



THE WAY OF WISDOM: A Challenge to Theology and the Life of the Church

A Declaration by the Faculty of
The General Theological Seminary of The Episcopal Church

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The Way of Wisdom: A Challenge to Theology and the Life of the Church

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The faculty of The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church met on retreat during the week of January 20-25, 2014 for prayer, reflection and discussion. The consensus that emerged was that the most serious problems in theological education, congregations, the structural organization of the church, especially The Episcopal Church, and the relationship of Christianity to the society at large emerge from a common root. This is the separation of theological reflection from the life of prayer and spiritual transformation, from Christian action and outreach.

“God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

—Micah 6:8

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

—John 17:17-18

I. The Problem: The Decline of Theological Education and the Health of the Church

The stewards of the Church have impaired its health. Our neglect and confusion, evident around the world in various denominations, has led to grave problems of decline in the number of faithful disciples among all mainline churches—not least in The Episcopal Church in the United States. As theological educators, we are acutely aware of the role we have played in this decline.

We have shaped and worked to reproduce a system of theological education that is estranged from the living ministry of the whole Church and its wisdom of spiritual transformation and mission to the world. We have been complacent, serving as a mere facsimile of secular education, validating our vocation in the church’s teaching office only with reference to academic specialization. Having lost our intimate connection to the Church’s ministry and mission, our work within the seminaries also has become fragmented. We find that we can no longer articulate how our disparate disciplines and specialties hang together or offer to our students or supporters a cogent vision of theological education as a vital and essential aspect of the Church.

Theological students do not have an holistic experience of theology. They are discouraged and unsatisfied with the increased separation of learning from formation and ministry. They are unsatisfied with their inability to integrate learning with spiritual practice and the work of ministry. All are looking for alternative solutions. Many believe that our congregations today most need priests with the so-called “practical” skills of liturgical, pastoral, and managerial know-how. Others, with the intent of addressing the diocesan needs of the church economically, have attempted to form spontaneous and self-governing bodies that can equip ordinands locally with basic skills for ministry. Yet, these have not overcome the fragmentation that fuels our decline. They have merely swapped the disciplinary fragmentation of our seminaries with the treacherous triviality of business management theory and the inertia of bureaucratic administration, or they have further divided the church from the resources it needs to carry out its ministry with wisdom and understanding.

These are illusions. They are more destructive to the health of the Church’s ministry and mission than the system we now have. Instead of unifying theological education and the church, they set out to redefine the meaning of ordained ministry entirely in terms of its functions, tasks, and public acts. They abandon any reference to the theology of Church’s ministry and mission. As a result, the fragmentation we now witness in the seminaries is perpetuated in our parishes and dioceses. As Edward Farley wrote prophetically thirty years ago, *“The more the external tasks of themselves are focused on as the only telos of theological education, the less the minister becomes qualified to carry them out.”*

As a challenge to ourselves, our fellow seminaries of The Episcopal Church and those responsible for theological education in the Church at large, we declare:

Because of the confusion and neglect perpetuated by our disconnection from the Church’s ministry and mission and by our internal fragmentation, the only solution to the decline of the Church is a renewed commitment at all levels to affirm the necessity of theological education to Christian discipleship and for formation in a way of life that desires “the depth of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God” (Romans 11:33) for all things.

II. The Solution: The Way of Wisdom

Our present system of theological education, the only one any one of us has known, is a novelty in Christian history. For the majority of its life, “theology” was not an academic specialty. It was the path walked by all Christians in their desire to bring the whole of their life into unity with God’s; it meant the participation in the ever-deepening practice of Christian discipleship that we all share. The idea that education in this way of life could be separated from the ministry and mission of the Church or that the study of scripture, theology, salvation history, ethics, pastoral care could be isolated from spiritual practice was inconceivable. The Fathers and Mothers of the Church, whom we call “theologians,” were at once biblical scholars, pastors, and critical thinkers of great spiritual wisdom who drew deeply from sophisticated philosophical reasoning as they guided the course of the Church in their time. Preaching the Gospel was integral to the transformation of the lives of all Christians. Responsible preaching required study and study was also worship.

We are not calling for a return to the past. We are troubled by the present. Where study has been separated from the goal of discipleship, theological education has been sequestered from the whole Church, reserved for those preparing for ordained ministry. The unintentional result

has been unchecked clericalism and widespread biblical, liturgical, and theological ignorance in the church.

Though we are troubled, we are hopeful for the future. We are acting creatively now. We call the whole Church at every level, to live in this hope, to focus its energy on integrating the depths of the Way of Jesus Christ into every aspect of its life, and to work with us to imagine ways to revitalize theological education as pursuit of and formation in the depth of the riches of the Wisdom and knowledge of God. We cannot do this work alone.

Many theologians and teachers have recognized the need for this transformation of theological education. We have learned from them and many work beside us now. Up to now, however, their wisdom and efforts for reform have been frustrated by both the academy and the Church, neither of which has been able successfully to reorder the content, structures, and institutions of theological education toward the goal of spiritual transformation. They have instead retained the models and goals of secular corporations and bureaucracies.

The faculty of the General Theological Seminary now commits to reordering the content, structures, and institutions of its ministry to this goal according to what we call “The Way of Wisdom.” All Christian disciples walk in the Way of Wisdom, all encourage one another in the Gospel and share the wisdom found in their own unique life circumstances and gifts. Some become leaders, encouraging and helping others to grow in the depth of the Christian life. Some are commissioned to the special ministries of presiding over the assembly of disciples, overseeing their spiritual health, and instructing them in the knowledge of God. Theological education is vital to these ministries of the Church because it guides and forms leaders in critical reflection on the Gospel, enables these leaders responsibly to care for the community of disciples, and preserves the truth of the Church’s witness to the gospel in our time and place.

The Church can and does fall into error, and yet we have been promised that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. Thus, theological education is an awesome and humbling service. As a theological faculty we are called to listen—to listen to that Spirit and to the needs of God’s people. We must not only approach our work with academic expertise, but as theologians, we must be accountable to one another and our students: to teach in ways that enhance development in the practice of the Christian life in the living ministry of the Church for the benefit of the world. The teaching office of the Church is particularly invested in its bishops, and we invite the bishops to join with us in this ministry of listening and mutual accountability.

The Way of Wisdom begins with the practice of attentive listening. It cannot be a narrow set of prescriptions. In a seminary, students are exposed to new and challenging voices. Sometimes those voices are the traditions and history of the church, or the beginning of serious study of the scriptures. Sometimes the voices are from the margins: the poor, the differently-abled, those suffering from discrimination and oppression. Sometimes the real surprise is to discover that the mainstream of scripture and tradition are those on the margins. We commit to teach so as to cultivate practiced spiritual attention in tandem with critical theological reflection and in this way to reshape theological education as integral to our shared life in the Body of Christ. Intellectual problems, disagreements and problems of privilege and oppression will not be wiped away or resolved by directing our work to this goal. They will, however, be illuminated by our common commitment to the Way of Wisdom. In the light of our common goal, we will be drawn closer together rather than further fragmented.

III. A Way Forward

The Gospel amplifies the prophet's call to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." This summons is addressed to the whole church, all its members. It is of the essence of the Way of Wisdom. It is a ministry for those who are in need, those who suffer, those who seek the wellbeing of their neighbor. It is not a way to serve ourselves or preserve any institution. The Way of Wisdom is the way of those who love justice and kindness, the Way of those who walk with God together with their fellow Christians.

- We call on all Christians to renew their commitment to the Way of Wisdom and their appreciation of the depths of Christian tradition, especially learning from those who are least among them.
- We call on seminaries and the wider Church to commit to supporting sustainable levels of high-quality theological education for all levels of the church (laity, priests, deacons, and bishops) and for all levels of study, from Catechesis through doctoral study.
- We call for greater cooperation between the seminaries in realizing this goal of theological education for the whole Church.
- We invite the bishops of the church to re-commit themselves to their teaching role as listening theologians to work to revive and reform the catechumenate for our time, and for church-wide support of the formation of catechists and other church teachers.
- We call on all members of the Episcopal Church to more deeply appropriate the vision of the Church as a community of all the baptized, as found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.
- We call on all clergy to more deeply appreciate the Wisdom found in the people in their congregations.
- We call on theologians and theological educators to make Wisdom their paramount priority and to seek to integrate all aspects of theological inquiry as a coherent whole.
- We as the faculty of the General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church pledge to follow the Way of Wisdom more deeply in our own lives and to change our courses and our curricula to better enable our students to encourage and help others on the Way of Wisdom.

Almighty God our heavenly Father, you declare your glory and show forth your handiwork in the heavens and in the earth: Deliver us in our various occupations from the service of self alone, that we may do the work you give us to do in truth and beauty and for the common good; for the sake of him who came among us as one who serves, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Book of Common Prayer)