



Wading Into Deep Waters: Transformation in Seminary

by Lewis Brogdon (MDiv '05)

My pastor always told us that the Lord works in mysterious ways. Those words took on new meaning for me during my years at LPTS, because the last place that I expected to experience spiritual transformation was at seminary.

In my faith tradition seminary was thought to represent everything that was wrong with the church - too focused on knowledge and not enough on spirituality. Seminary was believed to give too much attention to divisive doctrines instead of plain truth. Haven't we all heard the stories of what happened to the ministers who went to seminary and lost their faith? I don't know if I have ever been so thankful that those suspicions were wrong. I did not lose my faith while in seminary. My faith was transformed in a way that will forever shape the way I think about God, the world, and other related theological issues.

Encountering the Presence of God in the Classroom

Indeed the Lord worked in a mysterious and wonderful way while I attended Louisville Seminary. While I am not unequivocally saying that all seminaries will provide a similar experience, I am affirming that God can use a seminary education to transform lives, to revitalize

and redirect the church to greater effectiveness in ministry. I was surprised to encounter the presence of God in classrooms and in study time while pouring over books. Professors modeled a depth of faith as each class session began with a prayer or devotional. There were times in class when we silently sat and reflected on the goodness of God. In those holy moments God spoke, comforted, taught, redirected, focused, and prepared me for a level of effectiveness not previously experienced.

I was surprised to encounter a spirituality that bridges the head and heart. I confess, because I was a reasonably successful pastor before seminary, I thought I only needed more information, more content to convey to those to whom I would minister as pastor-teacher. I came to seminary expecting to merely assimilate theological information. Wrong! The professors were not just conveying information. They were as interested in spiritual transformation as they were in making sure we knew church history, biblical languages, and many theological conversations.

Finally I was surprised to encounter the power of God manifested in the community of believers. At Louisville Seminary I was introduced to the Church not just my church. Though I had an eclectic church background, God placed me in a

truly diverse community where I was compelled to witness the fidelity of believers outside the comforts of my particular faith tradition. In theology and church history courses, I examined the faith struggles of those who preceded me and yet faced many of the issues that pastors and ministers face today. Listening to them and the context out of which their writings originated gave me an appreciation for the faithfulness of God throughout all ages to those who are faithful to his name. It was incredibly challenging and transforming to accept that God was bigger than my particular, familiar faith tradition.

Experiencing transformation as part of a journey

Real spiritual transformation does not consist of mere surprises at the work of God. In my case, transformation was the result of a journey of faith. I came to Seminary having ministered in six different churches. However, God stretched my ability to think, accept, and respect diversity. If it were not for God working in me, enabling me to truly respect difference, the transforming work would have been short-circuited.



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Though there were and still are fundamental differences of opinion between many of my peers, professors, and my particular faith convictions, respecting the image of God in each person opened my eyes to ideas that have greatly enhanced my understanding and resultantly changed the ongoing conversation of theology in which we participated.

My early days in seminary were difficult because I was the only African American male, and I was also conservative in some of my views. When students walked by me without speaking or when I expressed my dislike for some of the views espoused by professors and students, I truly felt like a stranger. But it was in the safe environment of Professor Johanna Bos's course, "To Know the Heart of a Stranger," that I was better able to respect diversity because I was respected and given space to share my struggles. I became comfortable with myself and the theological differences around me.

It would have been easy to clam up and not really hear diverse ideas. It was painful, frustrating, and yet utterly enlightening to listen to those whose ideas did not remotely resemble my own. Today, as God has allowed me to participate in a few doctoral seminars and in numerous preaching engagements in churches, the depth gained from listening to the stranger, to the one who is different, has made me a more informed scholar and minister in the African American community.

Wading into the deep waters of critical thinking

The ability to critically evaluate arguments and theologies is a necessary prerequisite to a true appreciation of diversity. A pastor friend of mine told me, "all you know is what you've been taught; but what you've been taught is not all there is to know." That premise underscores the importance of critical thinking. I came to seminary with a lot of knowledge and expertise in my faith tradition, but I was not able or prepared to engage ideas outside my faith tradition. Through my courses and the continuing presence of faculty mentors, my critical abilities grew, enabling me to truly respect diversity. If you don't try to listen and understand others' views then meaningful dialogue is not possible.

Respecting diversity was one of the most challenging aspects of seminary, but I was enabled to do so because I learned that God was to be trusted even in deep waters. I am amazed by the theological depth and pedagogical patience exuded by my professors. They could have easily blown my ideas out of the theological water or systematically dismantled the underdeveloped theology that I brought to seminary. Yet they patiently and gently taught in a non-obtrusive manner by sharing their expertise and listening to my ideas and experiences. Now I realize how God used these professors to help me grow as a thinker and potential leader.

Because the professors cared about my spiritual formation, I was able to venture out into deep waters. I understand how one's faith can be dismantled and lost in a seminary not concerned about these delicate, spiritual issues. It was a blessing to be called to Louisville Seminary where God could use my professors to slowly walk me into deep waters to introduce me to a breadth and depth of thought about issues that I was oblivious to. The pastoral care of my professors made trusting God possible during this time. If there had been no trust between my professors, my faith tradition, and my convictions, I would not have waded into the deep waters of contemporary theological discourse.

Over time and through much prayer and reflection I began to find my footing and embark upon new paths. Graduation was all the more memorable to me because my professors helped me along in deep waters, which the Spirit of the living God used to transform my life and ministry. The mysterious ways in which God worked were truly marvelous in my sight, and I pray that every person called to seminary will have a life-transforming experience of their own.

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