

Theological Education for Life Abundant  
Barbara A. Holmes  
Vice President of Academic Affairs/Dean  
Professor of Ethics and African American  
Religious Studies  
Memphis Theological Seminary  
Memphis, TN 38111

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## **At the Crossroads: The Relevance of Ethos and Diversity in the Practices of Theological Education**

### I ETHOS

In the unique city of Memphis, Tennessee, where Ida B. Wells Barnett battled police and trolley car attendants and sued the company for their racist seating policy, in this city where Elvis gyrated, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. died, and blues singer, Robert Johnson, purportedly sold his soul to the devil for a few years of musical brilliance, I serve as Dean of a small private seminary. Memphis Theological Seminary is an ecumenical outreach of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

During the 1960's, this small rural Tennessee denomination moved their seminary to the center of mid-town Memphis to diversify the student body. As a result of that decision, one-half of the student body are women and more than 40 forty percent are African American. "Diversity" at our school is more than a legal mandate or a politically correct term, it is a philosophical commitment that is comfortably ensconced in the bedrock of our educational mission. . .perhaps too comfortably. Of late I have wondered if our commitment to diversity needs to be dusted off and infused with fresh energy and new curricular initiatives. In our theological context, the meaning of life abundant can't be divorced from the issue of diversity or the specific context and ethos of Memphis.

For Memphis, a city situated on the banks of the mighty Mississippi, and built on cotton fortunes and slave labor, abundance is a patchwork of hope, poverty and potential. The city sits at the crossroads of rhythm and blues, dirty South riffs, barbeque and angst. This is a place where geography, music, historical memory and amnesia converge. It is also a landscape where shame and regret forestalled civic and social healing for several decades.

Until recently, Memphis had not forgiven itself for being the site of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When Dr. King's oldest son arrived in Memphis a few years ago, he mentioned that Memphis never said that it was sorry for being the site of the assassination. I am not certain that I understand the elements of "site guilt," but the Mayor, present at the time, dutifully apologized and Memphis once again placed the mantle of guilt on its municipal shoulders.

Later there was a trial to probe the conspiracy elements of the assassination. Mrs. King came and cried as she walked through the Memphis airport for the first time since the assassination. As the media captured every tear that rolled down her cheeks, Memphis once again recalled its shame. I wondered why Dallas seemed to have recovered from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, while Memphis was still paralyzed by regret. I have decided, with absolutely no empirical evidence to support my conclusion, that for Dallas it was a one-time crisis layered with the complexities of a particular brand of Southern power politics. For Memphis, the tragedy was steeped in generations of historical discord and violent racial practices that contributed to an immobilizing shame.

Today Memphis is finally shaking off its social lethargy and civic depression to confront the challenges of a new century. In the midst of this steady recovery, I wonder about the role of our urban seminary. Because we are both in and of this city, I wonder whether our specific liturgical practices can contribute to the well-being of Memphis. For example, is our use of the liturgical phrase “You are forgiven,” only an expected response to religious confessions, or can it also be a centering pedagogical theme and practice that points the way toward the collective healing of congregations, pastors and cities?

I tell you these stories about Memphis because life abundant in theological education cannot ignore cultural realities. Inevitably, a city’s inferiority complex affects the lives of its people, their ability to imagine themselves whole, and their ability to live out their faith. The question is whether a small private seminary can embody the rhythm and ethos of a city in the process of healing, and offer our students and other institutions the uniqueness of local practices that seems to be missing in seminary education today.

## II LOCAL PRACTICES AS INTEGRAL ELEMENTS OF SEMINARY EDUCATION

Because there is so much to learn and too little time, every teaching opportunity should include the integration of practice and ethos. I want seminaries in locations like San Francisco, Philadelphia, Memphis and Portland to fully embody the essence of their communities. I want them to develop or identify theological practices rooted in the uniqueness of their history in ways that will enrich us all. Then we can create truly meaningful partnerships.

If all of our pedagogical practices are disembodied and disassociated from the particularity of place, then there are fewer opportunities to create partnerships. The environmental concerns of Memphis may not be the same as those of San Francisco, but carefully developed practices would be teachable in both places.

Attention to ethos and context is theological. There is something particular about Nazareth, and something unique about the Dead Sea. I am referring to places with histories and cultures that inform theological practices. As theologians and practitioners, we cannot afford to be inattentive to the particularity of our lives and locations, our shared histories and our religious proclivities and practices. Our lives together require attention to the details of space, place and community.

### III DIVERSITY PRACTICES IN THE DELTA

Diversity as a theological commitment is easier to live with than diversity as a consistent practice. Let me offer this example: Most seminary faculties are diversified to some extent and happily so, but what happens when diversity practices result in enough racial/ethnic hires to shift longstanding power differentials on a faculty? Most student bodies are diversified and happily so, but what happens when the needs of those students must be met with significant changes in a curriculum?

At our seminary, we are revising a curriculum that reflects the best pedagogical intentions of previous decades. Accreditation reviews helped us to develop and improve our institutional and academic processes. Now we must infuse this institutional template with the ethos of the place where we live. Diversity in Memphis is no longer a predictable black/white discourse; we are in the midst of the ethnic migrations of

Sudanese, Mexican, South American and Korean communities. Accordingly, our curricular revisions must reflect the changing student body and the changing times.

We are learning that diversity can signal hospitality to marginalized segments of the community. We witness this reality when teenagers from the neighborhood walk into the seminary. Often they are desperately seeking holy presence. They come not because we issue an invitation, but because our practices of teaching and learning in struggling communities speak to who we are and what we value. In Memphis, practices of diversity require attention to race, but also to issues of class, poverty, gender and sexuality. We know that if we are to flourish as a community, it will take not some of us, but all of us.

We cannot presume that the practices that enrich and foster moral flourishing can only be gleaned from the educated, the powerful and successful. I grieve the loss of gifts sacrificed to the “isms.” We are missing the wisdom and practices of American Indian elders. In our region, they are the Choctaw, many of whom are struggling with myriad health and social issues.

We are losing the gifts of the homeless. Survival on the streets takes intelligence, time and effort. Many homeless people have learned practices that the comfortable have not. When our students serve at Dr. Gathje’s house of hospitality for the homeless (Manna House), they seem to be just passing out socks and hygiene articles, or swapping stories over coffee. The practices may seem mundane, but all involved are learning how to be human together.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, when diversity is a practice, those practices may point to areas of abundance that are not otherwise apparent. If we bracket for a moment the presumption that abundance requires economic stability, we may find vast resources even in poverty-

stricken areas. Those resources arise from the resilience and creativity of the members of that community.

For example, we are learning from South Africans (who are our Faith and Health partners) that creativity is a regenerative and teachable practice. They are mapping their resources in impoverished townships. We are doing the same in the Delta. We are also partnering with local community health services to teach our Doctor of Ministry students the connection between “leading causes of life” and Faith and Health.<sup>2</sup>

In our text for this conference, *For Life Abundant*, I was drawn to James R. Nieman’s account that, “The practices of ministry operate in several publics at once.” He said, “We intersect with those whose professional practices intersect our own.” I am suggesting that theological education flourishes when it intersects with publics whose practices we have carefully avoided and whose lives never intersect with our own.

In that regard and for that reason, we situated a Theology and Arts Institute in one of the most troubled neighborhoods in Memphis (by news accounts). Then, we invited young people in the neighborhood to examine violence through the story of David and Bathsheba. In the workshops, seminary students and community people decided that David was a likeable but violent gang member, who saw what he wanted and got what he wanted, by any means necessary. Together students began an in-depth theological exploration about violence and responsibility to one another and God. Then, they improvised a very moving performance.

Theology students grounded their biblical interpretation within the context of the community and good exegesis, while disaffected community members used their lives to reflect upon and inhabit the text. The end result was reunion and mutually learning. For a

few hours we inhabited the beloved community through the practices of presence and the freedom of performing the gospel using the script of imperfect lives.

#### IV SUMMARY

Theological education in Memphis includes cognizance of ethos, context, and diversity. Contextually grounded practices whisper the legacies of generations past, while diversity practices plumb the depths of our differing gifts. In Memphis, we find ourselves at the crossroads of meaningful, if sometimes painful historical legacies, and rich communal resources. Our practices reflect the rhythms of Beale Street, Heartbreak Hotel, and the rural pop song and gospel plea, “Jesus, Take the Wheel.”

We continue to learn how to educate with an eye toward the urgent needs of the church and the world, and with a willingness to harvest good theological practices wherever they may be found. I don’t want future generations to look upon this period of teaching and learning as fallow and imitative. Most institutions of higher learning have something unique to offer. I hope that the creative genesis of our practices will teach future generations of educators the joy of particularity, diversity and ethos as critical factors in the dawning of life abundant.

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<sup>1</sup> Phrase derived from a conversation with Dr. N. Lynne Westfield during the conference workshop, February 2009, Vanderbilt University.

<sup>2</sup> Conversations with Dr. Gary Gunderson, Senior V.P. for Health and Welfare Ministries at Methodist LeBonheur Healthcare, June 2007, Memphis, TN.