

Teaching: The How Meets the What
delivered as the Showers Lecture #2
at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio
October 2001

By
Donald B. Rogers

I tried to establish to my own satisfaction in the first lecture that there is sufficient data to conclude that there has been a diminishing commitment to Christian education in the United Methodist Church (UMC) in the last fifty years. I have some heard that this pattern is true in other denominations as well. This has been a significant loss involving a dismantling of support systems, destruction of training programs, the elimination of staff, and other demonstrations, cultural as well as denominational that reflects the low commitment to the teaching-learning ministry of the church. I tried to establish, to my own satisfaction, that there is a good reason for not letting that continue. This is not good news, this dismantling and lack of commitment, and we need to turn it around. I did not mean to imply that we need to go back. I think we need to go forward and find new ways of doing that which may not have been as effective as it could have been in the days when it was eliminated. But a simple elimination and failure to replace is not, I think, a sufficient answer.

I suggested that in this turn around it is going to be of critical importance that the ordained leadership of the UMC, the elders and the deacons, take on a major responsibility and commitment for this; although I firmly believe in the powerful role of the laity and the education ministry as it has been for a long time. I honor that. I think the laity too are somewhat at-sea and need leadership and guidance which should come from those who are selected and set apart.

I used a metaphor at the end of Lecture One and I would like to repeat it.

I used a metaphor about a sailing ship. The church has often been compared to that. It is a common metaphor for the church. I spoke about the importance of the keel. It is dangerous to be out on the waters, even without sails raised, if the wind is blowing and you have no keel. But if you were going to sail in the midst of stormy waters, strong winds, and sometimes a hostile climate, it is essential that you have a keel, or else you are helpless. You can only go where the winds and waves may take you, and it can be disastrous. I suggested that Christian education is part of the keel-building ministry of the church. It is that which gives us depth and perspective. It is that which gives us a connection to the past. It is that which lets us call upon the wisdom of those who have gone before.

It is that which provides us with the language for talking accurately and intelligently to each other and to God about that which we believe. I believe also that it gives a language that God can speak to us as we become literate in the language of the faith. I think it can give us the experience of a comradeship that draws us together against the tensions of our time, which seem to separate us and make religion a very isolated and private affair. I think that is what the education ministry can do.

Now I want to turn to the internal agenda with the hope that what I say about the seminary can also be said about a parish church. I speak to this educational setting with implications for other educational settings. I want to suggest that the seminary must take as an objective of central significance the fostering of the leadership for the creation of the learning, serving, and worshipping community tied together, those three, inseparable. In order to do this, the seminary must reframe and revise its life process in order to allow this form of leadership preparation to take place. I want to suggest that this seminary can do it, although the barriers are real, and the challenges are great. That is where we are going.

I believe I have always honored the laity for their under girding and innovative leadership in the teaching-learning ministry of the church. They have in times past found this to be one of the ministries that they could claim most firmly, and many found themselves called with a deep vocational commitment to teaching in the church. I have people who can tell me their memories of those whom they experienced with that call, who were committed, for example, to teach the fourth grade forever. They saw it not as a burden, but as the invitation of God.

I am very impressed with that group of people who were once called diaconal ministers, and the lay status that they had and abandoned for reasons I have not yet ever understood. I honor the strong leadership they have given as professional educators, youth ministers, church musicians, and evangelists. But I do not think that the laity should have to go it alone and I don't think they should have to wrestle against the ordained agendas. I'm going to focus my remarks on the clergy and the seminary's role in the preparation of the clergy.

My thesis is simply that the ordained leadership must lead with more than a peripheral commitment to the restoration of the teaching-learning ministry as an essential characteristic of what it means to be the church. The phrase is “an essential characteristic” as many people have said. I am simply repeating, those who have been bold enough to say that if the church is not teaching it is not the church. I would say that if the church is not a learning, serving, worshipping community with all of that together, it is not the church. The learning-teaching function is of the essence. I think it is all the more of the essence in these times of challenge and that more than minor alterations are called for in the fabric of the church and the seminary's life.

What would be effective? What am I looking for? What I am looking for in the leadership? Perhaps most of all is that they become effective, intentional learners

Let me talk about the learner, and do so by some random examples. In the book that Kay Berg and I wrote we hoped the writing of those reflections would stimulate others to say, "I remember too! I remember those moments when I was led forward by some moment or by some person." When I talk about learners I'm hoping that you will say, "Ah yes, I know. I know that type of learner."

I'll tell you about Willetta from a church in Eugene, Oregon. Willetta was a dedicated kindergarten teacher. She was one of the best teachers I have ever seen. She had learned teaching through various support systems, workshops, lab schools, and what not, and she had learned it because she has paid attention always to what she was doing in order to learn from that experience. She was a very good teacher. She went to the library one day when they were selling some books and found some that had "Bible" in the title.

She bought them, took them home, and soon found herself reading biblical archeology. She was allowed to do this even though she had not taken introduction to Old Testament, and she became fascinated with the subject. She found more books.

A fellow who was living up the road away in Portland had written one of the books. She got on the bus and went up there, knocked on his door and said, "I would like to talk with you about your book." He was thrilled. She had this conversation with him, and became even more fascinated with biblical archeology. Willetta came to me as a Minister of Christian education and said, "I'd like to teach it." I said it might fit into the junior department, since they are somewhat interested in these kinds of things. She developed the course, and every generation of students that came through she would teach them her course on biblical archeology.

As you can imagine, this enriched her teaching of kindergarten children. She never taught them biblical archeology, but her own learning, her own energy, her own fascination with her own growth meant that she had another impact upon them. That is the kind of student who by accident, and then by intention, and then by bravado, will go on learning - no matter what.

I would like to talk about another woman in Oregon, Eleanor. She lived way out in the middle of nowhere growing up, and still mostly in the middle of nowhere as an adult. When we met, she asked me what she should read. I gave her some of the simple books written for laity. She went through those in a hurry. I started giving her other books I had read, and eventually I started to give her books I had bought but never read. Eleanor had gone through my library, and then found out that in eastern Oregon the county library through the state library could get her any book she wanted. She began then to develop her own bibliography, became well read, and of course eventually was sending me notes and digests about what I should be reading.

I think about one of our graduates, a fellow named Otto R. Bein, class of 58, a fascinating fellow. He learned, learned, and learned, and developed some of the most interesting ministries we ever had a record of. At one time, he was the Chaplain in the Parts department of a Ford agency in Des Moines, Iowa. He is a good friend of Wayne Barr's, and if you would like to know more about him, Wayne can tell you.

Mike Pearson is another, Mike did this red tile wall hanging to my left on the chapel wall. I call this "The ambush of the Spirit." I don't know what Mike called it. He was a student here. He came to us and was not sure he belonged here. He was not comfortable. He was one who had a very different drummer. We connected and built one of the finest stoneware potteries in the city of Dayton. He spent a lot of his time there. He was well read and moved through the curriculum. Arthur Core was teaching "Church History". Arthur was a fine historian, and he appreciated England the most. He was also an ecumenist, he liked the ecumenical movement and kept us in touch with it

and was alive to it. He also had an interest in Christian art. However, he did have a few practices in the classroom that drove students batty. Particularly students like Mike Pearson who had a different drummer. Mike had to take a course, Arthur Core's course in "Church History". He faced it with some anxiety, and at first, and then with clever creativity. He found out that Arthur was interested in art and Mike was interested in art.

Mike took the course called "Arthur Core" - he and Arthur spent a lot of time talking about art. He made it through the course, and also developed a fascinating relationship that continued for a long time. Mike went on from here and continued to learn, and continued to learn, and is now the pastor of the Dove of the Desert UMC in Glendale, Arizona. It's about ten years old, a fascinating church, going in some exciting new directions that are successful even by the church growth criteria. Mike is one of those learners.

I'll tell you about a woman from our Scarrett Bennett extension program. She came to us and she was not smiling. Other students found out that she had been in an experience at a seminary in the southwest, where she had been under the teaching of a professor who has one of those great arguments for not giving anybody tenure. He was arrogant, treated the students with disdain and humiliated them when they asked questions. It so destroyed her sense of who she was and her interest in education that she was about to give up going any further in her certification. Somebody suggested it might be different in Nashville, so she came to us, but she did not smile.

I learned all of this from others who had talked with her. They reported to me late in the first week that she had smiled. I thought, "That's good news!" The second week she talked to me. She said, "I want to thank you. This is the first humane education that I have experienced." She was smiling. She also went on to say, "I think I owe you another tuition," I asked her why because I didn't understand; didn't we figure this out right, what's going on? She said, "I owe you another tuition because I make it a point to sit at lunch everyday with Professor Larry Welborn. I'm getting another whole course."

She was then alive to learning. Somebody who was distanced from the whole process and not sure of herself, feeling very bad about it, somehow got turned around by an atmosphere, an aura, a group of people, and some professors. She could now smile.

A key factor which I have from my experience elsewhere, has been that they have teachers who are *accessible*. At one time I was willing to say the most important part of ministry is the incarnational principle of showing up; that what you have to do often is simply show up. This doesn't mean just being in the room. It means the challenge of actually being there, actually showing up, of being accessible because of your presence. I think that's part of what might change the students.

We used to have faculty meetings at a certain establishment down there in Nashville after hours. It was a delightful time for me because I liked to get the professors talking and just watch it go. I could do that. I could get them going. I could prime the pump a little bit and then sit back and listen to them do this repartee. Students found out about these faculty meetings, and they came and bought their own refreshments. They would sit and delight in listening, not knowing all of what was going on, but delighted to hear the conversation. Off stage accessibility!

I think we must engage in a secondary agenda, teach a secondary curriculum while we teach all that we teach in the primary curriculum. We must produce those who want to learn. We must produce those who know how to set learning as a part of their daily planner priority. We must produce those who know how to set learning goals, how to find and organize resources, and who know how to share this process with co-learners who are not their competitors. They must know how to evaluate their progress and establish new next steps in a continuous process of learning. That is the “something else” we must be doing by the way we teach. Besides what we teach, we must give attention to the condition of the learner.

How does this take place? I don't think it's a great mystery. I think part of it is that we have to find the ways of giving students the experience of success. Mary Kathryn

Swanson, who is nationally known for a program in which she takes the mediocre students that were part of her system, with now of many other systems following her lead, and works with them until they become excited about going on and becoming successful in college. She says, “What you have to do is raise the expectations and then give each student the support to meet those expectations. You guarantee they meet the higher expectations, and you do it on an almost daily basis. In essence, you are teaching them how to learn and at the same time you are affirming their ability to learn.”

I think that part of it is the importance of praise. Sinichi Suzuki says, “You never teach a child anything until you have praised them.” The kicker is, “if you cannot find something to praise them for, you're not paying attention.” We need to put into the process the ability to see and praise students into the fullness of their abilities.

I think another part of this is *mastery*. I don't know a non-chauvinist word for this. I heard some students not long ago talking in a classroom. One was saying to the other, “We have to learn everything so we don't have time to learn something.” That was his experience of the curriculum. “We have to learn everything so we don't have time to learn something.” That means that the students often leave with no I sense of the mastery of any part of the curriculum, no sense of “I know this stuff. I can do this stuff, I can go to the big meeting the next time they have it and go to a seminar and know what they are talking about. Because in a narrow focused way, I have mastery.” I think that turns learners on.

Then there is importance of modeling, of being able to see learning taking place before their very eyes. Ruth Simmons, the President of Brown says, “I would like every student to experience a moment of learning that is so delicious that they want to hold onto it forever.” Isn't that a nice word.... delicious? An experience of learning that is so delicious. Part of that delight comes from being in the presence of those whom are themselves publicly learning; that is, their teachers. They are able to see learning happening. Partly this means that you put together a curriculum where the teachers get to

teach their best, newest stuff, whether it fits the list or not. Where are you? What are you doing? What is exciting about your own learning? Let me see it in action.

I think students need to be trained in learning, step by step; in order to achieve self directed learning. I don't think they know how to do that. Students need participation in cooperative learning groups, where they are working and sharing together, and handing each other their papers at the end, and treasuring what each other has done and walking out saying, "We have learned. We have learned together! It has been good."

I think that it is very important that they participate in a whole cloth, learning, serving, and worshipping community. That's where I would like to put most emphasis. This would be a rehabilitation process for a good many of the students that come to us. They come to us from places that have hidden curriculums that produce compliant and complacent students. They are dependent, other directed, system beating, credential oriented, complacent school system functionaries, visiting us for as short of time as possible, and never on days when we have a retreat.

They are ones who visit this or that educational mall to check off another requirement to write the number of pages required, to read only the number of pages assigned (if the sentence stops at the bottom that doesn't matter they stop there too.) To ask, "will this be on the test?" to highlight the *whole book* in yellow, and eventually escape from what has become for them simply another one of these educational ordeals in which they are given a hood, a piece of paper, and a sigh of release. And then they are expected to engage in a full life time of self directed learning in a profession that requires less continuing education than about any other profession, and none for the basic maintenance of their credentials?

This is not true of all of our students or our all graduates; I'm painting with a rather broad brush. But I think it is a significant factor, this rehabilitation as part of our necessary curriculum. Another riff on this, if the result of our teaching-learning here

does not include the rehabilitation of the learning hunger, and does not send forth those who are excited about the power of learning to inform their ministry, and do not have both the knowledge and the skills to help not only their own future but their parishes to become learning-serving-worshipping communities, then I think we have missed the mark. This is what is before us. If Christian education needs to have a new commitment, and if this is true of the church at large, and if the clergy, ordained, and elders are to do this, then they have to have the skills, attitudes, and desires to do it - or it won't happen.

It is now time to discuss this seminary's need to reframe and revise its life in order to *be* what it might expect the church to *be*. I think *we* have to be what we expect the *church* to be. We cannot slavishly follow the model of Jesus as teacher, but there are some clues in that admittedly sketchy account of what he actually did. I want to bring up one of them, which is the continuity of experience. Think for a moment if Jesus had only known how to do this our way he could have set up the Jesus-Bar-Joseph Institute of Theological Studies, and say, "We'll do parables on Tuesdays from 2-4. We'll do Proverbs on Thursday mornings from 9-11. Check my web page for extraordinary acts of healing and feeding because you will be expected to show up at a couple of those and write a paper." Then he would have been free of those disciples hanging around him all of the time, and he could have published.

There is a church in Cincinnati that decided they needed to something in the area of a revival of their life. They hired someone and said, "Your job is going to be to live with ten people for a year. We will help find them, we will help challenge them, and we'll tell them what it is all about and they will be free of all other responsibilities and you and those ten are to live together, pray together, worship together, find ways to serve together, and you will be learning together. At the end of the year we will see, perhaps it will take another year, but if it works, sooner or later we'll have ten ready to do that with others." No other part of their life in that church was to be claimed by that church for that preparatory period. I thought how quaintly synoptic. It's that kind of continuity of

experience, that kind of accessibility, that kind of presence that church has to become, and if the church has to become it, then we have to become it.

Our closest reach to that is still the applied model. Perhaps we at UTS do that better than a lot of other seminaries. However, it is still an applied model, and we know that even here while under our attempts at teaching sound application back and forth across barriers between school and church, some never seem the two meet. Even here some live a schizophrenic existence; there is church and there is school and they seem to have no connection. I fear that many more go forth never to do that again after they are out of our system. Try as we might, the applied system I do not think works. The gap is too great, and I think it is unnecessary.

To change means we would have to change the way we live, because it would not be enough to change what goes on in the classroom. This is not going to happen because we enhance classroom techniques. I think we do that okay, maybe at times very well, sometimes extraordinary well. However, I don't think we live together at all. I believe we are all visitors here; the students are visitors, coming now less frequently, more occasionally, in and out, gone. I think the faculty are essentially visitors too. I don't believe that kind of thing works for what I have in mind for the church.

We have to live together in a significant amount of interaction - we have to eat together, worship together, serve together, chill out together, wrestle with commonly faced issues that arise out of our life together. We must learn together as co-learners and co-teachers, everybody in the mix, everybody with something to contribute, and everybody with something to gain. In other words, we must be what the church must become and make it possible, as did the disciples of yore to walk in the continuities of a learning, serving, and worshipping community. I think that is what I would take out of what happened to Jesus and his disciples. The disciples didn't have to say when Jesus told them to go and teach, "I wonder what we're suppose to do!" They had been doing it

with him all along the way! They just had to walk down that same path that they were on a little further.

There ought to be a few seminaries that look like this seminary, this seminary that looks exactly like most any other seminary, because there probably ought to be a few churches that look and live like seminaries. But there need not be many and somewhere, somehow some seminary ought to change the game. I think it could be done here.

I go back a ways, and I know that UTS has some valuable experience, still remembered by some, in the avenues of extensive educational innovation. I got here when some rather extraordinary things had been done. UTS has valuable remnants of that adventure in its current life. I think UTS has some awareness from its extensions and alternative models of how to do theological education. UTS has some voices that I think could still be heard. Let me read you this one:

“For persons who will assume the care, nurture, and development of the maturity of people from a great variety of backgrounds, this requires a large percentage of persons in the church becoming active servants. The church must become a continuous learning center to develop the abilities of this core of workers for community and the world. Learning and teaching must be a continuous process throughout the week with a dynamic celebration once a week. The service to the community must be done daily through many avenues of work and play, and the church becomes this dynamo of this working group, and Christian education is the life long plan for continuous growth from persons from birth on to be serving persons in the community and in the world.”

That's from Harriet Miller, a dear and exciting and now departed visionary, published this last year.

There are major barriers. I think the biggest one is inertia. Part of this is cultural inertia. What does the culture expect of church, school, and home together? They expect church, school and home to be the conservers, the preservers, the transmitters of

social systems and their rationales and all of their values and symbols preserved, conserved, transmitted, passed on, cloned. That is the expectation of the role of the church, school, and home in our world. That is a straight-line inertia. Religion, I think, has this with double doses. Religion has essentially a conservative role in the eyes of the general population.

Then there are the bureaucracies. ATS came to us last week for our accreditation review and I think they had essentially one question. Their question was, “Are you doing what every other seminary in the United States is doing, are you doing that well enough?” They looked at us and said, “Yes.” I think the University Senate is going to come and they will ask the same question, “Are you doing what every other United Methodist seminary on our list is doing, and are you doing it well enough?”

Those are inertia questions. I think the UMC credentialing system is a system of inertia. That which is honored, that which is looked for, that which is praised, is do you look like us, work like us, think like us, and fit? If you don't you are in trouble. They will postpone your credentialing and let you dangle until you get back inside the expectations. I dare say that the UMC criteria of successful clerical performance have little to do with high risk explosive innovation, have little to do with radical experimentation, have very little to do with “have you broken the mold?” have little to do with learning to be a newly born church in a newly challenging age. Inertia.

And there's our inertia as an institution, our bent to continue an academic school model with isolated disciplinary checklists full of concerns about turf guarding and career protection.

There are barriers. It might become evident that we here cannot do theological education any longer in the model to which we have become accustomed. I have great confidence that new leadership here will help this school turn around from some recently inherited handicaps. But if it should be that this is not possible, and we find we can no longer do theological education in this model, then it might be fascinating to see what

courageous new direction would be chosen by those who chose to remain, faculty, students and administrators, forced to do something other than what we are doing.

If it should become evident that we can go on doing theological education in our historic pattern, then the challenge would be even greater. Would we dare be willing to engage in this task by choice rather than by compulsion, that is launch into a form of theological education that is not like every other seminary in the United States, but is like what the church might be as a learning, worshipping, and serving community. Could we learn a new way of life?

I would like to close with a song. I do not think it is time for us to seek a safe harbor. I do not think it is time for us to rest on the shore. I think it is possible, and perhaps it is time, if we are ambushed by the Spirit that we catch the wind of the Spirit and sail even through the storms of our own time for the sake of Him whose blood red flag we raise.

But as we contemplate this song need I say, if there is no keel, we had better not sing it, and had better not lift the sail because we would simply go before the wind and end up stuffed into the shallows of the opposite shore dead in the water.

I Feel the Winds Of God Today.

*I feel the winds of God today; today my sail I lift,
Tho heavy oft with drenching spray, and torn with many a rift; If hope
but light the water's crest, and Christ my bark will use, I'll seek the seas
at his behest, and brave another cruise.*

*It is the wind of God that dries my vain regretful tears,
Until with braver thoughts shall rise, the purer, brighter years; If cast on
shores of selfish ease or pleasure I should be,
Lord, let me feel thy freshening breeze, and I'll put back to sea.*

*If ever I forget thy love, And how that love was shown,
Lift high the blood red flag above; it bears thy Name alone.
Great Pilot of my onward way, thou wilt not let me drift:
I feel the winds of God today, today my sail I lift.*