

Keith A. Russell, American Baptist Seminary of the West



Keith A. Russell is President and Professor of Pastoral Theology at American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, California. Russell has been engaged in contextual theological education since 1976, first at New York Theological Seminary and for the last decade at ABSW. He also serves as Editor-in-Chief of the Living Pulpit, a quarterly journal on preaching.

American Baptist Seminary of the West is a small, predominantly African-American seminary located in Berkeley, California. We are a founding member of the Graduate Theological Union, a nine-member consortium of seminaries which provides a common library, cross-registration, and MA and PhD programs. We have been transitioning for over a decade from being a historically white seminary to a primarily African-American school, while at the same time experiencing significant changes within our denominational life. As many of our denominational leaders and pastors turned increasingly to the right on social, political, and theological issues, ABSW sought to occupy the progressive middle. As a result, we have lost both financial and moral support from many leaders and churches.

As the school was experiencing all these changes, it was important to clearly state the mission that would form our future. After much conversation at all levels of the school's life, a mission statement was crafted:

ABSW is a Christ-centered school that trains men and women for leadership in the church of the twenty-first century who are:

- *Prepared to minister in a multicultural and multiracial world*
- *Rooted in an evangelical heritage and tradition*
- *Equipped for ecumenical partnership in ministry*

- *Informed theologically and biblically*
- *Skilled in the practice of ministry for personal, ecclesial, and social transformation*
- *Committed to the justice demands of the Gospel.*

How are we to fulfill this mission in a time with fewer resources and changing denominational patterns? For over two years the faculty of ABSW, aided by a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, worked on developing a curriculum that would accomplish our stated mission.

Reinventing Our Curriculum

One thing that was clear to our faculty was that we could not conduct business as usual. The traditional theological education pedagogy which placed more emphasis on knowledge than skill development simply was not equipping men and women for leadership in the church. We had been relying on a “banking theory” of education where the emphasis had been on “opening accounts” for students in various fields — New Testament, Old Testament, theology, history, pastoral care, etc., — and then you would fill each account with basic information. A successful student would leave seminary with his/her account full of vital and interesting information. The focus of this method was more on content than application and more on the mastery of material than on acquiring critical learning skills.

This “top down” understanding of teaching/learning, which posited certain materials and areas of concentration as true, or at least valuable, did not necessarily take seriously the context or contexts in which both students and faculty were learning. It is as if there was universal truth/knowledge that needed to be learned in order to be theologically educated without much consideration of relevance or application in the context of ministry. Everybody assumed that “practical theology” was a lesser discipline that was secondary to the disciplines of Bible, theology, and history. Nor was there any consideration given to the question of how contexts might change the nature of both what is taught and how it is understood. For instance, does the Pauline language about obedience sound different in an African-American context than it does in a majority white context? Does language about obedience have different meanings to women than to men? Is the Pauline context important in grasping how texts from the first century are carried over into the twenty-first century?

Our faculty came to the conclusion that we needed to abandon the “top down” understanding of teaching/learning and replace it with a theory of learning that included a focus on context. *We needed to start from the bottom up.*

When we looked at the base line of our mission statement, we kept running into the issue of

contextuality. We could not prepare men and women for multicultural and multiracial ministry without a focus on context. Our evangelical heritage and tradition is a context from which we operate. Ecumenical partnership is also contextual. Even biblical and theological formation is a process which must be accomplished in the context of time and space. Clearly, developing skills in the practice of ministry for personal, ecclesial, and social transformation hinges on understanding, exegeting, and reading multiple contexts of culture and ministry.

Slowly but surely, a conversion began to occur in the imagination of our faculty about the importance of context in the reinvention of our curriculum in order to meet the goals of our mission statement. *A consensus formed around this basis insight: Whatever we do in developing our curriculum, it must be radically contextual.*

A second insight developed in relationship to the first. When you take context seriously, you have to take multiple angles of analysis using several disciplines to gain knowledge and perspective. *Radical contextuality requires radical interdisciplinarity.* For instance, to understand the context of ministry in an African-American Baptist church in East Oakland, you have to understand African-American history, ecclesiology, and urban ministry, just to name a few of the relevant disciplines. The minister or faith community must learn to do this multilevel analysis in order for ministry to be defined and implemented. The question arose as to whether we as a faculty could learn to teach in a multidisciplinary manner and still be a member in good standing in our academic guilds? Would our commitments to the disciplinary thinking of the academy impede our openness to this new pedagogy? This may be the most difficult of the tensions that we continue to deal with.

Designing a New Model

Out of our two insights on contextuality and interdisciplinarity, the following picture of a new curriculum emerged. We created two year-long interdisciplinary colloquia that each had a contextual base. Each of these required colloquia was twelve units and involved a team of faculty engaged in the teaching. Context was the element which served to integrate the two-year sequence. The design was as follows:

Year 1 – Junior Colloquium

Team taught by the ABSW faculty, the aim of Junior Colloquium is for students to develop basic understandings and practices in the areas of theology, Old Testament, and the history of

Christianity while engaging in congregational studies. Visits to ministry contexts are part and parcel of the study of theology, OT, and church history. The theoretical work is always done in relationship to the contexts of ministry. Context visits are led by pastors and church staff.

Year 2 – Middler Colloquium

This required second-year MDiv colloquium comprises six credits of academic work per semester integrated with placement in a ministry setting for the academic year. The colloquium meets twice a week and also assumes that each student will work 10–12 hours a week in a teaching congregation. During the first semester, the two major subjects integrated into the practice of ministry are ecclesiology and the Gospels with emphasis on the pastoral arts of preaching and worship. In the second semester the study of ecclesiology considers the contemporary church in light of the New Testament Pauline Letters and communities. This study is integrated with the pastoral arts of worship, pastoral care, and congregational programming as these relate to baptism, the Lord's Supper, weddings, and funerals. Pastors are trained to be teaching pastors and join the faculty in teaching and supervising students placed in their ministry sites. Pastoral evaluations are part of the assessment process used to judge student progress.

A third year-long sequence was created to further enhance student integration of learning. The Senior Mentor Project seminar is designed to give each MDiv student the opportunity to choose an area or issue in ministry for exploration and study. A person who is an authority in that area of ministry is to be appointed by ABSW to serve as a mentor to the student. Under the mentor's guidance, along with ABSW faculty, students gain expertise in a particular area of ministry that concludes in developing, executing, and evaluating a ministry project.

Measuring Our Progress

This third year-long sequence has provided us with the opportunity to evaluate how we are doing in helping students to develop skills in both evaluating contexts and thinking from a multidisciplinary perspective. The ministry projects in this final year of seminary give evidence as to whether students can conceive a problem, research a problem from several theoretical angles, and create a project which addresses the problem that they have defined in a particular context of ministry. Since we have been engaged in this new curriculum for five years, we now have evidence of how students are learning. We have had projects that range from death and dying in an African-American setting, to developing a church for the homeless in downtown Oakland, to creating a discipline program for children and youth in a large black Baptist church in San Jose, to new membership training for a black Baptist church in Pittsburg, to a program on

conflict resolution in a Chinese Baptist church in San Francisco.

The final-year mentor project enables us to ask how we can improve what we teach in the Junior and Middler years so that students learn better skills in critical thinking, multidisciplinary analysis, and the exegesis of contexts and texts. We are pleasantly pleased by the progress our students are making even while we seek to deepen and expand our teaching in the first two years of our program. We are producing students who do understand contexts and who can think critically using multiple disciplines in their ministry leadership.

The big challenge for our faculty is to ask how we can extend this commitment to contextualization and interdisciplinarity to the rest of our curriculum. We have been able to develop our core curriculum (42 units) to reflect these twin insights. Can we do the same in other elective courses so that they reinforce what is happening in our core work? This is our ongoing challenge. We do celebrate, however, how contextualization and interdisciplinarity serves to integrate our theological training.