

What We Didn't Learn in Seminary

By F. Belton Joyner, Jr.

When Professor Banks walked into the classroom for my first course in pastoral care, he did not say, “Good morning,” or “Hello, I am Dr. Banks,” or “Welcome to this class on pastoral care.” He simply took big strides to the lectern and, looking slowly from student to student, said, “Know when to refer.”

Bingo! Just like that, he had given me the kernel I needed, the confidence I needed, the permission I needed for pastoral care in the parish setting. But such nuggets of practical wisdom are rarer than many a new pastor would like. Seldom did my seminary

education make such an instant connection to the local church ministry to which I felt called. The education was solid; the teaching was profound. (How else could one describe Old Testament with Bernard Anderson and New Testament with Howard Clark Kee and Interfaith studies with Will Herberg?) But, there were a few things that seminary did not—could not—teach me. As Bishop Hope Morgan Ward of the Mississippi Area has described in her reflection on seminary, there are “things I needed to learn elsewhere, because elsewhere is a better context.”

What kind of things? For me, I had to learn “elsewhere” that not everyone will like me even though I am a nice person. At a Board meeting in my first post-seminary appointment, I quoted Matthew 28:19 in response to a question about appointments, and one man left the church, saying I had embarrassed him by throwing Scripture at him in a public meeting. The nuances of Irenaeus and the emergence of form criticism clearly did not prepare me for that encounter.

Seminary did not teach me how to measure success. I heard the shibboleths about “faithfulness, not numbers” and the warning that “you are not a prophet just because you get run out of churches.” Even so, when most of us envision the days ahead in ministry, we see churches with high steeples and attendance tallies that grow by the week. Few of us are visited by what Eugene Foote (retired, Greater New Jersey Conference) calls “the ghost of Pastorates Future,” who tells us: “Behold me! I serve a small congregation. I have always served small congregations. I will never serve a large congregation. This is pastoral ministry, and this is what you will be.”

The theological school environment is a rich, shaping environment. And so it should be. But it is not always portable. After recalling the joy he found in daily evening prayer in the liturgical cocoon of his seminary, Ray Sharritts (retired, West Ohio Conference) remembers, “I tried to recreate that in a small church in Ohio. It never worked! It took me a few years to adjust. I still hold on to my devotional and sacramental theology...and I still try to light that spark in others. But I think it would be a great help to have had some help in this process of re-entry.”

It is that transition from “hallowed halls” to “pews and pavement” that gives the seminary its final grade for effective theological education. Have we been taught facts and theory or have we been taught how to learn? If our learning stops on graduation day, our seminary journey, no matter how enlightening, has been a failure. We must learn not only theology, but how to think theologically. We must learn not only pastoral principles, but how to make nurturing decisions. We must learn not only the Church’s history, but how this generation will respond to tradition. We must learn not only the standards for missional, evangelistic outreach but how to live missionally and evangelistically.

Some of the dilemma of the post-seminary undertaking is that one is tempted to think of the daily grind as being separate from the lofty pastoral roles. I discovered, however, that it is precisely in the lot selling Christmas trees or in the hut making the church’s “famous stew” that I gain the most pastoral authority. This is permission-giving authority: “You can come into my inner house and be pastor” or “You are one of us so you can proclaim social justice freely from the pulpit.” This means that church softball leagues and getting a bear out of a tree in the church front yard before Sunday’s service (yes, that happened to Bryan Faggart of the North Carolina Conference) and going to little Egbert’s piano recital—seemingly hum-

drum work for which graduate degree credits are not required—might be the sacred places and holy relationships in which ministry occurs. (On second thought, getting a bear out of a tree on Sunday morning might not be hum-drum work.)

In spite of the best efforts of my professors, seminary did not let me know how different 2000 would be from 1960. Barbara Hays (retired, Oklahoma Conference) mentions that her divinity school did not help her on “how to use the mimeograph machine.” Likewise, seminary graduates from as recently as 2000 could not have anticipated the social changes Facebook and Twitter would bring.

Technology is just the tip of an iceberg of change that could easily sink a ministry. I did not learn in seminary that the “church culture” in which I began my ministry would have developed major antireligious overtones by the time I retired. I did not learn in seminary that the powerful hymns we sang would get left out of the new hymnbooks (or that, for some, the books themselves would dissolve into projectors). I did not learn in seminary that a sense of reverence and silence

and mystery might move in and out of fashion as a liturgical ingredient. I did not learn in seminary how to deal with church finances in changing economic times. I did not learn in seminary that just about the time I learned the intricacies of *The Book of Discipline*, the General Conference would call for reordering the life of the local congregation.

I recognize that theological education could not always alert me to “the changes that are a-coming.” It might, however, have helped me know how to ride lightly in the saddle, staying on the horse, but not so entrenched that the living God could not reach me with a living change of direction, emphasis, or habit. I must let my seminary days be a foundation, not a boundary.

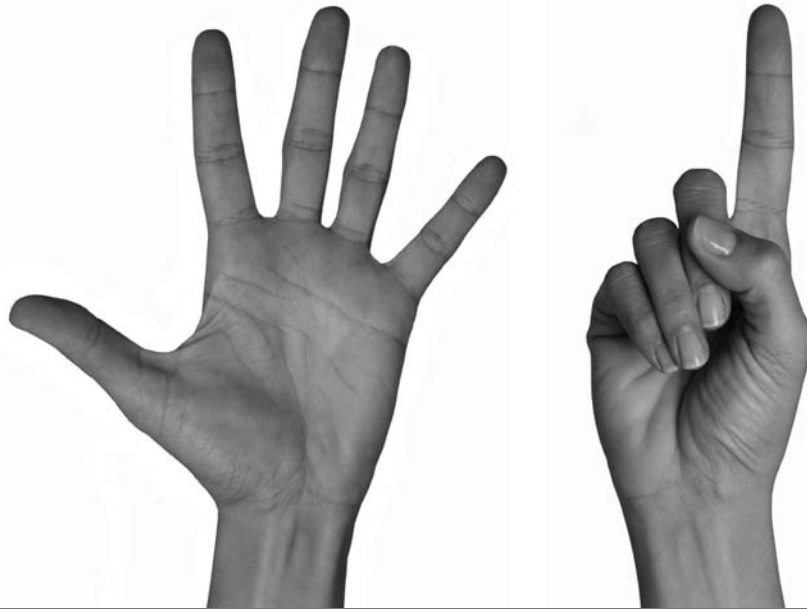
My ministry has unfolded in ways I could never have anticipated when I graduated from Drew Theological School in 1961; my ministry has been a mixture of locations and responsibilities. Those who provided my theological training could not have known just where God might use Belton Joyner. So, it is not surprising that there are things I did not learn in seminary. The remarkable gift in Jesus Christ is that theological education was a well of living water from which I can continue to draw. □

Surprise! You get to learn to drive a school bus and change tires and fix brakes and keep the kids entertained. The boiler is out? You’ve got to be kidding. Now, who do I call?

— Katherine Austin Mable
(retired, Minnesota Conference)



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Can you sum up your ministry in six words?

Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure (Harper, 2008) is a poignant new book from the editors of *SMITH* magazine. The book is comprised solely of “six-word memoirs” ranging from comical (“When all else fails, start

running”) to sentimental (“Forgot to say I love her”).

Circuit Rider asked a handful of pastors and professors to submit their reflections on leadership in exactly half a dozen words. Consider these short stories:

GOD HAS A SENSE OF HUMOR.

— Anne Wimberly

Mastered jumpshot. Short and fat. Wrote.

— Jason Byassee

**Greatness is defined
in one's grandchildren.**

— Charles Hicks

Painted toenails under a black robe.

— Carol Cavin-Dillon

GOD VERSUS BELTON. GOD HAS WON.

— Belton Joyner

Pastoral ministry fosters
codependency.

Got therapy.

— Rebecca Dolch

What is your six-word ministry memoir?

Share it with Jessica Kelley at jkelly@umpublishing.org or 615-749-6385 for inclusion in the next issue of *Circuit Rider*.

The contributor of our favorite six-word memoir (chosen at the editors' discretion) will win \$100 in books of his or her choice from Abingdon Press!