributions have been voices like Craig Dykstra, Miroslav Volf, Greg Jones and Dorothy Bass.¹⁰ They note how theology is only formed within us if it is practiced; and that, therefore, practice is the essential and necessary counterpart to theological and spiritual formation. It is through practice that virtue is cultivated. Volf, Bass and Dykstra have been key voices, but they have also facilitated the conversation and served as editors and coordinators for the contribution of others, including Gregory Jones who has given particular attention to spiritual practices within theological communities and schools.

They speak of spiritual practice as that which Christians do, together, by way of formative routines and actions – repeated, routinized: signifiers of faith and cultivators of faith. It is not merely a good deed done or a ritual observed, but the routine observance that marks Christian identity and fosters that identity. They are acts of response to the God who is present to the world in Christ and in the Spirit.

A primary catalyst for this conversation was the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, and the publication of his book *After Virtue*.¹¹ MacIntyre speaks of social practices that foster a particular set of dispositions and thus of a way of being (i.e. behaviour). And what these Christian theologians have done is to take MacIntyres understanding of the place of practice in forming virtue and see it through a distinctly Christian and theological lens. And they have done so on the conviction that we must not separate thought from action. They insist that word and deed, thought and action, form and reform each other; and that certain defined and intentional practices foster this interface between word and deed, between confession and behaviour.

Thus there are two sides to this. First, we need to be intentional in the practicing of our faith. In the move from confession to action, it is “practices” that give us tracks on which to act in a manner that is consistent with our confession. Thus, for example, the practice of triune worship reflects and expresses our conviction that God is triune. And the practice of hospitality reflects a conviction that we are to show hospitality. If you say something matters, it should and will be evident in practice. If prayer matters, then you will pray.

What matters most to you in life will be evident in the practices by which that which matters is “tracked” into the contours and routines and rhythms of daily, weekly life and the cycle of the year and, indeed, the seasons of life. And we do these whether we feel like or not. We do not act spontaneously, but deeply into routines and practices by which our deepest convictions – values – are formed in us and become virtues.

If we believe God is good; we will give thanks.

But then also this whole discussion has further affirmed that even as understanding informs practice, even so, practice informs understanding, so that: we do not really know that God is Triune until and unless we worship God as triune and that it is through the practice itself that this knowledge is cultivated. It is through doing hospitality that we come to see and understand its character. And, further, that the ways in which practices form our hearts and minds is precisely in their repetition. It is in the routine and, indeed, ritual observance – the practice – that what we believe is actually embodied and thus know.

Thus, our practices matter! If our worship is christomonic (rather than trinitarian), or narcissitic, it will cultivate such perspectives or dispositions. Bad or theological weak or theologically thin practices, particularly in the context of worship, do not form us in wisdom. Or, worse, they distort understanding and practice.

And thus, if I were to say that I cannot pray because I have no faith, these authors would urge me to pray so that faith might grow in me. The effect between understanding and practice is iterative. If I believe God is good, I will give thanks; but more, in giving thanks, I enter, slowly but surely, into a deeper awareness of and appreciation of the goodness of God.

Or, how do we come to an appreciation that God is Triune? Could it be that a fundamental means by which this happens is through baptism and the Lord's supper? That, indeed, our practice should reflect our understanding of the nature of God and that then could it not also be said that we do not really "get it", the Trinity that is, until we practice it, and specifically practice it in the actions, the embodiment, of baptism and the Lord's Supper. We don't *get* it until we *do* it.

And the genius of a spiritual practice is the realization that transformation is incremental. Practices foster a knowledge of God, of self, of the and other and of the created order. They are a means by which we know the grace of God by which we are transformed and made new. These "patterned activities", to use the language of Dykstra and Bass gradually and incrementally lead to transformation.¹² And critical to this discussion is that these are not merely activities of an individual, but of a community. But the fruit of these practices is known over time, as slowly but surely the truth, wisdom, is formed within us.

But this is not a new conversation or new insight for the church. This contemporary discussion of the "practice" of theology is but a newer version of an ancient conversation, one that is eloquently captured by the brilliant study of the quest for learning and wisdom within the monastic tradition: John Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*.¹³ This study of monastic culture may well be more relevant than ever, partly because the monastic movement is rightly providing a counter balance to the pragmatism of western (and Evangelical) approaches to theological formation and, further, because in a post-Christian secular society, the monastic cultivated practices that may well have remarkable relevance for the church and for theological education today. Leclercq reminds us that the genius of the monastic movement was the unqualified affirmation that the purpose of study and learning and indeed of all spiritual practice is union with God in Christ. And that thus even if we speak of wisdom as the immediate goal of study and learning, the ultimate goal without with the immediate goal makes no sense, is union with Christ. And this means that study and learning and scholarship by its nature must be infused with prayer and worship. It is by prayer and worship that our study is located within the broader purposes of God in our lives. Prayer and worship gives focus, clarity and purpose to study, to the academic endeavour and process. Constant prayer is then the context or air that is breathed as we pursue our studies and scholarship.

For the individual, then, there is no substitute for prayer; and for the community, the learning community of a theological seminary, the shared liturgy is a unifying and defining practice of our shared life and commitment to learning and wisdom; our learning is anchored in our worship of the living and ascended embodiment of the wisdom of God, Christ Jesus.¹⁴ We come to recognize we do not study well until and unless we pray well. And thus, teaching our students to pray is fundamental to our purposes as an academic community.

Second, the monastic movement made engagement with the Scriptures foundational to all learning. And

yet, it is not biblicism, for their study of the Scripture was complemented by their engagement with the theology and wisdom of the church fathers – one might say that what anchored their learning was the primacy of the Scriptures, yes, but a study that was guided by the theological heritage and tradition of the church.

It is important to affirm, though, that their study of Scripture was never as an end in itself; one came to Scripture from prayer and the Scriptures in turn informed their practice of prayer. And thus the whole contemporary practice of 'lectio divina' is really an ancient practice, fostered by the monastic movement and an essential spiritual practice for the church today and for every student in a theological school: the capacity to read the Scriptures in prayer, with attention to grammar and exegesis, but with ultimate attention to the one who is revealed through the ancient text.

And third, what impresses us from Leclercq's study of monasticism is that for all his celebration of the monastic approach to learning, he does not pit monasticism against scholasticism. To the contrary, he affirms that scholasticism is almost a necessary counterpart to monastic culture, with the scholastic diligent focus on the grammar of Scripture, and the recognition of the need to draw on non-Christian sources for our learning, including philosophy. Bernard of Clairveaux insisted that we are not wise until we live in the fear of God and are drawn up into the love of God. And thus monastic theology is the essential completion of scholastic theology.¹⁵ And yet Leclercq also noted that monastic theology needed scholastic theology in order to engage the times, the culture, and social and intellectual context in which theology is to be lived and expressed. And Leclercq has an oh-so-brief appendix in which the theological work of St. Anselm is celebrated and celebrated precisely because his genius was that he was both a scholastic – a first class scholar on the public stage – but also deeply monastic, a lover of God and a man of prayer.

And then, fourthly, we must beware of succumbing to the common stereo-type that monasticism was about disengagement and not about the call of the Gospel and of the church to mission and specifically to mission to the city and to the urban poor. In a sense it was about disengagement; one stepped aside from the demands of the world for study, prayer, contemplation and the focused practices of a disciplined Christian community. While what I have just described might be an accurate description of the Benedictine tradition – though even there, one must be cautious, in that this particular monastic tradition did have an extraordinary commitment to hospitality – this observation is simply not accurate for later monasticism. I think of the Friars, who left the cloister, whose houses of life and worship were located in the very heart of the cities, and whose lives – think of the Franciscans and the Dominicans, for example – were marked by profound commitment to the urban poor, in word and deed.

And then we have the Society of Jesus, the first apostolic order, that left the monastery, yet sustained the commitment to prayer, study but always with the resolve to be, as they put it, "contemplatives in action." It would not be an overstatement to describe this order as the greatest missionary order in the history of the church. And this leads me to my next point.

3. Theological Education and the Mission of the church.

And the other conversation – a third – is that which has insisted that if we speak about wisdom and congregational life, we can only do so in light of the mission of the church. Largely through the influence of Leslie Newbigen, there has been a dynamic conversation that has insisted on three things:¹⁶ first, that God is a missionary God, a God whose very being is one of reaching and acting redemptively on behalf of the world with a clear purpose: to bring all things under the benevolent authority of Christ – the saving power of the reign of Christ.

Second, that the church is a missional identity whose very being is one of participation in the reign of Christ. This act of participation begins with worship; the liturgy is the pre-eminent work of the church. But

then, as a worshipping community, the church is called not just out of the world to worship but then into the world as the living embodiment of the reign of Christ and as signs to this reign.

And then, third, it only follows: that theological education is about formation in wisdom, but it is very particularly the wisdom of a missional God who calls women and men into service within and for and to the church which is in mission; and that pastoral ministry is not only the exercise of leading worship but equally and just as important, the equipping of God's people to be in the world as signs of the in-breaking of the reign of Christ. Key here is the realization that we do not teach courses on mission so much as that all courses offered are offered and taught with reference to the mission of the church. This has taken on a sharper focus in the West with the demise of Christendom and the call to do theological formation in a post-Christian world and in a globalized world.

And thus, we urgently need a dynamic theology of church and kingdom that locates our understanding and practice of wisdom and the cultivation of wisdom. Theological schools equip the church – specially congregations – to live now in light of the reign of Christ; and the primary way that they do this is through the formation of religious leaders who share this vision.

We can only speak this way if we have clarity about the character of the mission of God, of course; everything depends on the question: what on earth is God doing. Everything is derived from and dependent on the answer we give to that question.

When we speak of mission, we speak, at the very least, of the following:

That the mission of God is the restoration of the beauty and glory of the created order, and, even more, of the fulfilment of creation. Thus those who identify with the mission of God will speak of the concern of the church for the environment.

Also, to speak of the mission of God is to reference the one to whom all authority has been given: Jesus the Christ, who now reigns above and is inaugurating a kingdom of justice and peace.

Then also to speak of the mission of God is to speak of the church as an instrument of God to witness to and embody this kingdom. This, of course, suggests that the church is not an end, but a means to an end; and though an necessary end, it suggests that "church growth" or "denominational extension" are not at the heart of the mission of the church.

When this missional vision has been picked up by theologians and educators in theological schools in the global south what has emerged is a common theme around what is often spoke of as "transformational" leadership and ministry. And what in particular has been highlighted is that we cannot speak of mission without a commitment to justice, compassion and social responsibility: that we witness to the reign of Christ through word and deed.

Probably no voice has emphasize the relationship between wisdom and social responsibility as profoundly as that of the liberation theologians of Latin America. Jon Sobrino, for example, speaks of "political holiness". Our vision of life and work and wisdom must be through the lens of the in-breaking of the reign of Christ, Sobrino insists; and if we are discerning we will see that the God of all mercy, embodied in the radical mercy of Jesus, has what Sobrino and his liberationist colleagues speak of as a "preferential option for the poor", and that indeed the poor are the locus of God's presence in the world. Voices like that of Rene Padilla have rightly observed that when the vision of liberation theologians is one-sided and only speaks of economic justice, that it is essentially a half truth. But if the alternative is to only speak of "personal salvation" all we have is another half truth. A Padilla puts it: God loves justice, and nobody that has been born from God can remain indifferent to exploitation and injustice, poverty and hunger that afflict his neighbour."¹⁷ To Padilla's credit, he was sounding this prophetic word as a lonely voice in 1974 at Laussane I, the first of three major conferences on evangelical global mission, and he was still insisting on

this perspective at Laussane III, in South Africa in 2010.

I was struck recently work of the Virginia Fabella (Filipina, Maryknoll sister). In conversation with other Asian women theologians, including Chung Hyun Kyung of Korea, she speaks of doing theology in recognition of the salvific value of women's active suffering as she cogently describes the poor women of Asia who are doubly oppressed – because of class and gender. But what her wisdom calls for is an active solidarity with these women wherein a passive identification with Christ's sufferings leads to a struggle, in the name of Christ, on behalf of the suffering poor.¹⁸

In May of 2011 I participated in a conference sponsored by the Asia Theological Association that brought together theologians and educators from Asia, Latin America and North America. And one could not miss that those from Asia and Latin America pressed the point: theological education with integrity needs to take account of the deep suffering that is found in the cities of Asia and Latin America. Urban theological education in the city has to respond to the cry of the city. And it needs to equip pastoral leaders to be agents of spiritual and social transformation in the city. And these were Evangelical theologians and church leaders insisting on this – voices that in the past might have emphasized, as Padilla put it, “personal salvation” and evangelism and church growth. Now we are seeing an insistence on the essential counterpoint between word and deed. As Leslie Newbigen has stated somewhere, when you only have half the truth you really have no truth at all and that thus we cannot pit social responsibility against each other.

And so this leads me to ask how our approaches to theological education, in both the West and the global south will bring together partnerships with compassion ministries and active approaches to social justice. Wisdom is not ultimately wisdom until it is practiced; it is not a matter of mere knowledge, but of knowledge *lived*, in truth and in justice. And contemporary approaches to theological education in the global south and, increasingly in the rest of the world, are recognizing that this needs to be integral to a theological curriculum.

B. The Elements and Current Challenges of this Vision for Theological Education as Formation in Wisdom.

All of this has led many to the conclusion that “formation in wisdom” is a helpful and appropriate way to think about the task of theological education and the formation of religious leadership for the church – as long as our definition of wisdom integrates understanding with character and as long as it is orientated to the practices of congregational life insofar as these are means of participation in the reign of Christ (the kingdom of God). And this will mean that theological education is marked by some key elements and will face some distinctive challenges.

1. The Elements of Wisdom Formation

1.1. First, this vision of theological education as formation in wisdom would suggest that we do not need to apologize for or downplay the rigorous work of study, critical reflection and the discipline of the mind. Theological education is about the formation of a Christian mind.

Beginning with the Apostle Paul – I could add John and Luke and perhaps other authors of the NT text, but at least Paul – the church has consistently recognized the vital place of excellence in scholarship, and appreciated that intellectual and theological leadership is vital to the mission of the church. We must not characterize the vital role of the scholar by denigrating serious scholarship as ‘cartesian’ or ‘scholastic’ or but evidence of the influence of the Enlightenment. While scholarship at its best is rooted in devotion,

congregational life and oriented towards mission, it is still scholarship. Scholarship fosters the capacity to think and see and respond *theologically*; theological schools must of necessity cultivate a Christian mind, meaning that they foster a theological vision of life, worship, work and ministry, culture and society.

And one of the primary ways in which we serve our students is that we lead them through the classic academic disciplines which will foster their capacity to think clearly and logically and carefully. And in this respect, theological institutions are academic institutions, and as such part of the broader academic community of the countries or regions in which they are located. And while sometimes we may need to bend a little to adapt to what seem to us to be artificial standards of accreditation, another way to think of this aspect of our calling is to consider how the theological school could provide leadership on what it means to do first class scholarship.

In other words, the answer to narrow scholasticism or rationalism or narrow academia is not anti-intellectualism. Revivalism may have been a key factor in the global mission movement of the 19th and 20th century, but at a terrible price with its aptly so-called “scandal of the evangelical mind.” As Evangelicals, we are deeply committed to a vibrant spirituality on the one hand and active engagement in the mission of God in the world, on the other. But both of these are deeply dependent on a vital and critical theology.

A seminary is a member of two distinct communities. It is both an academic institution and an institution of the church. And neither of these is an inherent threat or problem for the other. The seminary is a teaching-learning community and thus an academic community subject to the standards of good teaching and learning. This academic identity is a gift to the church, calling for clarity of thinking, depth of understanding and knowledge. And it is also an opportunity for intellectual leadership in the world – indeed a vital means by which the church witnesses to the reign of Christ. A seminary is also a churchly community that this is a vital identity that keeps the seminary true to its core commitments while fostering a broader vision of teaching and learning that might be typical of the secular academy. Indeed, the seminary does not need to be beholden to the secular university; to the contrary, quality intellectual leadership from the seminary should shape and lead to the reformation of studies in other disciplines, including business, medicine, law and engineering.

Scholarly work for formation in wisdom, requires at least four points of engagement – adapted, as will be evident to some, from the Wesleyan quadrilateral. First, Scripture is foundational; theological education is both immersion in the Scriptures but also and just as critical, the learning how the Scriptures are to be read.

Second, we read the Scriptures in the light of and in engagement with the theological heritage of the church; to study theology is nothing other than this engagement, which recognizes the weight of the creedal heritage of the faith community.

Third, theology at its best includes critical engagement with one’s social, cultural and intellectual context; this is an act of discernment, of course – recognizing what is good and worth retaining and integral to our cultural context and identity and discarding what is not so good. It is thus also an act of genuine learning.

And fourth, theology listens to the experience of the church – of individual Christians but also of the story of the church, its narrative in life, work and witness. Attentively, we listen to the lived experience of the people of God, in the world, in relationships, at work; and we listening with the question: how is God present and at work and speaking through the experience of those we are called to serve. And the experience of the church includes the suffering of the church. Our formation in wisdom takes place in the midst of the pain of the world, of the church and the pain that intersects our lives.

First then, scholarship is foundational to formation in wisdom; we need to be unequivocal in the insistence that wisdom includes the knowledge of God and of the will of God: and this comes primarily through our

engagement with the biblical canon. In the pursuit of wisdom we need to foster this critical thought (or discursive reasoning) to inform and shape worship and behaviour (a theologically informed worship; and theologically informed moral intelligence and a theologically informed way of being in the world).

To live wisely, as Christians, requires and indeed demands that we develop habits of thinking and speaking, a theological and discerning vision of God and of God's ways.

12. Second, this formation in wisdom – our study and learning – must continually reference the question: what on earth is God doing?

First, this would include a vision for the of the mission of God and of the reign of Christ. It should be evident in the design of the curriculum; and it should be clear in the way that the courses are taught. It would make sense to me that the faculty of a theological school would spend as much time in their faculty meetings on this question as any: what is our understanding of the mission of God and how is this evident in the design of our curriculum?

Second, it will be evident in the understanding and practice of what it means to be the church. Wisdom is not abstract; it is a knowing that is distinctly churchly – expressed in the life and witness of a congregation, specifically a congregation in mission. This is a particular challenge for Evangelicals; ecclesiology has not been our strong suite. A key question for each curriculum of each theological seminary will be: what is your understanding of the kingdom, of the church, and then of the relationship between the church, the kingdom and the world. And then, how is your formation in wisdom evident through this lens of understanding and practice. I suggest that Leslie Newbigen will continue to be a key resource for Evangelical Christians in this regard. But again, as with the mission of God, the idea or vision of the church will need to infuse the entire curriculum, not merely the specific course in the systematic theology course that happens to include “ecclesiology” as much one sub-section of theology.

Third, we speak of the mission of God and the church in mission and this will lead us to a consideration of what it means to witness in word and deed to the kingdom of God. Our curriculum will include social analysis: learning to read our social context with particular attention to how the integrity of our verbal witness is complemented by attention to compassion, works of mercy and advocacy for social justice. And surely at its best, this will mean that we cultivate a vision for what God is doing both locally and globally. For many theological schools, this will mean particular attention to the cries of the urban poor. It is no surprise that in Manila we have theological seminaries that profile the extraordinary needs of the thousands and thousands of street children, or the seminaries in Africa that can only do theology in a way that recognizes the severity of the AIDS crisis. But the wisdom we seek also arises from an attention to the global vision of what God is doing in the world. Thus my fascination to be with students of a theological seminary in Cuba recently and to be taken with their insightful questions of my experience of the global church: with intensity they asked me questions about the church in Bosnia, Vietnam and the Philippines, contrasting and comparing from their experience of the church in Cuba. And one had a sense that as in their life-time the Cuban church will be a significant factor in world mission. They are thinking globally.

1.3. Third,, cultivating wisdom also means formation in righteousness, justice and equity (the triad of Prov 1).¹⁹ We are not wise if this is not evident in character and virtue; and thus a seminary can and must see its calling and mission as a formation in wisdom that means the cultivation of a moral intelligence. Further, a wise person is formed in a craft, in the capacities and skills that are requisite for the work to which they are called. So, wisdom is understanding and knowledge, yes; but it is knowledge that is lived.

It is a *practiced theology*. Spiritual formation and capacity formation are integral to the whole of the theological curriculum.

Many of late, including myself in other contexts, have stressed the need for both spiritual and capacity formation, that I do not need to give more attention to this question here except to say, as is so eloquently stressed by LeClercq in his study of monastic culture that what surely stands central to the life of an academic community committed to formation in wisdom is worship. We are not first and foremost a worshipping community; theological schools are academic communities. And yet, we must speak of the critical role of worship and prayer, defining and shaping a community of learners. Liturgy fosters integration of heart and mind, formation of character, and the love of God that animates our scholarship and service in the world.

We need to stress this point. While we may yearn for wisdom and knowledge and understanding; and while we will hopefully grow in our capacity for moral intelligence and discernment. And while we long to witness to the reign of Christ, in word and deed, and provide effective religious leadership for congregations, in the end, there is only one thing that can satisfy the deepest yearnings of our souls. And that is Christ Jesus. Nothing else will do. Not the Scriptures; not a vital and comprehensive theology of the Trinity or a well grounded Christology. Not the satisfaction of having made a difference for the urban poor. Jesus alone is our living bread and life-giving water (Jn 5:39-40, 46-47). And thus all our studies and our ministry must be anchored in our prayers and the liturgy; it is worship and prayer, and especially the Lord's Supper, that keeps it all personal. The Christian thing is not Scripture or doctrine or morality or mission. The 'Christian thing' is Jesus.

And thus how do we know that Christ Jesus is risen from the dead? It is through a rational apologetic? We do need this apologetic; but our deep knowing, the knowing that is the truth that sets our hearts free, is the knowing that comes when we recognize the Risen Christ in the "breaking of the bread", in the Holy Meal we know as the Lord's Supper, in the gathering of the people of God for worship and communion with one another and with their Living Head. Words alone cannot give us understanding (even the words of Scripture).²⁰

These three affirmations are a way of challenging two temptations: to see the academic process as beholden to secular accrediting agencies or, conversely, to reduce theological education to training for the practices of church leadership. Wisdom can provide an alternative vision for unifying theological education.

In speaking of wisdom and theological education I am not for a moment suggesting that this is something radically different from the mission and ministry of the church. Rather, a congregation is also a school of wisdom. And thus the theological school is also about wisdom precisely as a way to help the congregation be about wisdom. The practices that are fostered within the academy are but an extension of those that mark the teaching/learning practices of a congregation.

And yet, there is a slight difference and an important one. Graduate students at a theological seminary have certain tools at their disposal that are not available to a typical member of a congregation – perhaps the study of philosophy and logic, or the study of the original languages. And this is due, in part, to the fact that a theological schools is also part of the academic community. Further the curriculum of a theological seminary would likely include the cultivation of the skills or capacities to foster wisdom within a congregation. But we must still stress, that there are more continuities than discontinuities between the congregation and the theological seminary, particularly in this regard: formation in wisdom.

2. The Contemporary Challenge: Distance, Part-Time and Internet-based Education.

For many, an overview of this kind is simply a waste of time; it sounds too idealistic and too distant and not sufficiently in touch with both current realities and current opportunities. The realities include what seems a simple impossibility: a community of learners within a residential theological community. And the opportunities are, most notably, the possibility of internet based learning. Again and again we seem pressed to view a theological degree as but a clutch of courses, that a student takes over time, and that once completed lead to an academic degree – whether earned in person, a course here and there over time, part-time perhaps, or obtained from a distance through a course offered on line.

In response, I wish to offer a few comments and observations.

2.1. We must never lose sight of the wisdom of those who have gone before us and what they teach us about good learning and formation in wisdom. I am suggesting that formation in wisdom is not an option and that we need to attend to those elements and aspects of theological formation that do precisely that: nurture growth in wisdom. And for this we *must* be somewhat idealistic.

2.2. Wherever it is possible, we must do all we can to sustain the formative power of a community of learning, gathered for worship and together engaged in mission in the world. It is worth fighting for.

2.3. Education and learning are always, in the end, about the encounter between the teacher and the learner or student; and in the end these two elements do not change, regardless of what happens in the form or delivery of theological education. If so, the following two convictions are axiomatic:

Affirmation No. 1: That theological education rests on the commitment of faculty to teach for growth in wisdom – understanding, character and participation in the life of the church which witnesses to and embodying the reign of Christ. Faculty should be hired for this purpose and vision; and all courses are taught with this as their unifying vision and focus (regardless of the discipline).

Affirmation No. 2. The locus of good learning is always the student; and the critical component of adult learning is that the learner takes responsibility for her or his own learning and, with this vision, for their own growth in wisdom.

Students need to take adult responsibility for their own formation. They need help and guidance, certainly; but their relationship with the theological seminary will not be that of parent/child but of an adult learner who in partnership with the school and with other students and learners is coming to maturity in life, relationships and work.

The theological school will sustain and articulate the vision, and identify the crucial elements for this formation and provide opportunities for participation in each of these elements. There will be courses of study, supported by a good theological library, where professors teach out of a deep love for God and commitment to the mission of God in the world. There will be opportunities to learn how to pray – perhaps in a parallel retreat venue – along with regular opportunities for worship in shared liturgy. And there will be opportunities to join faculty and other students in active service in the world, where through practice and engagement, faculty and student learn how to listen and see how God is present and at work in the world.

But in the end, the responsibility for growth in wisdom lies with the student. Of course: after their formal studies, they will have to take responsibility for their own learning and formation; I am just suggesting that in this climate and context, it needs to begin right away.

The call to wisdom is a call to life: it is a powerful and compelling call; and it is a universal call. And it is intimately linked to the life of the church and thus to religious leadership for the church. And it has the potential to provide a deep integration to the curriculum or program of a theological school.

1. Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983)
2. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).
3. Kelsey, p. 44
4. Kelsey, p. 34.
5. Kelsey, p, 134.
6. For the full critique of clericalism by Kelsey see pp. 161 - 165.
7. Kelsey, p. 245.
8. Daniel J. Treier's *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (GR: Eerdmans, 2006); David F. Ford's *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (UCambridge, 2007). I am not suggesting these are the only voices; there are many others, including Charles Woods, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (perhaps the strongest critique of clericalism); Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization and Mission in Theological Education*; and Ellen Charry, *By The Renewing of Your Minds: the Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York, Oxford U Press, 1997)
9. Trier, p. 24.
10. The defining publications for this conversation include Craig Dykstra: *Growing in the Life of Faith* (1997 and then the revised edition in 2005 (revised version); Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, editors, *Practicing our Faith* (1997); and Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Eerdmans, 2002.
11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1984)
12. Bass, *Practicing Theology*, 26.
13. John Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. By Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham, 1961).
14. Leclercq's entire study comes to the finale with this definite statement – the last sentence of his fine book: "In the liturgy, love of learning and desire fo God find perfect reconciliation." (p. 251).
15. Leclercq, 223.
16. For Newbigen, see especially Lesslie Newbigen, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989. Also, I have in particular valued the contribution of Darrell L. Guder to this

conversation, as an interpreter of Newbigen and for his good work of relating the whole matter of the missional character of the church to theological education. See in particular his "Theological Formation for Missional Faithfulness After Christendom: A Response to Steve de Guchy", in *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, pp. 51 - 55; and Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000.

17. quoted by Davi Lin in his seminar paper from C. Rene Padilla, "My Theological Pilgrimage", The Spiritual Theology of the Global South, Regent College, Winder Term, 2011.

18. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion : Third World women doing theology : reflections from the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians*. Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, pp. 108 - 117.

19. In a parallel paper to this one, "Holy People are Wise People" I speak more fully to this triad of righteousness, justice and integrity.

20. These insights arise in part from the observations of Craig Dykstra, *Love's Knowledge: Theological Education in the Future of the Church and Culture*, occasional paper of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, 1996