

## Daniel O. Aleshire, Association of Theological Schools



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For most of the past decade, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has conducted an annual workshop for new faculty in theological education. Eligible faculty members who attend this fall conference have completed their first year of teaching in an ATS-member theological school. The workshop agenda includes the accounts of newly tenured faculty about their first years of teaching, and presentations by academic deans on the successful transition from graduate school to faculty positions in theological schools, as well as a great deal of time for participants to talk with one another and discuss their own experiences. Much of the content of this article reflects what I have heard from my conversations with these thoughtful and talented people.

### Teaching

Teaching is an important focus in all theological schools, but it takes on unique dimensions because the mission focus of these schools is on the professional education of religious leaders. While schools of theology have students pursuing theological education for a variety of

reasons, the center of gravity is the education of persons preparing for ordination or some other form of professional religious service. New faculty learn that master's degree seminary students tend to want teaching that helps them address three overarching questions: 1) How is disciplinary information integrated into a comprehensive religious knowledge?; 2) What does the information mean for their personal religious understanding and identity?; and 3) How is the information most useable in their practice as religious leaders? These are not the questions that graduate students bring to PhD education, and the teaching that faculty new to theological education undertake will be different than the teaching they experienced as graduate students.□

1. *How is disciplinary information integrated into a comprehensive religious knowledge?* Faculty members in theological schools teach their disciplines with an eye to the ways in which students need to integrate church history, biblical interpretation, and pastoral care, and be able to use all three thoughtfully in a single sermon. While disciplines serve faculty very well, they are not as useful for seminary students, most of whom will use an amalgam of disciplines in their practice of ministry. This amalgam — I am not confident in referring to it as a synthetic or integrated use of the theological disciplines — functions quite differently than a faculty member's use of his or her discipline. Faculty, fresh from the most intensely disciplinary teaching and learning that higher education offers, need to learn how to adjust to students' inclination to give most of their intellectual energy to the interrelationships among disciplines rather than the elegance of any one of them.

2. *What does the information mean for religious leaders' personal religious understanding and identity?* Religious leaders cannot lead communities of faith on the basis of advanced knowledge and skills alone. They are able to lead, in part and perhaps most fundamentally, by their own religious commitment. For this reason, all theological education is formational; it shapes the religious identity of students as it informs them intellectually. The result is an interaction between students and faculty that differs from interaction that is primarily focused on mastery of content. If part of a student's religious identity and commitment is focused on a particular understanding of scripture, for example, then learning that a scripture passage does not mean what it was assumed to mean can create more of an existential crisis than intellectual discovery. Disciplinary training sharpens faculty skills in the deconstructive tasks of critical analysis; but in formational theological education, seminary students need intellectually viable reconstruction for what is critically deconstructed. Not all graduate training provides the resources necessary for this reconstructive task.

3. *How is the information most useable in their practice as religious leaders?* Most seminary students are in professional degree programs to prepare for the exercise of religious leadership. They are not learning to "know" something as much as they are learning to be able to "do" something. This means that they often ask the practical question when the discipline invites the theoretical question. It takes some time for faculty to adjust to the student pressure to demonstrate how an area of knowledge translates into the capacity to exercise a particular kind of informed religious leadership.

## Scholarship

New faculty members know how to do research or they could not have attained a research doctorate. The questions that they bring to the ATS workshops about scholarship are often more practical than theoretical. They are figuring out how to find time to pursue their research and writing interests, how academic publishing actually works, and what grants and funds might be available to support their work. These issues are not unique to theological faculty; they are issues all novice faculty members negotiate. However, seminary faculty questions are influenced by the size of theological schools, the demands of formational teaching, and the disparity between common understandings of scholarship and the widely varying expectations of research among theological schools.

Formational teaching is more time consuming than other kinds of teaching, and master's-level seminary students can consume faculty time more like undergraduates than that of master's students in other settings. Most ATS schools are small, and all the faculty administrative work must be completed by a small number of faculty members. Because of their small size, many seminaries cannot offer the workload protection that other, larger academic settings provide for new faculty.

New seminary faculty sometimes assume that the research university (where most of them earned their advanced degrees) expectations of scholarship are the expectations of the seminary where they teach. Research expectations often vary considerably and, just as often, seminaries are not clear about the expectations they maintain. If a new faculty member is teaching in a divinity school related to a research university or free-standing seminary that offers PhD-level education, the research expectations will be high and parallel those that the new faculty member observed as a graduate student. Tenure and promotion are dependent on significant scholarly productivity and contribution. If the person is teaching in a small denominational seminary, the research expectations may be very different. However, that difference is not always evident in the published criteria for tenure and promotion. Small denominational schools, for example, can have formal criteria for tenure and promotion that look like those of a research university-related school, but these schools do not implement them in the same way. New faculty members thus have the task of discerning the difference between formal written criteria and how those criteria are implemented. All theological schools value scholarly accomplishment, are proud of faculty who advance the work of theological disciplines, but they vary significantly in their ability to support faculty scholarship with the time and resources that such work requires. Some denominational schools most value applied scholarship in direct service to the church, even though tenure and promotion criteria might appear to favor more traditional guild-oriented research.

## Service

Service is highly valued and almost universally expected of faculty in theological schools. This can come as a surprise to new faculty members who watched the practices of the research university where they completed their graduate study. A research university might declare that service is important, but the reality is that research productivity trumps service and teaching. The university experience socializes students to value research over teaching and service, and they can bring that socialization to a theological school, as a graduate institution. The problem is that they discover many theological schools value service as much as, and occasionally more than, research.

Service almost exclusively takes the form of contributions to parishes or congregations, denominations, or other entities related to the ecclesial communities that theological schools serve. For women and faculty of color, it also takes the form of support and mentoring for minority students, and they are often asked to serve on more than their share of committees to ensure representation. Service to congregations may be related to their disciplines, but typically extends beyond them. A professor of biblical languages, for example, is seldom asked to teach biblical languages and more frequently asked to conduct a Bible study for an adult education class. Unlike the professor whose service role beyond the university is often related to technical expertise, the service role of seminary faculty members often requires them to use a popularizing expertise as they are frequently asked to speak to audiences without technical expertise.