

Way of Wisdom

In January of 2014, the faculty of General Theological Seminary returned from a retreat in Florida with new ideas about theological education. We had engaged with each other for the inside of a week. We heard Tom Brackett of the Episcopal Church Center, who works in Church Planting and Ministry Redevelopment, via a Skype presentation. The outcome of all this good work and serious deliberation was a statement called Way of Wisdom. We also identified broader issues – e.g. implications for our own residential and commuter community—on which to continue working in committees and in Faculty Colloquia lunches. WoW itself first saw the public light of day in various faculty and decanal sermons, homilies and talks on Feb 2nd, 2014, Theological Education Sunday. We talked about it at our Board of Trustees meeting later that week and gave it a formal airing in the seminary at a community discussion on April 1st. Since then it has been reported in Episcopal Cafe, in seminary publications, and other places.

Here is a summary:

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.

In all my years working at GTS, I find WoW to be the most promising development of our seminary life. It's about something we're all doing, whether in seminaries or parishes or offices or soup kitchens—the re-ordering of our intellectual and spiritual selves toward God. It values the contributions of all. What's distinctive about our input is that it comes out of our common deliberations on the integration of shared disciplines as they can be brought to bear on lived religious experiences in churches and other places of mission around us and so to deepen our life in Christ. It reorients us to older materials in Christian tradition: the Didache, for example, is not simply “Teaching” but a manual entitled “Training” of the Apostles and early followers of Jesus. I've longed for this since I came to GTS.

An example indicates earlier attitudes. Shortly after I arrived 27 years ago, Dean James Fenhagen, R.I.P, sought language to affirm my presence amongst the faculty. He said to me, “The Church needs the laity.”

GTS has since then undergone seismic changes that not only bring us to this point but also help us understand whence we come. Where formerly the lived experience of Christians in parishes and other places of ministry was discounted and objectified as mere practice, now these are celebrated as central places where our theological disciplines engage the faith of the baptized in Christ already living and working in the world. Where once ministry was something done in parishes and places of ministry to people perceived to be in need of the church's wares, now we seek to recognize and build on what Bishop Charleston identifies as the sharing and receiving of community. Where once the clergyperson was the epicenter for all parish activity, now we are working with others across the Church to empower clergy and lay leadership collaboration, which many already know to be the heart of congregational ministry and vitality.

We've begun to build an integrated curriculum across disciplines for every week of every semester for every year in every degree program. Then we will create a sequence in which each year will build on the next by emphasizing and cultivating a developing sequence of Stages of Wisdom that Professor Davis identified with us in a recent Faculty Colloquy. Such an approach develops earlier Christian instruction: the Epistle to Diognetus 11, for example summarizes materials for use in catechesis or liturgy:

Then respect for the law is sung,

And the grace of the prophets is recognized,

And the faith of the gospels is launched,

And the tradition of the apostles is maintained,
And the joy of the Church abounds.

Each step requires careful synthesis across disciplines. Each stage builds on the others. Here is an overview of what we are considering as the first and the final stages.

The first stage is attention to and awareness of God's work and presence in our lives and in the world around us (e.g. Job 28:28). Here we might identify, amongst other things, a pattern of lived religion in our common life. This one includes the discipline of listening and observing. Professor Lamborn already teaches a class for incoming students encouraging reflection on what living in community means. They ask what the meaning and challenges are of integrating learning into Christian community. What are spiritual practices that will help achieve balance? How can we increase abilities to reflect theologically in many contexts, as well as allow new ideas, questions and experiences to emerge and inform faith and action? Attending to these questions is in part preparation for CPE and after CPE, Field Education placements that are part of a cohesive second year curriculum in which stages of Wisdom include Faith, Knowledge, and Courage.

In the final year we are planning an integrative seminar as the end of a cumulative process (Wisdom 6:17-20). In this seminar students will reflect on so as to live out fully every facet of parish life and other places of mission from liturgical training, planned meetings and classes, visits, to individual encounters. Stages of Wisdom in this year include Counsel, wherein judgments are based in reality, Understanding, wherein we work towards perceiving how life holds together in the truth, and Wisdom in which every aspect of our lives is ordered toward God. Participants besides the students (themselves peer learners) will include parish lay and clergy mentors plus seminary faculty and other practitioners offering particular skills essential to parish life. We could consider topics e.g. Scripture study and effective pedagogies; theories of leadership with an eye to the formation of effective clergy and lay leadership teams; particular theological questions, projects, or ways to foster and develop particular skills. Such an integrative seminar is a place of continuing focused reflection on e.g. teaching and leadership, liturgy, pastoral care, and the integration of these skills with public practice. It is a place for shared growth and development of new skills. It would include work with mentors themselves trained in particular mentoring skills and accountable to appropriate bodies. It could be a model for ongoing work in future ministries.

What we are trying to do is just beginning. It is both exhilarating and unnerving. Here's why.

“Luther's example and experience suggest that human institutions cannot truly be reformed, because we will always stand in the way of change. Some destruction is inevitable. The detractors of contemporary efforts at church reformation are only partly correct when they claim that our reforms are killing this institution. But the proponents of change are also only partly correct when they claim that their efforts bring new life. In

truth, the institutional church (and a good many other human institutions) is dead. Such life as we see may not be evidence of reformation but of resurrection, for which only God may be thanked. If we are to survive these times, we must let go both of our fear of failure and of our zeal for success.”

[Sam Portaro, *Brightest & Best*, p.48 (posted on Facebook 4/10/14 by Tom Brackett)]

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