

Myra L. Watkins

*Training Faithful Disciples to Meet the Challenges
of the Church in the World: Applying Bonhoeffer's
Seminary Vision to Hybrid Education*

Abstract:

This article will first examine Dietrich Bonhoeffer's philosophy and practice of theological education to train faithful ministers of the gospel for the service of the Church. Particular attention will be given to Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* which he wrote while directing one of the underground seminaries for the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. Second, this article will explore Paul House's argument for a personal, incarnational, rather than a distance learning, approach. Using a small seminary for a global family of churches, Every Nation, as a case study, this article will present relational discipleship as a central, integrated course to train leaders for the church. It will conclude by suggesting why and how principles of relational discipleship can be integral to a hybrid seminary approach for training leaders who can meet the challenges of the Church in the world.

Keywords: relational discipleship, cost of discipleship, hybrid seminary education, Bonhoeffer, Every Nation

Myra Watkins is a second year PhD (Intercultural Studies) student with a concentration in theology at Asbury Theological Seminary. Her research interests include the theology of mission, public missiology in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, and the interchange between the gospel, church, and culture. She and her husband, Mike, have served for decades as missionaries and church planters in Ukraine and Poland.

Introduction

In his keynote address at the 2012 Lausanne Consultation on Global Theological Education held at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Timothy Tennent introduced several areas theological institutions need to address in relation to the realities of an emerging global Church since theological educators form, shape, and direct the Church's theological education (Tennent 2012). Among other concerns, Tennent insisted theological institutions must become more missionally driven. Similarly, Amos Yong points out that the work of theological education must be understood in light of its audience, the Church, and its purpose, the *missio Dei* (Yong 2020: 22).

In addition to training pastors and teachers, Tennent said “we must train culturally savvy, theologically nuanced evangelists and church planters. We must release new kinds of apostolic leadership” that oversees lay-empowered movements globally. To carry out this mandate and to face new challenges that call for adaptive change, he proposed adopting new degree goals and delivery systems. More recently, the Covid pandemic rocked our world making new delivery systems necessary and global needs more acute.

Furthermore, Tennent stated that more missional churches have been opting not to send their young leaders to seminary. Every Nation, a young global family of churches that formed in 1994, is one such church planting movement that has only recently started sending its leaders to seminaries such as Asbury. In 2020, Every Nation founded its own seminary with a hybrid delivery Master's in Theology and Mission to catalyze leadership development for pastors and missionaries, helping emerging leaders become the apostolic leaders of the future.

Every course in Every Nation Seminary which includes four in theology, seven in biblical studies, and four in missions integrates the values of relational discipleship, biblical preaching, apostolic leadership, and global mission (“Mission | Every Nation Seminary” n.d.). With relational discipleship in the contexts of relationship with God, the people of God, and the world as the core integrated three-year course, church planters, pastors, and missionaries may be prepared to meet the challenges of the Church in the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's seminary vision to train faithful ministers of the gospel in service of the Church, the visible Body of Christ, was unique to his context under the Third Reich during the Second World War. Still, I

argue that his insights in *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*, which he wrote while directing and teaching a seminary for the Confessing Church, can inform theological education for the Church on mission in our world today.

While Paul House uses Bonhoeffer's seminary vision to argue for in-person, incarnational learning rather than distance learning, I propose that principles of costly discipleship and life together can be integrated into a hybrid learning approach that enables church planters and church leaders to remain on mission in their contexts. In the process of unsettling adaptive challenges, theological institutions that value costly discipleship and life in community need not fear the loss of these essential aspects of the vibrant, visible Church. In order to release new kinds of apostolic leadership and mutually beneficial partnerships globally, new delivery systems that do not compromise on relational discipleship are needed.

Bonhoeffer's Context and Vision for Theological Education

In 1935, Bonhoeffer became the pastor in charge of the Confessing Church's new seminary to prepare clergy that would serve churches and resist the claims of Hitler. Bonhoeffer believed this required the revitalization of discipleship lived in community since church renewal depended on a brotherhood of pastors reforming the church as a visible body in a hostile environment. In his seminary, students were initiated into a new way of life that was structured around the sacraments, scripture, and communal discipleship to prepare them for service in the world.

A deep crisis in the German church brought Bonhoeffer together with the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church issued the Barmen Declaration in 1934 declaring the church's sole allegiance to Jesus Christ and a biblical view of the relationship between the church and state because they believed that German Christians, in their eagerness to follow Hitler, had compromised the gospel and the church. The Confessing Church viewed church administration through a "council of brethren" because brotherhood is the essential beginning of church (House 2015: 58).

Before the Nazis came to power in 1933, Bonhoeffer was concerned that seminaries and theological departments in universities were not forming disciples or followers of Jesus Christ. Therefore, he deemed it necessary to train pastors as Jesus trained the apostles. In a letter to Erwin Sutz on Sept. 11, 1934, he stated why he believed a new type of theological training was needed for pastors:

The next generation of pastors, these days, ought to be trained entirely in church-monastic schools, where the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship are taken seriously – which for all three of these things is simply not the case at the university and under the present circumstances is impossible. (House 2015: 41)

Bonhoeffer's students were unmarried young men who chose to align with the new, relatively undefined protest church, so they were bold enough to challenge the status quo in German church life. The Confessing Church included Lutheran and Reformed congregations, so students came from more than one theological tradition. They had studied theology at a university and had spent time as ministry apprentices. Between 1935 and 1940, Bonhoeffer directed the training of ten groups of students in various locations as deteriorating restrictions necessitated new venues for the work. His inaugural group numbered twenty-three, and the total number was one hundred eighty-one (House 2015: 45).

Bonhoeffer envisioned seminaries that form shepherds for the church as special visible ministries of the body of Christ. Jesus dwells in, replenishes, and sanctifies the church as “the living temple of God and of the new humanity” as it walks the earth (Bonhoeffer 1995: 247). Bonhoeffer claimed that, as a consequence of the Incarnation, the Body of Christ “takes up space on the earth” (Bonhoeffer 1995: 247). Hence, the Body of Christ can only be a visible body. Therefore, Christ's works will be visible.

In order to form shepherds for the church, Bonhoeffer proposed that seminaries should reach at least three interconnected goals. First, to form a community on proper grounds. House points out that daily worship, prayer, and meditation were means of sanctification to smooth the rough edges of selfishness, ambition, individualism, and theological arrogance (House 2015: 137). Second, to send out pastors who were formed by the Bible so they would obey God. Third, to provide a visible example of the body of Christ. According to Bonhoeffer, the body of Christ takes up positive space in the world through worship, listening to God's Word, prayer, caring for others, using its gifts wisely, offering hospitality, going about its daily work and returning to meet again, and spreading the gospel of redemption in Jesus Christ (House 2015: 141). He focused on life together in regular, simple, Word-centered, prayerful, formational worship.

Bonhoeffer thought that German Lutherans had reduced grace to a principle only requiring mental assent and blurred the lines between the

lordship of Jesus Christ and Hitler's leadership. Therefore, he considered it essential for the Confessing Church, his students, and Christians in general to "recover a true understanding of the mutual relationship between grace and discipleship" since discipleship springs from grace. House asserts that Bonhoeffer's most important writings, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) and *Life Together* (1939), should be considered in light of the fact that he wrote them while directing the Confessing Church's seminaries or "church-monastic" schools (House 2015: 41).

Costly Discipleship

The Cost of Discipleship or *Following After* in German originated as a series of Bonhoeffer's lectures at Finkenwalde, one of the Confessing Church's seminaries where he served as the spiritual director and professor from 1935 until 1937 when the Gestapo shut it down (Ford and Muers 2005: 45). Karl Barth remarked that "on the matter of a theology of discipleship, he was tempted to simply reproduce long passages from Bonhoeffer's book and let the matter stand there" (Ford and Muers 2005: 45). In contrast to cheap grace, Bonhoeffer lays out a costly grace under the cross that is not primarily governed by religious ritual, ethics, or doctrine, but by the call of Jesus Christ to follow him.

The promise held out to followers of Christ is that they will be members of the community of the cross through the Mediator, the "people under the cross" (Bonhoeffer 1995: 114). Bonhoeffer taught that Christ the Mediator separates the disciple from the world of men and things, so we should not be concerned with ideals, values, or duties, but with recognizing and accepting Jesus Christ's *fait accompli* (Bonhoeffer 1995: 107). Through following Jesus, we establish direct contact in our kinship relationships and our duty to the community. The same Mediator who makes us individuals in relation to God founds a new fellowship. "He (Jesus) stands in the centre between my neighbour and myself" (Bonhoeffer 1995: 112). He divides, but also unites (Mark 10:28-31). We have everything through the Mediator, including the visible fellowship of the Church, yet with the proviso of persecutions.

Bonhoeffer lays the foundations of costly grace, calling, and commitment through the Sermon on the Mount following the flow of Matthew's gospel before he equips students in costly ministry (House 2015: 74). In Matthew 7, Bonhoeffer analyses how Jesus addresses the relationship between the disciples and unbelievers and infers that the disciples and the

people or the crowd belong together, the little flock and the great flock that Jesus is seeking (Bonhoeffer 1995: 183).

After examining the Sermon on the Mount, he moves on to Matthew 9:35-10:42. Matt. 9:35-38 highlights Jesus' motive and method for calling coworkers into God's harvest. Jesus had compassion for the people he taught in the cities and towns of Galilee for "they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 36). Bonhoeffer taught his students to not only learn new techniques of preaching and instruction, "they were to be initiated into something that would radically change the prerequisites for those activities" (House 2015: 75).

Bonhoeffer's students wrote their impressions of his discipleship in the New Testament course, noting the call stories, Jesus' statements concerning discipleship, and the Sermon on the Mount. A letter from the Finkenwalde students to their supporters states:

Discipleship is the unconditional, sole commitment to Jesus Christ and thus to the cross, a commitment whose content cannot wholly be articulated. The place to which the church is called is the cross, and the only form in which the church can exist is discipleship. (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996b: 14:89)

Considering the context of Nazi Germany, the words of Bonhoeffer's students echo his aim to prepare students who would lead the church without compromise. Next, it is important to understand how the seminaries of the Confessing Church employed practices that Bonhoeffer laid out in *Life Together* to attain the biblical goals for ministers set forth in *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Community as Gift and Challenge

Bonhoeffer considered seminaries as precious communities of the visible body of Christ that showed students the way community life in churches can be shaped. The Confessing Church sought to establish pastoral ministry on the basis of brotherhood rather than privilege and prominence (House 2015: 129). Bonhoeffer recognized that his suggested practices could be adapted, so there is inherent flexibility in his approach.

Bonhoeffer's vision for community is grounded in Christology: "Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ" (Bonhoeffer

et al. 1996a: 5:31). Since Jesus is our Mediator, Bonhoeffer taught that Christians can live at peace with one another; love and serve one another; and become one (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:33).

His insistence on the Christian community's identity in Christ led him to two convictions. First, Christian community is a divine reality, not an ideal. He warned that idealistic Christians can have a distinct conception of community life that can lead to disillusionment. Bonhoeffer asserts,

God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and God accordingly. (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:36)

Second, Christian communities are built on the manifest Word of God rather than the power of charismatic leaders. Christian community is a spiritual and not a psychic reality (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:35). The desire for powerful, charismatic leaders in churches runs counter to Paul's standards for bishops (1Tim. 3) and to Jesus' statement in Matthew 23:8 that the disciples have one teacher, and they are all brothers (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:106–7). In Mark 10:43, we learn that "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant." He says that the community of faith does not need brilliant personalities, but faithful servants of Jesus and of one another, yet it often lacks the latter (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:107). Apart from Jesus Christ, Christians would not recognize one another, and their egos would interfere with loving one another (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:33). Bonhoeffer was emphatic about this principle with his young students who would lead the church:

Every personality cult that bears the mark of the distinguished qualities, outstanding abilities, powers, and talents of another, even if these are of a thoroughly spiritual nature, is worldly and has no place in the Christian community of faith; indeed, it poisons the community. (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:133)

God calls us to a better way through thankfully receiving community life as linked with our salvation and incorporation into the body of Christ (House 2015: 111). Bonhoeffer stressed that shepherds of

the church must take the path of service and faithfulness that Paul and Jesus required. He emphasized four areas of service that took practical shape in seminary life: listening to others, active helpfulness, bearing with one another, and speaking God's Word to others.

At the seminary, students participated in a rule of life that included daily chapel, silent prayer and meditation, voluntary confession of sins to one another, and life together in community that included meals together and recreation. For Bonhoeffer, Christian worship never really stops with continuous scripture readings, singing hymns, prayer, communion, fellowship, and godly work. Bonhoeffer did not exclude himself from community life, but modeled participation including confession of sins.

He stressed that community life and meditation should make the individual strong for the times of testing and lead them to be ready for the daily reality of the world, not provide an escape from reality (Bonhoeffer et al. 1996a: 5:92). In conclusion, Bonhoeffer pointed out that almost everyone who has participated in true Christian community has been granted an uplifting experience by God (House 2015: 113).

Argument for In-Person Seminary Education

House uses Bonhoeffer's theology and practice of theological education to argue for what he calls the biblical necessity of personal, incarnational, face-to-face education for the health of pastors and churches (House 2015: 29). House says it's likely that seminary education has entered a new phase in the United States and elsewhere: "the biblically based, centuries-old belief that theological education should occur in person through mentors with peers in communities in communal places" is no longer deemed necessary (House 2015: 28).

According to House, seminaries have departed from two critical elements in theological education. First, they have departed from proving that theological traditions can produce a viable academic setting through faculty credentials and an enduring physical location. Second, they no longer prove they can govern themselves and teach reasonable, assessable goals. He says that many educators think impersonal education through credit or degree-granting online or hybrid means is inevitable even if they do not desire such a delivery system or think it is theologically viable.

House considers a commitment to incarnational pastoral formation as the irreplaceable key to recovering Bonhoeffer's seminary vision because God has placed the incarnational principle at the heart of

the Gospel. By any standard of measure, he says, this incarnational method remains successful. Shaping or forming people for service is God's means of developing believers in friendships, marriages, churches, and communities. However, this method can seem slow and requires patience.

Since some argue that face-to-face seminary education may inhibit world missions, House says in-person seminaries can begin with the mission's mandate and provide students with extensive access to teachers and colleagues that can catalyze missions. A practical concern is that people in some nations or locations without access to seminary education may also lack reliable internet and funds for computers. Also, oppressive governments could block and monitor online classes. House argues that even if emergency cases exist, missions should not be used as a reason for impersonal education when the real goal, or at least the result, is to enroll more students to increase tuition revenues.

Theologically, House points out that Jesus spent much of his ministry training a small number of disciples face-to-face. Then, he sent them out to make disciples. In this personal, organic way, the gospel expanded to the ends of the earth in a few decades (House 2015: 188). In the New Testament, Jesus is God speaking to people face-to-face and he has passed that direct speaking on to his church. (House 2015: 194–95).

However, I propose that perhaps enduring physical locations are less necessary, theological institutions can learn to equip a broader array of traditions, and reasonable, assessable goals can effectively be met through hybrid delivery systems that meet the challenges of the Church in the world. Both theological institutions and the Church must correctly assess the world we're in, and it is a connected, flattened, networked world. In Bonhoeffer's day, drastic circumstances made theological training entirely in church-monastic schools the best and possibly only option for the Confessing Church.

Theological education for the Church in today's realities cannot effectively train culturally savvy, theologically nuanced evangelists and church planters and release new kinds of apostolic leadership without significant contributions from contexts where such leaders can potentially oversee lay-empowered movements. These contexts are often simultaneously local and global. How might theological institutions do this well in a hybrid program without losing an emphasis on costly discipleship formed through life together? A case study looking at relational discipleship and mentoring in a small hybrid seminary program for Every Nation, a global family of

churches, may shed some light on this concern for theological education and the Church.

Relational Discipleship as an Integrated Hybrid Course in Every Nation Seminary

Every Nation is a global family of churches dedicated to establishing church-planting churches, reaching the next generation on the university campuses, and making disciples in every nation. Every Nation currently has five hundred churches in around eighty nations. Every Nation Seminary (ENS) is a global seminary headquartered in Manila, Philippines. The faculty and students are diverse, and the students enter the seminary program with at least several years of ministry experience as pastors, regional leaders, or campus missionaries. Except for an annual two-week intensive in Manila or Dubai, the students remain in their ministry contexts as they take classes and interact with faculty and other students.

The M.A. in Theology and Mission that ENS offers has four integrated courses over three years that are primarily taught at the intensives: Relational Discipleship, Biblical Preaching, Apostolic Leadership, and Global Mission. The curriculum includes four courses in theology, seven courses in biblical studies, and four courses in mission: Pneumatology, History of Missional Movements, Evangelism and Apologetics, and Pastoral Theology.

Not only are the courses integrated in the curriculum, they also directly relate to Every Nation's church-based discipleship and apostolic, global mission. Relational Discipleship is central among the four integrative courses. The ENS statement on relational discipleship follows:

We believe that every student is first and foremost a disciple of Jesus whose discipleship and leadership journey happens in the context of relationship—with God, the people of God, and the world. Therefore, at ENS, we desire to form deeply committed disciples of Jesus whose lives are marked by the lordship of Jesus (Christ-centered), the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Spirit-empowered), and the compassion of the Father for the lost and the oppressed (socially responsible). (“Mission | Every Nation Seminary” n.d.)

The core integrative outcome for Relational Discipleship is that graduates “will embody and grow in the practices of being and making

biblically-formed disciples who love the Triune God, one another, and the Word.” This is linked to the outcome for global mission which is for graduates to exemplify “a biblical theology of mission, cultural humility, and a sacrificial lifestyle by praying for nations, financing missions, and mobilizing disciples who go to every nation and every campus.”

Greg Mitchell, the professor of the Relational Discipleship course, says, “who we determine Christ to be determines how we follow him.”² Discipleship is about grace and transformation, not adopting new behaviors. He weaves together a very practical, behavioral discipleship with theology. Trinitarian theology shapes his view of discipleship which he sees as relational development wherein the self is brought into the context of relationships, so the focus is not on personal, individual growth.

Mitchell says that Every Nation has done a great job unpacking discipleship as a reproducible program, so he focuses on how change occurs, viewing it as a process of death and resurrection built on Philippians 2:5-11. His emphasis is like Bonhoeffer’s who linked following Christ with becoming members of the community of the cross through the Mediator or “people under the cross.” Mitchell requires students to read sections of Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship*. He says real discipleship is very vulnerable, it explores the heart, while making it too efficient runs contrary to biblical discipleship.

The ENS annual intensives are relational with four intentional commitments. First, everyone stays at the same hotel. Second, they cater lunch daily, so everyone, both faculty and students, dine together. Third, in class, they change the seating arrangement every two days. Fourth, in a similar way to Bonhoeffer’s seminaries, ENS residenceals focus on life together in regular, simple, Word-centered, prayerful, formational worship through chapel services twice a day. Students overwhelmingly mentioned chapel and the relationships they built as their favorite and most formative experiences during the residential weeks.

At the beginning of the first intensive, William Murrell, the academic dean, orients the students into the academic culture and talks about the tensions between missional unity and theological diversity, action and reflection, and indoctrination and critical thinking. Looking back at Bonhoeffer’s four areas of service in *Life Together*, the students have opportunities to listen to others, actively help, bear with one another, and speak God’s Word to others during the intensives, but also through the multi-faceted mentoring program.

The Importance of Multi-Faceted Mentored Ministry

In ENS, mentored ministry is not a culmination of learning from the program nor a short-term mentored ministry experience. Rather, the mentoring program with three aspects is part of the seminary program from beginning to end. In seminaries, students are traditionally responsible for finding their own placements, which can be challenging for residential students who have relocated from distant locations, but the students in ENS are already involved in ministry and can remain in their contexts.

At the beginning, the ENS launch team asked, “How do we make ENS both global and relational in a correspondence program?” Murrell who led the launch team was greatly influenced by Bonhoeffer’s theology and seminary model.³ The team believed the best way to develop students as disciples, preachers, leaders, and missionaries is to provide a team of three mentors to each student, with each mentor having a different role and function. They mentor students to lean into existing discipleship relationships and into their contexts.

The Faculty Advisor is an ENS faculty member who offers academic guidance and facilitates a “micro-cohort” leadership group that offers opportunities for peer mentoring, prayer, critical reflection, and spiritual formation. Barry Lee, the director of the Mentored Ministry program said, “the intention is that people will be formed relationally as if they were in a Bonhoeffer seminary, but on a global scale.”⁴ Murrell describes the groups as similar to Wesleyan bands, so they are oriented around discipleship with time to reflect, share life, and pray. The groups are intentionally multi-generational, ethnically diverse, and diverse in ministry experience. For example, one leadership group has people from six nations in five regions, so cross-cultural learning takes place.

The Preaching Coach is a skilled preacher and experienced coach who facilitates individual and group coaching sessions focused on discovery and development. Each student is assigned a Preaching Coach for the duration of the program who offers timely feedback on individual sermons as well as sermon preparation. Preaching is also viewed as a fruit of the minister’s life.

The Ministry Mentor is a ministry leader from the same local church or regional context as the student who provides pastoral care and helps the student integrate what they are learning at ENS into their local ministry context. For example, a student from Myanmar is mentored by his pastor who is also Burmese, but he benefits from learning in a global

seminary. The network of relationships equips them to serve the church in both global and local contexts. Students typically can get visas to the Philippines where the intensives take place. Students from Namibia, Uganda, and South Africa have all been able to make it to the intensives.

Lee said students have given positive feedback regarding the global cohort because one culture does not tend to dominate among the plurality of cultures. On the other hand, ENS can only point in the direction of contextual issues as they tend to deal with the mission of the church within a plurality of global concerns. Lee said that a hybrid global seminary is working, but it is hard to do it well. It requires a lot of work.

The Visible Body of Christ: Towards Meeting the Challenges of the Church in the World

I will now look at how Bonhoeffer's perspective of the Church in the world broadened after the Gestapo shut down the seminaries he led. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer defines the church as existing "where the Word is preached, the sacraments are duly administered, and the ministry gifts of the people operate in daily life" (Bonhoeffer 1995: 187). He compared the Church to "a sealed train travelling through foreign territory" on its way through the world (Bonhoeffer 1995: 313). God sanctifies and seals the Church as his own possession, his habitation, the place from which the Word of God goes forth in judgement and reconciliation into all the world.

Bonhoeffer emphasized Christ's claims to exclusiveness in *The Cost of Discipleship*, but he came to understand Christ's claims to totality in the face of the Nazi's totalizing claims during his involvement in the resistance to the Nazi regime, which he wrote about in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison* while imprisoned in Tegel. Drawing on Colossians 1:15 and other passages, Bonhoeffer developed a "Christocentric understanding of all reality" and revised some of his earlier views on sharp distinctions between the church and the world (Fowl and Jones 1998: 153). In *Ethics*, his view of Christ's claim to totality expands to reflect the world as the sphere where Christ is found (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 1995: 206). The reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ belongs to the world. Bonhoeffer did not think in terms of two spheres, church and world, but wrote that "the church is the church only when it exists for others" (Bonhoeffer 2015: 503, 282).

Viewing the church in this way has at least six implications. First, the church must be there for others simply because others exist who

Bonhoeffer understood to be both those who are without religion and those who are mature. Second, the church can be the church for others because Jesus is “the man for others.” Third, the church is for others if it keeps its doors open to the world, which can be a dangerous journey. Yet, it’s the nature of the church to do so. Fourth, the church is for others if it allows them to remain others and without trying to make them its own. Fifth, the church can be radically for others because Jesus Christ is at work in the world. Finally, the church for others is not merely a reinterpretation of ecclesiology, but inspires a change in financial commitments, building programs, liturgies, and theological education (Flett 2020: 122).

Martin Luther left monastic life and concluded that the otherworldliness of the Christian life should manifest in the midst of the world in the visible Christian community, the church, and in its daily life. Using Luther’s example, Bonhoeffer states that, “the Christian’s task is to live out that life in terms of his secular calling” (Bonhoeffer 1995: 298). Like the apostle Paul, Luther’s call to men to return to the world was a call to “enter the visible Church of the incarnate Lord” (Bonhoeffer 1995: 298).

However, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the claims and limits of secular callings are fixed by our membership in the visible Body of Christ. Followers of Jesus reach a limit and enter into Christ’s suffering when “the space which the body of Christ claims and occupies in the world for its worship, its offices and the civic life of its members clashes with the world’s claim for space for its own activities” (Bonhoeffer 1995: 298). Such was the case during the Third Reich when church leaders and members were required to give an oath to Hitler’s leadership.

Bonhoeffer argues that whether in or out of the world, the Church’s task is to increasingly realize the form of Christ himself who came into the world, but was not of this world. Out of his infinite mercy, Christ bore mankind and took their sin upon himself, was rejected, and suffered. As the Body of Christ deeply invades the sphere of secular life with a great gulf existing at some points, Bonhoeffer insists that the Christian is to obey the following: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2, ESV).

Emphasis on visibility of witness recurs in Bonhoeffer’s writings and is crucial for grasping the personal and community aspects of Church and seminary. As Bonhoeffer taught, disciples and the people (or the crowd) belong together, the little flock and the great flock that Jesus is seeking.

Costly commitment to following Christ, the narrow way of the Sermon on the Mount, is best lived out in society. Therefore, a hybrid approach to seminary that involves a rhythm of life together during intensives with multifaceted mentoring and local contextual ministry is worthy of consideration, not just as a reluctant concession to trends.

Conclusion

For Bonhoeffer, Christian community forms us not only to read scripture wisely but also to live as Christians in the world. Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones point out that Bonhoeffer emphasized reading scripture in community as this practice raises questions not only about biblical interpretation, but also about politics and ethics (Fowl and Jones 1998: 144). Reading scripture in community is a vital part of seminary education, which involves biblical interpretation and application to the manifold issues in our world today.

Bonhoeffer and the leaders of the Confessing Church's seminaries were acutely aware that they and the German Christians reached very different conclusions about how to live as faithful followers of Christ. What are the critical issues we face today that tend to divide the church? In contexts that are both local and global, how can theological institutions facilitate not only reading scripture together, but also following Jesus Christ in community as his visible body no matter the cost?

Looking at the crisis in theological education today, Yong asks a similar question: "How might theological education reconstruct itself in a postmodern, post-Western, post-Enlightenment, and even post-Christendom age?" (Yong 2020: 18). Part of his argument is that theological education needs to engage the rapidly de-institutionalizing forms of the twenty-first-century church (Yong 2020: 21).

The answers to these questions may be diverse, but I propose that the vision must be missional. Theological institutions must get out of the seemingly safe boat of preserving their own viability and walk with Jesus who calms the storm and leads us on his mission. Through a missional lens, new structures and delivery systems of theological education can form students to serve the Church on mission in today's world.

Throughout this paper, I have argued that institutions entrusted with the theological education of the current and future leaders of the Church can learn from Bonhoeffer's seminary vision. Principles of relational discipleship in the contexts of relationship with God, the people of God,

and the world can be integral to hybrid seminary approaches for training pastors and apostolic leaders who can meet the challenges of the Church in the world. Many leaders in Every Nation, including myself, have benefitted from the theological training in Asbury's Wesleyan tradition that corresponds with its commitment to global missions and relational discipleship.

End notes

¹ ENS 2021 cohort student profile: 32 students from 17 nations: 10 from North America, 9 from Asia, 5 from Africa, 3 from Latin America, 2 from Europe, 2 from Middle East, and one from Oceania. Four students are women. ENS 2022 cohort: 32 students from 16 nations: 18 from Asia, 6 from North America, 3 from Africa, 3 from Oceania, 1 from Europe, 1 from Latin America. Five students are women.

² Zoom interview with Dr. Greg Mitchell on August 25, 2022.

³ Zoom interview with Dr. William Murrell on August 24, 2022.

⁴ Zoom interview with Barry Lee on August 25, 2022.

Works Cited

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich

2015 *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works - Reader's Edition. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

1995 *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, and Eberhard Bethge

1995 *Ethics*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, Hans-Richard Reuter, Clifford J. Green, and Geoffrey B. Kelly

1996a *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*. Vol. 5. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

1996b *Theological Education at Finkenwalde*. Vol. 14.

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Flett, John G. and Wrogemann, Henning

2020 *Questions of Context : Reading a Century of German Mission Theology*. Downers Grove, IN: IVP Academic.

- Ford, David, and Rachel Muers, eds.
2005 *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*. Third ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub.
- Fowl, Stephen E., and L. Gregory Jones
1998 *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- House, Paul R.
2015 *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway.
- "Mission | Every Nation Seminary"
n.d. Accessed January 19, 2023. <https://everynationseminary.org/mission/>.
- Tennent, Timothy C.
2012 "'Theological Education in the Context of World Christianity,' 2012 Lausanne Consultation on Global Theological Education." Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, May 30.
- Yong, Amos
2020 *Renewing the Church by the Spirit: Theological Education after Pentecost*. Theological Education between the Times. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.



NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION
OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY