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Exploring Integration: Reflections on Call, Education and Ministry

I came to theological education after more than two decades in the parish—the Caribbean and New York—and a short stint as a national program staff person for the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church. During my period with the General Board, I had the privilege of working with congregations in several jurisdictions of our church. I responded to an invitation to come to ITC when the late Major Jones pulled me aside at a national Black staff forum. In his own inimitable way—quiet, assuring and persuasive—he told me to submit my curriculum *vitae* to the search committee for the Director of Field Education. In due course, I received the appointment.

My challenge was to establish the Field Education program as an integral part of our life. My predecessor, the late Cal Houston, was part-time. The institution had just completed a reaffirmation review by the accrediting association. The committee felt that faculty involvement would express institutional investment in the program and would enable integration into the total curriculum. We have achieved a creditable measure of success in this venture. Faculty less enthusiastic about participating offer their own reasons which are often clouded in unexamined skepticism.

During the last thirteen years, I have come to understand how Field Education achieves that integrating role for our curriculum. In the program, we understand how and where

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our knowledge and skills acquired through the several disciplines enable appropriate engagement in ministry.

One understanding of our task is expressed by reference to the figure of a cross—an important symbol of faith. On the left side of the cross beam we place the letters “TD” which represent the theological disciplines: Biblical Studies, Church History, Systematic Theology, Psychology and Pastoral Care, etc. These raise questions about the contemporary context. It is here the life of faith must be lived, not only at a particular period in history, but always in a particular place. This is represented by “CC” on the right side of the cross beam. The contemporary context challenges what we learn in the classroom and asks new questions. At the top of the vertical beam, we might place “STM,” popular letters describing the degree—Master of Sacred Theology—offered at some schools. My letters represent an understanding of our task in preparing self-critical theologians and ministers. At the base of the vertical beam, I propose the letter “A” which suggests persons who are willing to risk, to be engaged to act out their faith in church and world. This has been my journey, discovering that call, education, and ministry are ways of describing a necessary relationship in our particular pilgrimage.

To talk about call is to witness an encounter with God in Jesus Christ and to determine the meaning of that engagement. Indeed, it is testifying to experiences with God who is always calling us, demanding that we choose response for God. To respond in obedience (*ob-audire*) is to listen with intent, to pay attention to God with the inner ear, ready to follow that call wherever it leads. If we respond, the following are questions in self-examination and self-evaluation: where is God in all of this? Is this indeed the presence of God in my life? What does God want me to do? Can I do the

task? What gifts, skills, abilities do I have or need? How do I complete the job? Whatever is the first question will lead to other questions. Issues of education and ministry—service—flow from these answers.

The process is not always linear. It is not that one receives a call and one achieves an education—some kind of training which may include seminary and then an appointment from a bishop or a call to a charge to be in ministry. In many instances this does happen. The usual process is more dynamic and cyclical. The process of reflection, of exploring meaning and trying to make sense of these experiences and events in our lives might occur at any point in the cycle—call, education, or ministry.

Persons have been known to come to seminary to gain knowledge of the Bible and of the Christian faith, or better still to attain an education. Or persons might have been led to pursue a seminary degree as just another graduate degree. In acquiring that education several circumstances combine to hear God's call. Or persons might be engaged in service, acts of ministry, such as taking care of a sick parent, out of a sense of duty. It is a good thing to do. Further, into this life of caring, the Spirit prompts seeing and understanding as a way of expressing love for God, whose love is experienced in many ways.

A person may be led to discern that involvement arises out of a sense of faithfulness and the pressure of a calling. Or the call might be a challenge from one of the elders in one's home church declaring a conviction that God has called "you." However one enters the cycle, questions will arise that necessitate deep reflection. What I am contending is that one cannot discuss call without talking about ministry and preparation (inclusive of some form of education or qualification) for the tasks to which one believes one is called.

Jesus called disciples that they might be in his company, following Him. There are two words in Aramaic which can be translated "disciple." One meaning is that of a "student," one learning about the faith. The other meaning is "apprentice," practicing being a disciple. It is critical reflection on these interrelationships that has the capacity for making meaning for our life and faith journey.

A fundamental concept I have in a vision for Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) is that we become an increasingly self-critical community of scholars, some of whom are teachers. Important to our life and work is the ongoing exploration of this interrelationship between call, education, and ministry. As we convey our work, we must hold each other accountable, pacing one another on the road to excellence. As teachers, we must accept for ourselves the disciplines of rigorous and relentless scholarly pursuits, "living the questions." Seminary taught me to wrestle with the questions, even if they threw me.

Henri Nouwen suggests that "[t]eaching means the creation of the space in which the validity of the questions does not depend on the availability of answers but on their capacity to open us to new perspectives and horizons."¹ We must challenge our students to join us in these pursuits, encouraging healthy critical exchange that fosters mutual self-development. These ongoing conversations should also be encouraged among faculty in intra-, inter- and trans-disciplinary configurations. President Franklin proposes that we must also create opportunities for extra-disciplinary colloquia with partners beyond our boundaries in theological education. It is a recalling to the development of a vision of a comprehen-

¹Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Living the Questions in Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, ed. Robert Durback (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 48.

sive, integrated understanding of the life of faith in contemporary society.

A second component in my vision seeks ways of affirming that we are a community of the called. We live our lives discerning our sundry tasks as vocation—a sense of being called of God in Jesus Christ to share in what God is doing in the world. My students often hear me suggest that our work is only a part of what God is doing in the world. We have only a piece of God's action. Our task is to discover this God who has called us and to discern how and in what manner we may participate in God's work. This means recognizing the moments of encounter with God, deepening a relationship with God and seeking to live lives of obedience and faithfulness to God.

I am arguing for a community for whom practice of spiritual disciplines and the spiritual life are an important part of our being. "The goal [in such a] community is to make sure that each member of the community is heard and is properly giving the gifts that they have brought to this world."² In community we affirm, respect and deeply care for one another, freeing others to contribute their gifts for our common life. "When authentic community emerges, false differences in power and status disappear, such as those based on gender and race. But real differences remain, and so they should, for they are created by functions that need to be performed if the community is to thrive. . . ."³ This conversation about the spiritual life/character formation is ongoing not only in theological education, but also at all levels of the church. Stu-

²Sobonfu Somé, *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* (Berkeley Hills, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 1997), 36.

³Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of the Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 138.

dents hunger for it, and we struggle with ways to define and provide this in the classroom and in other parts of our community life. We must foster a balance of strong intellectual preparation and the development of one's inner resources. "For the first step away from God is a distaste for learning and a lack of appetite for those things for which the soul hungers when it seeks God."⁴ This is what I envision as we affirm ourselves as a community of the called.

Finally, I envision ITC as a community that seeks to interpret, understand and offer our work and our life in commitment to ministry—service to and on behalf of God. Initially this means executing our ongoing task of preparing women and men for participating in God's work in church and world, through providing necessary resources for personal competence and leadership development in Christian ministry in traditional and non-traditional ways. Consonant with President Franklin's vision of being public theologians,⁵ we must offer ourselves as a theological center of reference for the church and society, to examine critical questions about faith and life. We must be willing to work with all persons who yearn to discover those places where faith and life converge to make our daily existence more meaningful. We must also work with others, particularly pastors and congregations who seek to establish God's reign in all the structures and systems of society so that love and justice might prevail.

I have sought to suggest in this brief essay that exploring call, education and ministry is seminal to my phi-

⁴Abbot Palladius, "Some Sayings of the Desert Fathers," in *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*, translated [from the Latin] by Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions Books, 1960), 44-45.

⁵For a discussion of this concept, see Robert Michael Franklin, "Travelin' Shoes: Resources for Our Journey," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXV (Fall 1997): 3-7.

osophy of theology. I have also proposed that these ideas are the foundation on which I have built a vision for ITC. We are a community of scholars, some of whom are teachers, who seek to discern life and work as vocation; these should guide the ministry—service we give to others in church and world. This ethos, these attitudes and actions are expressions of our obedience and faithfulness to the God who has called us and entrusted us with these responsibilities for life and work.