

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 28 - FEBRUARY 1995



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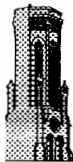
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The grass roots and the ivory tower

A charitable trust that funds seminary education in the Pacific Northwest recently made a year-long study. The trust surveyed 800 lay people, pastors, and seminary professors, asking "What should get top priority in pastors' training?"



▪ **For the laity, spirituality** was tops. **Relational skills** got the lay people's next highest vote, followed by character and then communication skills. Last on the list was **theological knowledge**.

▪ **The pastors'** top vote went to **relational skills**, with management abilities second. Following those came communication skills, then **spirituality**. Like the laity, the pastors put **theological knowledge** last.



▪ **For the seminary professors,** however, **theological knowledge** was number one. Then came character, leadership skills, communication skills, and counseling skills.



We need to address the problem that these findings reveal: a big gap between what seminary professors believe God calls them to do, and what pastors and the laity want them to do. We must find a way to work together more effectively for the good of the whole church, by making some changes both at the grass roots of our local churches and in the ivory towers of our seminaries.

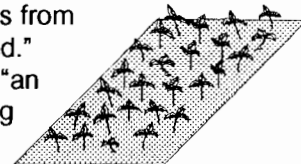
Grass-root changes

Lay church members need to admit that the Christian faith can be expressed in ways that differ from those we happen to prefer. We need to hear what theologians and scholars are saying. They may be speaking for God.



Seminaries—our seed beds

The word "seminary" comes from the Latin word that means "seed." One definition of a seminary is "an environment in which something originates and from which it is propagated—a seed bed . . ."



In a way, our seminaries are the church's seed beds. They're often where important new God-given insights germinate, take root, and begin to grow. They're where valuable information about the Bible and Christian history often surfaces first.

Seminaries are also where most of the clergy who hold the church's top leadership positions have their faith nurtured when it is sprouting and maturing. In seminaries these leaders first learn how to preach, how to understand the Bible, how to give pastoral care, and how to administer the church organization. Seminaries therefore have a big influence on the church.



Ivory-tower changes

✓ Theologians need to speak in lay language instead of speaking only in academic language, when they report research results and express Christian doctrine.



✓ Seminary professors need to train pastors to speak in concrete, contemporary lay language, by using it and requiring their students to use it in sermons and papers in seminary courses.

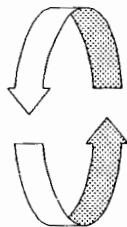
✓ Our professors must teach students the **relational skills** needed for persuading church members to consider unfamiliar viewpoints and helping them to evaluate religious beliefs and experiences.

✓ Professors and pastors must show concretely how Christian **spirituality** is expressed in **theological knowledge** and also in everyday lay life.

✓ Professors must listen to what pastors and the laity are saying. They may be speaking for God. ❖

A changed opinion

My views about seminaries and professional theologians have changed a lot during the course of my life. I believe God was behind the change.



Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God ...

—Romans 12:2

When I was growing up, many pastors of my local church and others nearby were graduates of the same seminary, and my family members and our church friends said it promoted false, radical, dangerous ideas and destroyed people's

faith. I had no other source of information on the subject, and these family members and friends were the people I assumed were always right, so I mistakenly assumed they were right about this.

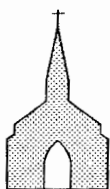
Interesting but disturbing

Through my habit of browsing in bookstores and buying interesting-looking books, during my young-adult years I acquired and read some books by Tillich, Barth, Bonhoeffer and other famous theologians. I found them fascinating, but I was often surprised and sometimes upset by how different these theologians' views were from what I heard in church. I thought, "These men probably don't go to church. They probably never pray." I suspected that they weren't even real Christians.



Still, I realized that some of what they were saying made sense. In fact, some made more sense to me than what I saw and heard at church.

Going through the right motions



All my life I had been dutifully going through the motions of worshiping, praying, and participating in the church like everyone around me. I had tried to convince myself that all those motions made sense, but I often found that hard.

We routinely recited prayers, creeds, and rituals that used outdated words and didn't relate to what I saw as real life. Church members acted as if the King James Version of the Bible had been dictated

word-for-word by God, which seemed impossible to me. I heard no one questioning the dream interpretations, prophecies, and miraculous healings that were common in the Bible, even though such things never happened in today's world, as far as I knew. I saw no one giving away their second coat or even considering it. Most disturbing, I saw no church members with anywhere near the enthusiasm that the New Testament described.

I didn't know anyone else who thought or read about these subjects, so I couldn't discuss them with anyone. Besides, I had little time for such things. I was busy with housework and family roles and volunteer jobs.



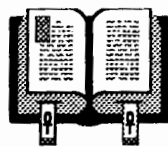
I therefore tried to banish my questions about the Bible and the church. I occasionally read one of the famous theologians' books and thought about it briefly, but then I shelved it and moved on.

God and time brought change

Years later, however, I found that the questions I thought I had banished were still there and were clamoring loudly for attention. I began reading about some aspects of the Bible, the church, and religious experience that I'd barely thought about before, and I reread and reconsidered some of the theologians' books I'd shelved.



I began to realize that some of these authors' ways of understanding and responding to God were the ways in which I could best understand and respond to God. I saw that people could be Christians without thinking and acting exactly like the church members I knew. I saw that there were many valid ways of experiencing God, praying, worshiping, and understanding and expressing Christian beliefs. I saw how the Bible used symbolic language, and



how the Bible had reached its present form through the gradual compilation of documents that reflected many different motives and cultural settings. I was finally finding what really *did* make sense to me, and realizing that God had led me to it.

A stronger faith

Starved for people to read and talk with about these subjects, I began looking for graduate courses



to take. To my surprise, I found that only seminaries offered what I wanted, and that the closest one offering it was the seminary I had so often heard criticized by my friends and family. I enrolled and kept going to get a degree.

It was an exhilarating, life-changing experience. And it didn't destroy my faith. Instead, it helped me strengthen it in God-inspired ways. Many other Christians report similar feelings about their experience in seminaries.

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.

—Job 42:5

We can't let the problems blind us



Like other parts of the church, our seminaries have shortcomings and problems that we urgently need to address. But we can't let the problems blind us to the seminaries'

value. Seminaries can help the total church and individual Christians to discover and respond more effectively to what God is calling us to do in today's world. I've experienced that first-hand. ❖

New conditions are making seminaries' job harder



Seminary students in the U.S. aren't just white Anglo males as most once were. Today's seminarians come from many ethnic and cultural groups, and at mainline Protestant seminaries at least a third are women. They're reminding seminaries that the church looks different from different angles and that preparation for ministry must come in many forms.



Today's rising costs keep causing more students to need more financial aid and to need to get their degrees in the shortest possible time. This requires seminaries to raise more funds. It also puts pressure on them to decrease the number of courses they require for degrees, although some church members want them to require more.

Many seminarians today are second-career students. They tend to have larger financial requirements than younger students, and to need night and weekend classes so they can keep their jobs during seminary. This puts new demands on seminary faculty, staff, and buildings. And because these students don't begin their ministry until midlife, preparing them costs the church more in proportion to the years of service it gets from them.



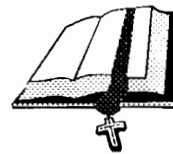
Why do we need research?

At a seminary board meeting, when the seminary's research was mentioned a baffled layman asked, "What is there to do research about?" His question assumes that the words of his favorite Bible translation are God's pure and final word about everything, so there's no need to look for anything more or different.



Biblical scholars, however, have found that even though the Bible's authors were inspired by God, their personal experiences and cultural settings strongly influenced their understanding of what God was saying, just as our experience and our culture strongly influence our understanding of God. Scholars see, too, that compilers, editors, and translators have played large parts in bringing the Bible to its present form.

We need to know the Bible's history

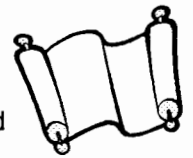


Bible scholars therefore search for the Bible's original documents in their earliest form. They also look for other documents written in similar languages and cultures, so that by comparing these to the Bible's original manuscripts they can learn how to translate the biblical manuscripts correctly and to recognize their authors' intentions.

Scholars also search for information about customs, beliefs, and attitudes that prevailed when the Bible's original documents were written. They look for views that reflected God's will but were rejected because of authors' or editors' prejudices and therefore need to be recovered.

We can't avoid interpretation

The results of this research can help us interpret what we read in the Bible. And interpretation is unavoidable. Some Christians claim that taking the English words of a version of the Bible as God's pure, complete, and final word avoids interpretation, but it doesn't. The mere act of choosing that method (or any other) is making an interpretation.



Learning about the church and the world

Seminaries' research also includes looking at church history to see how doctrines and worship practices originated. This can help us see which traditions represent God's will and which do not. Seminaries also study today's churches and the varied cultures, religions, learning styles, and personalities of today's people. This can help the church see how to minister and communicate the Gospel effectively where God calls us to be at work.

If we want to be the church God calls us to be today, we need the findings of these researchers.

We'll have to help

From our seminaries, some of us mainly expect theological knowledge. Others want relational skills. Some want all our traditions preserved. Action people want practical training. Prophetic Christians want bold new efforts. All these ingredients have their place, but whatever mixture some of us consider right, others consider wrong.



An unusually large number of our churches' top clergy will retire between now and the year 2000. We must help our seminaries to prepare effective

and faithful leaders to replace them and lead the church where God calls it to go in the 21st century. But our seminaries can't do this unless we provide open minds and hearts, top-quality students, and money. Seminaries can't do their job if we're bad-mouthing them instead of helping them. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

Can the church learn from the business world?



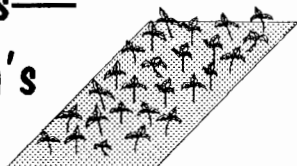
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**Seminaries—
the church's
seed beds**



What should seminaries do?

- **Indoctrinate?** One role of seminaries is to teach what the Bible says, to teach the history of the Bible and the church, and to inform students about the doctrines that have traditionally been considered essential for Christian faith.



- **Make students think?** Many people must consider alternatives in order to reach a mature faith that can withstand what life brings. Some seminaries thus expose students to a wide range of ideas and experiences.



- **Train pastors?** Most of us favor this, but seminaries also must train people for other forms of ministry.



- **Be prophetic?** Many Christians feel that seminaries should be the church's cutting edge. This means seeing what God is calling us to do and making us aware of it, which often requires advocating new methods, new viewpoints, or new ideas.

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