

The Advantages of the Course of Study School

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The formation of pastors provided by the Course of Study School is potentially superior to the education of pastors provided by seminary.

This is an ironic statement for me to make, because I am fully invested in academic education. I did my seminary work at Duke Divinity School (which I consider Methodism's premier seminary), I earned the Ph.D. from Duke University (which I consider to be one of the nation's premier universities), and I currently work as director of continuing education at Duke Divinity School, hence my bias. I work and live in an academic setting, and yet I want to argue that the Course of Study School has greater potential for pastoral formation than do current forms of seminary education. Far from desiring to bite the hand that feeds me, I simply want to bring before the attention of The United Methodist Church a group of people who are not treated fairly, and argue that one reason they are maltreated is because of the inordinate advantages people like me possess because my education is highly valued, whereas their formation is not.

I must be careful not to caricature; I do not want to devalue my own academic training, nor devalue seminary education. Given the constraints under which seminaries work, it is amazing how well they do their jobs. Some seminary graduates are formed well for pastoral ministry, both because of, and in spite of, their academic education. Some Course of Study students are formed poorly for pastoral ministry even though they have a distinct advantage over seminary graduates. Thus, my argument cannot be reduced to the superiority of all Course of Study students over all seminary students for pastoral ministry. I simply want to suggest that the constraints under which seminaries operate, and the lack of

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those constraints for Course of Study, provide the possibility for the Course of Study School to be a superior way to train pastors.

In my seminary course on Methodism, I learned about the Course of Study School. I knew it existed, but not until I taught in the school, and became the director of it, did I actually experience “in living color” the engaging people who exist as Methodism’s lower class ministers. Like me, many Methodists might be unfamiliar with what the Course of Study School is, and even those who do know we have a Course of Study School may yet be unfamiliar with the people who make it up. Allow me to explain the Course of Study and provide a general (and therefore woefully inadequate) description of its students.

In the United Methodist Church, pastors are instructed in theology in two ways; they can either attend an accredited seminary or they can enroll in the Course of Study School. Seminary requires full-time academic study for three to four years. Course of Study School is an alternative, requiring one month annually for five to nine years. It is for those people who either do not have the financial resources, the educational qualifications, or the time to enter seminary. Although these two options are offered for the training of pastors, immense inequities exist between them. A seminary education will open up many opportunities for a potential pastor, and almost assure full membership in some annual conferences. However, Course of Study graduates do not have the same opportunities. They can enter into full membership only under the “exceptional promise” clause. Course of Study students bear the burden of the itinerant system. They move more frequently than seminary graduates. Insofar as they are not full members in an annual conference, they are not guaranteed appointments, and can be ejected from their pulpits if a seminary graduate comes along who needs an appointment. They receive less pay, have larger circuits, and serve on fewer boards and agencies. In short, they are United Methodism’s lower class.

The people who are willing to be subjected to this status come from a variety of backgrounds. Some were successful business people who felt called to the ministry late in life. Some have extensive educational backgrounds, including Ph.D.s. Others are barely literate. All have worked in some other field before entering ministry; some took care of children, some drove trucks, some worked in coal mines. Whatever their occupation, no one can charge them with leaving their previous employment for upward mobility. All of them have made sacrifices to be available to the Methodist Church as pastors.

The disparity between Course of Study and seminary graduates is unfortunate. No one should be forced into a subservient class. A basic understanding of “justice” alone renders the difference between Course of Study and seminary graduates intolerable. Yet the disparity is doubly problematic because the Course of Study makes better sense of United Methodist official theology of ministry than does seminary. Why, then, does seminary education remain the ironclad standard for ordination? Because unlike the theory, the practice of ordination is culturally

elitist. The Course of Study School offers a potentially superior pastoral formation followed by an inferior clerical status. I will substantiate this argument in three steps. First, I will set forth The United Methodist Church's theology of ministry. Second, given this theology, I will show how the Course of Study School is potentially superior to current seminary education. Third, I will address why ordination continues to be indebted to seminary education, even though the Course of Study is theologically superior. After substantiating my claim, I will conclude with some possible prescriptions to remedy the inequity between the two programs.

THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY

Within United Methodism, the "ministry" of the church falls into two categories—the representative and the general. The general ministry belongs to all Christians by virtue of their baptism. In effect, baptism is a type of ordination into the ministry of witness, service, and community. Thus, all Christians are ministers.

Within the general ministry exists the representative ministry. The representative ministry includes the ordained and diaconal ministries. People in these ministries are called from within the general ministry, and evidence "special gifts, God's grace, and promise of usefulness."¹ The call, according to the *Discipline*, is twofold—"inward as it comes to the individual and outward through the judgment and validation of the Church." The calling out of representative ministers is validated only by their usefulness to the general ministry of the church. The general ministry is charged with calling from its ranks people to represent them in ministry. Thus, the general and representative ministry cannot be separated. The latter exists only to assist the former.

The general ministry not only validates the call of representative ministers, it is also responsible to form them. In the description of the representative ministry in United Methodism, no discussion of theological "education" is mentioned. Instead, we find the language of "call, gift and usefulness." This language does not lend itself well to current interpretations of education; it is well suited to the language of formation. In the present day academy, education is often understood as technological. It makes new things. Standard academic dogma about education assumes the false Platonic notion that people would choose the good if they only knew what it was. What prevents people from knowing the good is that they are falsely indebted to their past histories. Thus, through the methodological process of doubt, persons can be distanced from their past and therefore become enlightened.

Nowhere is this understanding of "education" more adequately defined than in the American Academy of Religion's statement "Liberal Learning and the Religion Major." This notion of religious education understands that "conviction" may impede the process of "the ground rules" of the academic study of religion.² Thus the academic study of religion requires a distance between the person being educated and the community he or she represents. Of course, what comes between is a new tradition with its own community and institutions. The

American Academy of Religion's statement is quite clear about this:

The premises on which we conduct our study are located institutionally and intellectually in centers of learning that have their origins in the medieval European university and have been methodologically informed by critical traditions that have been developed since the European Enlightenment.³

Through seminary education, this tradition (which is in explicit rebellion against the church) now mediates between the church and the pastor as what counts for acceptable pastoral practice.

Course of Study students are not as thoroughly constituted by this mediation as are those of us who have gone the traditional intellectual route which culminates in seminary. This is, of course, why we find Course of Study students so frightening at times, particularly their public displays of emotion. They have not been sufficiently inducted into the European Enlightenment tradition that severs mind from body. They are truly different, even if they never use the term "difference," "differance," or "the other." Thus, they maintain the potential for pastoral formation in a way that those of us who live the European Enlightenment tradition do not. (Of course, one of the difficulties of the Course of Study is that we use it as a way to entice persons to desire that other tradition and thus we lessen their possibility for formation.)

Pastoral formation assumes an immediate relation between the knowledge within which we form people, and their role as pastor in the church. It is always teleological in that the purpose for the knowledge is not simply to create a generalized enlightened person, but the fulfillment of a traditioned role, community specific, as pastor-scholar. For that reason, the constant presence of the community to which one is appointed is a necessary feature of one's formation. Formation does not overcome one's community; such an agonistic practice is inappropriate. Formation enhances one's ability to respond and function within the community that renders intelligible one's formation in the first place.

Education cannot make clergy; they are formed by the community of faith which recognizes their gifts, calls them to represent the whole community, and uses them for that purpose. The outward call of the church is a pastoral formation because the church calls by giving certain people specific tasks, thereby training them to be pastors. The tasks themselves form pastors. "Theological education" is something of an oxymoron; "theological formation" is the intelligible term.

Because pastors are formed, not made, "education" cannot be the primary means of their formation. One component of pastoral formation is instruction in right teaching, but this instruction is never for the purpose of teaching alone. Right teaching is for the purpose of critically reflecting upon one's formation. Right teaching is inseparable from right worship and right living. The three are inextricably connected. To think rightly effects right living which is a result of right worship; right worship constitutes right living which effects right thinking. Because

you cannot decisively separate right living, right worship and right thinking, the Church maintains that right teaching has consequences of ultimate importance.

If either the Church refuses to take seriously the formation of those with special gifts, or the seminary usurps its role in seeking to make gifts, then the general ministry suffers; *the general ministry is dependent upon the representative ministry for its effectiveness.*

This is an odd claim; for in our present situation conventional wisdom suggests that the future for the Church depends upon the breakdown of the distinction between the general and representative ministry. The call to “empower the laity” has come to mean conceding the power of the representative, and particularly the ordained ministry, to the laity. The power of the ordained exists in the preservation of Word, Sacrament and Order. In these three, Sacrament is central, for the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist preserve the order and the Word. Thus, those who seek to “empower the laity” through conceding the power of the ordained to the laity, insist that the future will depend on more and more laity celebrating the sacraments.

This is a tragic mistake, because ordination functions as the best way to empower the general ministry of the church. To remove the distinction between clergy and laity will not empower the laity, but disempower them.

The general ministry of the church authorizes the ordained ministry, and thus depends on that ministry. This is not a popular position; nevertheless it is true. The ordained ministry empowers all Christians for their ministry because the ordained are validated and formed by the Church to preserve order through the celebration of the sacraments, through right teaching and through the upbuilding of the community. When this office is lost, then the unity of the ministry is abandoned. Each person is allowed to decide for her or himself concerning teaching and sacrament.

Let me give an example to illustrate this. Several years ago I worked as a local preacher for the Caribbean Council of Methodist Churches in Honduras. We had forty local preachers, one ordained elder and twelve churches. The elder would travel throughout the connection administering the sacraments. Under the direction of the elder, the local preachers would preach and teach. We had one energetic, articulate young preacher who had great success as an evangelist. On one Sunday morning, he showed up on the beach in clerics and held a revival. At the end of the revival one person asked him what prevented him from baptizing. Was he not called by God? Why then could he not baptize? This young local preacher said nothing prevented him, and so he baptized people that day. This caused a great scandal throughout the church and the local preachers assembled to discuss the issue. They did not find the baptisms invalid, but they did rescind the young man’s preaching license; for they realized that he had violated the unity of the church by taking upon himself a function for which he was not validated by the whole community. Through unilaterally deciding to baptize, he set himself up

above the church community. They were not given the opportunity to form him, and then validate that formation. Thus, he violated the order of the church.

The sacraments are not a function of individual prerogative; they are for the ordering of the community in its unity. The church is not a motley assembly of individuals, each retaining his or her own life; the church is a gathered community from out of every nation, tribe, tongue, and people which is to be one. That unity is an ordered unity, and the role of the ordained ministry is to preserve the order through right preaching, teaching and worship. For the purpose of this unity, the church sets aside certain people and ordains them by giving them the power to celebrate the sacraments. Ordination cannot be separated from this power. To celebrate the sacraments without the validation of ordination is a violation of the unity of the church.

These Honduran local preachers were theologically self-educated. Yet they understood the theology of ministry better than the powerful United Methodist Church with its educational institutions. They realized that their ministry was connected to the Church Universal, and the best way they were equipped for their ministry was through the preservation of the order found in the distinction between lay and clergy. All those lay pastors knew that the ministry of the single ordained person was also their ministry. Thus, they could be satisfied that they served in their capacity and he served in his, and through these differences, the church was empowered for its ministry.

In witnessing this extraordinary act, I saw a theological integrity in a small, struggling "third world" church which United Methodism lacks. The energetic young preacher was quite popular. When he left he took a large number of youth with him. He was received into an American missionary Pentecostal church, and the struggling Methodists lost members, financial resources and influence. But the Methodist Church in Honduras knew that Jesus did not call them to count his sheep, but to feed them. Thus, they did not hesitate, for they were convinced in the end that this was the most appropriate way to maintain the integrity of the gospel.

The theology of ministry is inseparable from the validation and formation of the whole church. The church must call and set aside certain people for its own sake; in so doing, it forms them. Once it has done so, these people and no others must have the power of the sacramental ordering of the church's life. This best equips the church for its ministry. If others than those validated by the church are given this authority, the church suffers. The voice of powerful individuals usurps the voice of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

OUR THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY AND THE POWERLESSNESS OF COURSE OF STUDY SCHOOL STUDENTS

So what has all this to do with my claim that the Course of Study School is theologically superior to seminary education? The relevance is quite simple—the

Course of Study School better expresses this understanding of the theology of ministry than does the seminary because the Course of Study has more potential for pastoral “formation” while seminary is constrained by notions of “education.” Yet, ironically, local pastors who graduate from Course of Study School are often refused ordination and treated as inferior clergy.

The problem centers on the inordinate responsibility placed on seminary education. In practice, the seminary is asked by the church to make pastors. The seminary has itself usurped its subordinate role in the formation of pastors as well. Seminary education works with the component of pastoral formation we have called “right thinking.” If it is asked to produce right worship and right living, then we have made seminary into the church. The seminary is not the church. It can only work with the resources the church provides, it cannot create them *de novo*.

Given the inseparability of right living, worship and thinking, pastoral formation obviously finds its primary focus in the Church. Yet my experience of education has been that most people assume right thinking can be separated from right living and worship. How much seminary education assumes that we must first be faithful and good worshippers before we can be rightly trained as theologians? Does seminary education assume any type of “formation” necessary before engaging in the right thinking component of pastoral formation? Or does it assume that through appropriate theories and concepts pastors can be made? Despite the theory of seminary education, too often the practice seeks to make professionals through the application of appropriate theories and concepts.

The difference between seminary and Course of Study is reflected in their curricula. In a seminary curricula, people are given “choice.” If someone desires to spend more time in church administration and pastoral care rather than theology, then the student is given that opportunity. In the Course of Study School, the curriculum is set by the church and “choice” is not a concern. Students do not have options. The curriculum requires students to understand first their role—their “usefulness” for the church. Thus, first year students are taught “The Pastor as Theologian.” But seminary curricula often are indebted to educational models which assume it is up to the student to define his/her role. Some seminary curricula even help students develop her or his individual “Credo”—“I believe....” The Course of Study does not tolerate such nonsense; it imposes the church’s “*crediamus*”—“we believe.” Of course we do this because we do not want to be embarrassed by Course of Study students so we treat them differently, even though, generally speaking, Course of Study students have a greater amount of lived experience in the faith in all types of situations than do seminary students. If we were to trust anyone to “choose,” we should trust Course of Study students rather than seminarians.

Seminary teaching is more indebted to professional guilds than to the church. Thus, disciplines such as pastoral care, ethics, administration, Ancient Near East

studies, Christian origins, etc., set the parameters for how pastors are to be educated. Be assured that these disciplines do form people, but they form people into each of these specialized professional guilds rather than in pastoral skills.

Course of Study teaching does not allow the imposition of the disciplinary guilds as readily as does seminary teaching. Course of Study students do not care about being formed into disciplinary guilds; they know they are pastors.

The idea that distinctions are possible between worship, pastoral care and ethics reveals deep problems within the seminary curriculum. Pastoral care has to do with the cure of souls, not psychological well-being. The cure of souls cannot be the province of one discipline defined by current psychological models; it requires an understanding of liturgy and the Christian life. To separate pastoral duties into disciplines dissects the pastor like a frog in a high school biology course. A dissected frog might be useful to understand the flow of gastro-intestinal juices, but a dissected pastor fragments the ministry of the church. A dissected frog cannot be put back together for its function as a living creature; neither can a dissected pastor.

Unfortunately, the Course of Study School also divides into disciplines, but, fortunately, it does so less successfully than does seminary. The various disciplines are qualified by the title "The Pastor As..."—the pastor as interpreter of the Bible, rather than Ancient Near East specialist; the pastor as theologian, rather than philosopher; the pastor as caring person, rather than resident psychologist. In the Course of Study School, the notion of "pastor" provides continuity which gives students more resistance to vivisection.

In seeking academic respectability, seminary education often justifies its place in academic life much like law, medical or business schools. This education creates competent professionals who, on the basis of their specialized information, are comparable to other professionals. The Course of Study School does not need justification as academically respectable. It does not justify itself on the basis of creating competent, specialized professionals, but on the basis of its usefulness for the church's ministry.

Another reason for the superiority of the Course of Study School is that these students are less prone to be competitive with each other because they are all basically serving the same type of church. They have no reason to seek to use an education as a way to achieve an upwardly mobile church. Because they are discouraged from competing with each other, solidarity occurs more readily. Their solidarity forms them into a pastoral guild better than when people are taught that success is achieved through conquering the largest church possible.

The Course of Study School is theologically superior because it provides for the possibility of formation in a way seminary does not. The educational models which define much of seminary education not only inhibit pastoral formation, they often actually assume that right thinking must be separated from right living and worship. The mythical story of the need to distance a student from her

community for the sake of education creates the academic community. This story also assists in the passage of students from the communities which formed them ripping apart right living and right worship from right thinking. Objectivity, or self-distancing, is, and has been for some time, a rigid orthodoxy against which you cannot object. Not only does the Christian community suffer from this myth, other communities critical of modern rationality do so as well.

In Marxist thought, a distinction is made between traditional and organic intellectuals.⁴ A traditional intellectual was someone who, in the process of becoming a Marxist intellectual, so abandoned her lower class upbringing that despite what she writes, her lifestyle betrays that she is nothing more than a traditional intellectual. On the other hand, an organic intellectual is someone who did not abandon her class in becoming an intellectual. The difference between a traditional and organic intellectual is found in the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of "objectivity" to distance the student from her communal formation.

Although the Marxists would not appreciate me using their terms for the training of theologians, the terms fit nicely for the distinction between many seminary students and the Course of Study students. Seminary education basically accepts the distancing myth. Because many seminary students have received the disadvantages of a good education which effectively distanced them from their moral communities, they can be nothing but traditional intellectuals. On the other hand, Course of Study students have often received the advantages of a poor education which did not successfully distance them from the church. They approach the Course of Study with a aversion to objectivity which helps them be better theologians for they know what they do must have direct relevance for church life. Thus, they have greater potential for being organic intellectuals.

This is not to say that all distancing from communities is a bad thing; of course it is not. We all need to be distanced from some communities which capture us. And the lack of distancing of Course of Study students from their communities means they often are committed to communities we find unacceptable. Yet how do we best distance people from corrupt communities for pastoral formation? Not through the myth of objectivity, but by providing a vision of the church which allows us to be critical of the ways our lives are captured by communities other than that which constitutes the body of Christ. Course of Study students are not taught to be uncritical. They are taught to be critical of the disparity between who their church is and what, in fact, it practices. But they are not taught that rationality requires abstraction from the church community. And thus they have greater potential to learn this lesson and have it effect their entire lives.

The gifts of ministry are not technological innovations. That is why we call them "gifts." Because the theology of ministry is fundamentally connected to validation and formation by the church and not the academy, the Course of Study School is theologically superior. It has greater potential to understand its role as assisting the formation of pastors.

WHY THEN IS SEMINARY THE NORM?

If my understanding of the theology of ministry, and my reading of the differences between the Course of Study School and seminary, is correct, then the question arises—why is seminary the norm and Course of Study School made the exception? One explanation is that United Methodist ordination practices are elitist.

Methodists moved culturally and socially upward during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Upward social mobility requires upward cultural capabilities which are often achieved through education. When the Methodists moved upward, they became embarrassed by their previous resistance to academic institutions. They wanted to dispel the notion that Methodist preachers were uneducated backwoodsmen.⁴

This upward mobility falsely equated “educated” with academic training. It suffers from the “scarecrow complex.” In the *Wizard of Oz*, the scarecrow’s quest for knowledge was fulfilled merely by the conferral of an academic degree, as if the letters M.Div., Ph.D., D.Min., could be equated with knowledge, wisdom or theological formation. The early Methodists did not have academic credentialing; they did have theological formation. John Wesley required it. Of one lay preacher who, upon interrogation, stated he had no taste for reading, Wesley responded, “Sir, contract a taste for it or return to your trade.”⁵ How many seminary graduates read something more than church growth literature after graduation today? And Frances Asbury often used his long travels as a time to form young pastors theologically. As early as 1816 the Methodists developed a Course of Study School which was to be presided over by elders to train new pastors, to introduce them into regular, life-long habits of reading and reflecting theologically. The Course of Study School delayed the founding of seminaries because many pastors argued they were unnecessary. Theological education could be had without them. But approximately a decade later, educational institutions began cropping up. Seminary education required pastors to go through the Course of Study School in their seminary curricula up until the second world war, after which, the Course of Study School and the seminary went their separate ways. Now pastors are more defined by their seminary affiliation than their commonality as Methodist pastors.

As the educational institutions grew in power, the churchly forms of training diminished. Even when the educational institutions broke free from any form of churchly control, the academic training was more highly valued by the church than the Course of Study training. The result is that, despite the fact that the Course of Study School is the oldest educational institution in Methodism, it does not have sufficient power to offer its graduates the same privileges other academic institutions do.

The options should not be “uneducated” or “trained in the academy.” This is a false distinction which instantiates a cultural elitism. As Methodists increasingly moved upward culturally, seminary became the norm. The normative influ-

ence of the “seminary rule,” and the condescending notion of “exceptional promise” are residual elements of Methodism’s attempt at upward cultural mobility. That the normative role of seminary education is a result of cultural elitism is empirically demonstrated by the lack of power Course of Study students have within the church.

One way they are appeased is by allowing them to celebrate the sacraments. In essence, allowing local pastors to celebrate the sacraments is to grant them ordination. Remember that our theology of ministry sets people aside for their usefulness to the ministry of all Christians through ordering the church for ministry in the world through Word and Sacrament. Thus, to grant people the power to do this, is in effect to ordain them.

According to Methodist Church law, local pastors are authorized to celebrate the sacraments. But a distinction must be made here between what we legally allow, and what our theology asserts. Legally, we say that they operate as an extension of the bishop’s power, and in fact they operate at the request of district superintendents, yet theologically neither bishops nor district superintendents have the power to ordain on their own without the church’s presence. Ordination belongs to the whole church; the church alone can bestow that power. Thus to allow individuals to bestow the power of ordination dissociates the bond between the representative ministry and the general ministry. This practice is analogous to someone enjoying the intimacies of married life without the commitment of marital fidelity. We tell local pastors to do what the ordained can do, but we deny them the calling to ordained ministry. The church is uncommitted to them, even when they are committed to the church.

If local preachers have the requisite gifts and graces, then the church should validate their call and ordain them. Academic education should not be a prerequisite for ordination. Refusing to ordain local preachers destroys our theology of ministry. We make ordination a function of academic education. Education cannot make theologians; the church must form them.

PRESCRIPTIONS

The creation of a group of lower class ministers—who are denied ecclesial power for the sole reason that they were unfortunate enough to be born into a lower socio-economic class which denied them access to educational opportunities, or that they entered ministry late in life—within a church constantly speaking for the poor and oppressed is more than ironic; it is tragic. This situation needs urgent and immediate attention. Following are five prescriptions to begin to address this situation.

1. We, as a church, must disassociate ordination and academic accreditation. The seminary rule should be abolished.
2. The Course of Study School should be an acceptable alternative route for the theological education of pastors, and the “exceptional promise” clause abolished.

3. Alternative forms of theological formation which take seriously the role of the pastor as theologian should be created and implemented based on an apprenticeship model that refuses to accept a rationality which requires students to distance themselves from the church to be educated.

4. The role of the church as the only official ordaining agency must be recaptured. Filling pulpits as a matter of supply-side economics must give way to a theological understanding of ordering the faithful through Word and Sacrament. The role of the district superintendent will move away from bureaucrat manager to the preserver of the sacramental life of the church.

5. Seminary "education" must be reconnected to the church so that it understands its purpose as one component in pastoral formation. It must not be relied upon as the primary means by which pastors are formed.

Notes

1. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1988) p. 114.
2. American Academy of Religion "A Report to the Profession: Liberal Learning and the Religion Major" (Scholars Press, 1990) p. 13.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
4. Antonio Gramsci "The Intellectuals" in *Readings in Marxist Sociology* (Clarendon Press, 1983)
5. Frederick Norwood *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983) pp. 217-222.