

**Going Global: Theological Education for Whom?
Seminary Convocation, January 8, 2006**

I. The Global Vision of the Book of Acts

At last Peter got it. Oh, God had been working on him for a long time. Before his ascension Jesus told him that he and his fellow apostles must bear witness of the Good News to the very ends of the earth. On the day of Pentecost persons from many cultures heard the proclamation of God's love in their own languages. The signs were clear as day. But like most of us, Peter had a hard time overcoming habitual ways of thinking. So he and his colleagues still relegated Greek-speaking Jews to table service, only to see Stephen and Philip become first-rate evangelists. And yes, they'd seen the Gospel spread even among the half-breed, mixed race Samaritans, and even given the eventual apostolic endorsement. Perhaps Peter had even heard about Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. But only now does the divine vision of all-inclusive community really begin to sink in. First Peter received a powerful vision in which God strongly admonished him not to consider unclean what God had declared clean. Then he observed the unmistakable signs of the Spirit at work among the household of Cornelius, who was not only a non-Jew but an officer in the oppressive occupying army.

So now Peter had his big "aha!" moment. Now he believed he'd caught on. And he uttered an immortal line: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." We might say that Peter realized that God doesn't play favorites. And that's a huge breakthrough for a Palestinian Jew accustomed to thinking that his people were the chosen ones, better than anyone else. Instead he now saw that God loves absolutely everyone just the same. No favorite persons. No favorite nations. No, now Peter recognized the same infinite divine compassion for every human being and every culture. No one was better than

anyone else. God loves us all, God seeks us all, God wishes to include us all in one great human family. God's embrace is global.

Peter's new confession represents a pivotal point in the Book of Acts. From then on the pace of growth among gentiles would greatly accelerate, thanks to the evangelistic witness principally represented by Paul. Peter's conversion to inclusiveness will lead him to defend Paul's mission at the great council in Jerusalem described in chapter 15. And because Peter was the recognized leader of the apostles, his approval carried the day. And so the sphere of the Gospel continued to expand until it circled the entire globe.

Since Acts is the first book written specifically about the church and its call, the testimony of this text should carry great weight with us. We should recognize that its vision of wide-open embrace and sharing without exception continues to shape our sense of mission in the most decisive way possible. Diversity isn't just one program the church decides to pursue. Bringing persons of every culture and background together is part of the church's very essence. If we don't affirm this global vision we simply aren't the community of Christ. As African American theologian James Cone has declared, the church isn't a country club where we associate with other people like us. God demands that we learn to live in community with persons we would not naturally gravitate towards, persons who look different, speak a strange tongue, and have customs we consider odd and unusual. God isn't reinforcing the traditional tribal or national or any other kind of boundaries. The lively Spirit is calling forth a new people who retain their distinctiveness, bringing their different gifts to the table, yet learn to appreciate and indeed cherish every voice, every color, every tradition. This, indeed, expresses the very heart of the Gospel. For what else is the Good News of Jesus but the message of God's

amazing love freely and equally given to all of God's children? Sometimes I think we should emblazon Peter's words on the walls of our sanctuaries, as a reminder of what we are all about.

I rejoice that Joe Serig and Barbara Higdon and everyone who has labored to establish and grow this seminary shares the global vision I have sought to describe. We know that the Spirit is accomplishing an amazing work and a wonder. In the span of our lifetimes we've seen our small denomination take root in many nations. Today the majority of those active in the Community of Christ live outside of the United States and Canada. We believe that French is spoken more often in our sanctuaries than English. And we've also witnessed dramatic changes in the land where our headquarters sits, as the immigration driven by globalization gathers persons from a great variety of cultures.

When we learn to see the world in the terms of the Book of Acts, we are not threatened by such developments. Instead we rejoice at the great opportunity we are receiving to embody the Gospel's call to true community. And so from the beginning the mission statement of this seminary has expressed our firm commitment to diversity and inclusiveness. We have been developing a seminary ethos statement that also strongly affirms these values. This year the faculty has been very intentional about examining the ways that we can be more faithful to God's impartial call. Above all we wish to be servants of the Good News of Jesus Christ. We strive to support the mission of the Church by forming and preparing its leaders for their work in all parts of an ever more pluralistic world. Who is theological education for? We must strive to make this formation available to all who will benefit from classes as they seek to serve the all-embracing Gospel more faithfully.

Tonight I'd like to review with you some of the good news about the programs already underway in response to these contemporary missional imperatives. And I will also briefly share with you some ideas about what yet remains to be done if we are to faithfully follow the vision of the Book of Acts in our time.

II. The Seminary Trains Pastors

Traditionally Christian seminaries exist primarily in order to prepare and form congregational pastors. In our denomination we face unique challenges. For we have long had an inclusive view of ministry, giving authority to many persons called to serve without extensive seminary education. We should rejoice in our particularity in this regard, for in this way we have embodied God's impartial summons to all people.

And yet the needs of our ever more complex world now demand a greater degree of preparation than that traditionally received by our congregational leaders. Through the work of the Spirit the planning of church leaders converged with the vision of generous donors just as the seminary was getting off the ground. The result: the Co-missioned Pastors Initiative, now in its pilot phase. This program is a wonderful example of what can happen when the church and the seminary work in partnership. The church prepares congregations, offers a variety of support services, and brings pastors into community through retreats and other means, while the seminary offers the curriculum. We consult together regarding all dimensions of the initiative in order to provide an integrated, holistic program.

Pastors come together for classes one week every year over a period of three years. The seminary's instruction includes subjects such as the church's message and

identity, our understanding of scripture, preaching, worship leadership, pastoral care, leadership skills, peace and justice ministries in the community, and evangelism. By next month 100 pastors will be involved in coursework, including about ten Hispanic leaders. We will continue to refine our educational offerings, even as we are greatly heartened by the initial response to our efforts.

Our new president and prophet Steve Veazey regularly lifts up the importance of effective pastoral leadership. Responding to this challenge, the seminary is determined to make the education of pastors a vital regular dimension of our labors, just as important as any other. We believe that the lessons learned during the pilot phase will permit the Co-Missioned Pastors Initiative to become a permanent ongoing program of church and seminary. Plans are already underway to begin similar efforts in Australia and French Polynesia, and other nations will surely follow.

III. The Seminary Trains Leaders Around the World

How can the instructional programs of our denomination's only theological school reach all the leaders of an increasingly international movement? From the beginning the seminary's leadership determined that we would make every effort to serve the training needs of our entire body. Once again partnership with the church proved decisive. Our colleagues in Temple School had already developed Ministerial Education and Discipleship Studies (MEADS) to prepare Transformation 2000 ministers (later Field Specialists), and the International Leaders Curriculum (ILC) to educate key leaders in every nation where the church is established. The seminary determined to lend its support to these efforts.

Visas and budgets have mandated an increasingly decentralized approach. And we wished to demonstrate our intent to provide the same level of education for all church leaders. So we now use the single term MEADS to refer to all our endeavors to prepare denominational leaders unable to participate in our graduate programs in Independence. In partnership with Temple School we offer classes in Independence in February, and in Lamoni during the Congregational Leaders Workshop in early August. Leaders in the Western United States gathered for courses in Los Angeles. We are exploring other future venues.

In collaboration with field leadership, we regularly teach all around the world at times most convenient for local jurisdictions. Seminary faculty have taught in French Polynesia, India, Kenya, Bolivia, and Honduras. In every place we find persons of great intelligence and curiosity with a burning desire to learn in order to improve their ministry. We should remember how many do not receive the privilege of obtaining a university education. In fact only one out of every 100 persons worldwide is able to attend college. Yet all persons deserve the opportunity to engage in theological education! God's impartial love requires nothing less. While similar subjects are offered in every locale, we gladly strive to make adaptations to the special needs of various cultures.

Often these learning experiences feature an amazing variety of languages. These cultural exchanges have a wonderfully transformative effect on all participants, allowing us to glimpse the promise of global community first laid out in the Book of Acts.

IV. The Seminary Prepares Future Teachers to Equip All the Saints

By now I hope you can see that at the seminary we are involved in far more than graduate degree programs. We increasingly visualize our work as three overlapping circles of equal size: pastoral education (CPI), preparation of denominational leaders around the world (MEADS), and graduate education (MAR, MACM). We stress that each program should be supportive of the other fields of endeavor in a process of mutual enrichment. And this requires us to rethink the goals of a seminary's most traditional offerings, namely graduate theological education.

Consonant with the vision of Acts, we certainly cannot view Master's level work as the preparation of privileged elites. Nor should we settle for a kind of credentialing exercise requisite for full-time church employees with prior college degrees. Instead those privileged to pursue graduate theological degrees should consider themselves in the process of being equipped to become resource persons, teachers and facilitators for the ongoing learning in which all faithful disciples must be engaged. What is acquired in seminary graduate courses must be passed on to other leaders.

To specifically prepare our seminarians for this task, Professor Sue McLaughlin has developed a course entitled "Teaching to Learn, Learning to Teach." We require it of all our students in the MACM program. Sue has also developed a version offered at one week venues such as the Congregational Leaders' Workshop, permitting previous graduates to benefit. Since many of these persons have already taught extensively in a variety of settings, the course becomes a peer seminar, a community of mutual learning. We have discovered that in the process persons engaged in ministerial formation around the world form camaraderie and a sense of common purpose. We are witnessing the

emergence of a denomination-wide ethos supportive of continuing theological education at all levels.

V. Envisioning the Next Steps

The developments I've shared with you this evening fill me and my colleagues in this enterprise with excitement and hope. By God's grace and through the expert contributions of many persons we have come a long way in four short years. I am so grateful for all the persons who so generously give their time and skills to further the educational work supportive of the vision of the Book of Acts. I hope you agree we have much occasion for rejoicing. Thanks be to God!

Inspired by the evidence of the Spirit's fruits, we must continually press on to embody God's purposes ever more. Much work remains to be done. May I share with you an insistent urging I have felt? I would interpret it to be one of the gentle yet persistent nudges of the Holy Spirit. I suggest that we need to do more to be truly inclusive of the diversity of persons here in the United States. Our graduate student body does not yet adequately represent young adults or African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans. And given the reality of educational barriers, I believe that we must develop unique non-graduate programs focusing on the special ministerial needs of diverse communities. Once again we find that this task can only be accomplished as church and seminary work together closely. I rejoice that serious conversations are already well under way. We cannot rest on our laurels while some are still excluded from participation! God's vision lays the same call upon us as upon Peter.

God will continue to push us and enable us to more fully embody the hopes of the Book of Acts.

As I stand here before you this evening, I know I speak for all of the partners in this enterprise in which I am so privileged to share. And so on behalf of the seminary board, and the seminary's faculty and students, and our cherished partners in the church, and our supportive university personnel, and our most generous donors, and the ever growing number of Friends of the Seminary, I make this solemn pledge: with all our strength and all our skill we will continue to strive to show in concrete deeds that *theological education is for all, without exception!* May it be so. Blessed by God's Spirit, let us make it so. Amen.