

Teaching: A Call for a Renewal of Commitment
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By
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In these two lectures I will be talking about the church, but what I will really be talking about is the church that I have come to know here, that is the United Methodist Church (UMC). If what I say has some application to other denominations, those traditions will have to see if there is a fit or not.

I will be speaking in generalities, and I am fully aware that there are notable exceptions. In fact, some of those exceptions may be the bright light that we will eventually want to turn to if we find ourselves longing for a better day in the teaching-learning ministries of the church. I will be doing some impressionistic analysis, and referring to some reports of those who were much more fully involved in the life of the UMC than I. I will bring to you an awareness that comes from several years of the United Scarrett Bennett experience, where I had greater contact with the Christian educators of the UMC than otherwise I would have been able to have. Many of those educators stay in touch, and I shared my ideas on those lectures, and they responded. In essence, I will be quoting them in places. In fact, much of the time I will be saying what others have said. Very little here is new to the discussion of teaching-learning.

Here's what I want to do. I want to establish that the UMC has been in a steady slide of diminishing commitment to Christian education. I want to establish the need for a renewed commitment, one that is made all the more significant, I think, by what has happened in the last few weeks and the implications of the response to that. I want

to establish the need for the United Methodist clergy, elders, and deacons, to be in the forefront of the turn around leadership for the renewal of that commitment, if indeed that commitment seems worthy of attention.

In the second lecture, I want to establish the need of this seminary to create that turn around motivation and capability in its students in order that they might provide that leadership for the church. I will suggest that the seminary needs to significantly reframe and revise its educational process so that it can be what it expects the church to become. In conclusion, I will talk about the opportunities, the capabilities, the challenges, and the likelihood of all of this happening within this place where I have spent many years and love dearly.

I begin by trying to establish the case that there is in fact a diminished commitment. There is a book published by the United Methodist Association of Scholars in Christian Education. These are the folks from the seminaries, the colleges, and at one time from the UMC agencies who met together regularly. They published a book last year called *Personal Narratives*, about the history of Christian Methodist education in the 20th century. It's mostly about the last fifty years. Let me start off with this quote from Robert Browning, a true blue United Methodist Christian educator and one not given to hyperbole. He says that what happened in 1972 in United Methodism was the *massacre* of Christian education in the UMC. "Massacre", that is a tough word. He goes on to point to some of the indicators. In the beginning of that decade, there was a national staff of 55 with specific programming and support responsibilities in age level variations. They were reduced in 1973 to 35, in 1978 they were reduced to 16, and in 1989 they were reduced to 10. They were spread out through all of the ministries of The Board of Discipleship with instructions to spend their time and efforts to effect even a greater reduction in specific programs of support and training for leaders in Christian education at all levels of the church life. They were placed "everywhere" and ended up "nowhere."

You see the pattern. A denomination of about 8 ½ million cannot now find ways, means, energy and determination to have more than 10 national staff people spread across all of the other ministries with the responsibility of seeing if they can help them do education in light of their concerns.

That's part of the picture. An analysis of this shows it to be partly financial. As the church has faced financial difficulties, it has decided where it can afford to cut, and Christian education has been one of the places it has decided it can cut.

One of the reasons this decline in commitment happened during this period was the impact of competing theological factions busy in the life of the church. The factions found Christian education curriculum production to be an easy target. If you want to nail somebody because you don't think they are doing what you think they ought to be doing, then you dig out the Christian education resources, spin through them, and demand that they change. Curriculum publishing used to be a very profitable business in the church, supporting not only itself but to many other parts of the life of the church. As sales fell it became evident that this production had to at least break even. It was not going to be supported by any kind of strong stewardship. Then the curriculum had to please all of the factions. As they tried to do so, they pleased none of them. And every time they made another effort, they lost another constituency.

There was another movement going on, a noble effort, which was the decision to democratize the policy-making bodies of the church. That was to see if the policy-making groups could not be representative of the various ethnic, racial, and issue groups within the life of the church. And so it was done. A quote from Ned Dewine: "It resulted in many persons in many levels of the system possessing little knowledge or understanding of Christian education, even though their decisions had great impact on the local church education of persons of all ages and stages of life." This contributed to the decline and commitment.

Another thing that happened is one that many of you have had as part of your own experience. The role of women in the UMC changed during this period. Earlier some women knew that the only place they could find a role in parish ministry was as a Christian educator. Then in the 70s along came bold, aggressive, obstinate, and persistent women who pushed their way through the bureaucracy in order to establish that there was a place for the ordained elder who was female. Having broken that door open, other women came to follow and were not at all interested in that “second ministry”... the ministry of Christian education.

In fact, Furnish says, “Women seeking ordination made sure that their transcripts showed little if any preparation for Christian education, less they be ordained and then put back into that ministry on some staff church.” Men did not flock to fill the gap in the positions from which the women escaped. Also, Chamberlain talks about this being a time when the church began to sense that the world was writing the agenda for the church. We must get out of the stained glass halls and the stained glass mentalities. All of those things we were doing were somehow irrelevant to God's work. We must hurry to join God in that work out there, and those things we were doing in here were irrelevant. Worship, education, whatever... leave it behind in order to go forth to do that which needs to be done elsewhere. Some of those internal ministries have recovered, but I don't think Christian education has.

Those are some of the insights of those people who have written in *the Personal Narratives* book, who are far more informed about this than I. I turn to my own impressions. As I recall, and it has been awhile, when I arrived here we had age level support people at the district level, Dayton South and Dayton North. Leaders for Children, youth, and adult ministries were matched by a set of support people at the conference level. And then, of course, they were matched by a set of support people at the national level. The last time I looked, and it may have changed, there was one person serving Dayton North and Dayton South and Wilmington District with some title like

“Program Director” which meant having responsibility for all of those things that had been covered in Christian education plus a whole lot of other things that needed supervision and cultivation.

I and other members of the faculty from time to time were invited to go to Grace Church or sometimes to Hyde Park in order to participate in an annual ecumenical training program for Christian education leaders. These were large gatherings of people devoted to their credentialings, interested in their call as laity. Those have disappeared. Some of us had the privilege of working with a large interesting group of people who came to us in Nashville for the final stages of their credentialing process. Most of these were very experienced educators, youth ministers, church musicians, and such. It became evident to me, not many months ago, that we had gone through that whole population and have no hope that there will be another.

This is because, if you will, the whole “farm system” had been dismantled. It used to be you got to teach a Sunday school class, and if you did a real good job they would make you the lead teacher. After you had been the lead teacher, they might ask you to be the chair of that department. If you were still around after a few years, and many were because they saw this as a vocation, you'd be ask to be the director of Christian education for that parish. And you would be a good one because you had benefited from curriculum previews and workshops for various skills. Development and observation schools, and lab schools, and all sorts of ecumenical involvements were there so that you became a very good Christian educator. Little of that exists. The lab schools are here and there, greatly reduced in the amount of time spent in them, and poorly attended. The whole farm system, which was not only the preparation of leaders, but was also the places of encouragement of a commitment. A commitment grew in that process, has also disappeared.

When I came to United, I came because the school had decided that they were going to put two people in the area of Christian education. I joined a wonderful person,

Harriett Miller, and we were to service the MARE degree and Master of Divinity. We are now at the place where we can well serve all of the interests and demands of this school with a part-time adjunct.

I think all of this extends beyond the church. I think we are caught up in a cultural milieu, which is at best equivocal about the value of education and views it as something that is a burden to be endured. If you give the students a day off from formal classes they stay away. We're not surprised at all about that. I think this reflects also a cultural attitude about the value of the church. I don't know how long this last "return to the church" will last. I'm not hopeful that it will have any legs because I have a strong sense that our culture has moved to a place where the church is part of the weekend activity and activity on weekends is recreation and purely optional. Education is not highly significant in that attitude about the entire value of church.

I take cheap shots, now and then as you know. I have reflected upon the attitude of parents by saying no parent would ever think that their child could learn to play the piano the way they think they can learn the Christian faith; and that no little toe would ever be allowed to kick a soccer ball in a league with the low expectations that we visit upon those who wish their children to participate.

I think that within the life of this **school**, in some ironic fashion, the commitment to Christian education has diminished. A representative from ATS, here for our accreditation review, said we are not alone when I described our abandoning of the MARE degree. She said we are not alone in finding that ministerial interests have shifted to liturgy, liturgical innovation, therapy, and church growth programming.

I asked my alumni, "What's going on out there in the church?" And someone from Birmingham said of a church of forty-seven hundred, "We have just gone through a Bill Easam's pew-shaking evaluation and our laity are incredibly enthusiastic now about the worship service that the laity are putting together. The enthusiasm has reached the place where they are no longer interested in church school, and no longer interested in anything

that looks like discipline because they can live from one enthusiastic moment to the next.” I don't think she knew that she had picked up an interesting word when she talked about enthusiasm. Methodists have worried about “enthusiasm” from time to immemorial. The issue has been the tension between enthusiasm and education. .

I teach a course called the “Pastor as Educator” and I invite those who are there to put on the chalkboard various possible roles they might fulfill in the future when they take on the fullness of parish ministry beyond this time in relationship to education. The modal choice, (modal means more people pick it than anything else, my son told me that), the modal choice among those in that course has been “cheerleader”. “I will be glad in the parish to cheer on those who do this ministry.” Very few have ever been willing to put teacher in the top markings of those professional call identity factors that they intend to inhabit.

One of the bright spots that has come along is Disciple Bible Study. Admission officers all over the UMC are grateful for Disciple Bible Study, because it has changed lives. People are committing themselves to work with each other for approximately thirty weeks and study a broad sweep through the scriptures. They are invited to talk about their study, and share with each other. They have found their lives changed. The irony, it seems to me, is that this should be necessary, that it should have such an impact as a rare and new thing, that it should be so extraordinary that somebody would study the Bible for thirty weeks in a conducive atmosphere and find their life changed, and say “isn't this unusual!”

There are other factors that I might indicate about my establishing that there has been a decline in commitment to Christian education. One of them is the UMC inability or unwillingness to pay for the education of its clergy. Eight and one half million people can't find enough money to pay for that process.

If it is in fact a defensible statement that there has been a diminishing commitment to Christian education, is there any reason to worry or do anything about it? I noted the music of the people in the last few weeks after 9/11 knowing full well that you do not submit comfort music to rigorous exegesis. That's not what it's about. But when it's the *Star Spangled Banner* and the Broadway tune *God Bless America* in which we find comfort, and there seems to be little attention to something like *If Thou but Suffer God to Guide Thee*, then I am not persuaded that this is a sign of a profound trust in God.

I think it is reaching out in some desperation in shallowness for that which does not exist. "There are no legs to my faith, are there any to yours? Will you carry me?" And we will. But I am also aware in myself as well as around me that we are in the midst of a smug ignorance of Islam, a smug ignorance of Judaism, a smug ignorance of any of the other religious competitors for the world's affiliation, and I think a smug ignorance of Christianity.

In answer to the question "Is it worth doing anything about?" you have to make a choice-it's up to you, you choose. Is ignorance the best guarantor of commitment, wisdom, faithfulness, and bold involvement in our redemptive confrontation of a battered world? Or is learning a better, although not foolproof guarantor of commitment, wisdom, faithfulness and bold involvement in our redemptive confrontation of a battered world? I think there are some reasons for putting your money on learning.

There is this attributed to Moses in the midst of that Deuteronomy moment, 6:4-9:

*Here, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.
Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.
Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at
home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.*

Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Jesus spoke - in Matthew 28:18-20

*All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

And Paul writing to his child Timothy: 2 Timothy 2:1-2

*You then my child, be strong in the grace that in Christ Jesus;
and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.*

I am moved to have some interest in the teaching-learning ministry of the church by these direct admonitions of the scriptures, which I think interestingly come out of people who were in tough times, who had an understanding of education's importance in the midst of the tough times. If times are smooth and there is no real trouble then maybe you can let it slide, but when times get tough, throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition, the emphasis has been teach. The people of faith must teach the present generation so that it can teach the next generation-because somewhere in the next generations to come one of them is going to have to know very, very deeply what it is that is true and what it is they believe. We must teach to reach our great-great grandchildren. There are these direct admonitions of scriptures and I invite you to think about them and muse about them, but it goes well beyond that in the strong implications of the behaviors, the model behaviors of those such as Jesus and Paul.

Jesus seemed to appreciate one title more than any other, meaning I think, teacher, "rabbi", and "rabboni," (greeted as such on his resurrection.) What shall I call this risen Lord? She said I will call him Rabboni. That's the best title. He taught. He

taught. Paul's structure in his letters, adds an indication of an implied educational agenda.

The report from the church growth people that I have heard is that the issue of retention is as much or more significant than the initial successful invitation. That it is those ministries that keep people deeply embedded in the life of the church, education being one of them that's contributing to church growth. It's not just bringing people in the front door. It's seeing if you can keep them from going out the back. And there is that phrase of a fellow who keeps coming here every time we have a youth meeting and says, "Now remember what you win them with, is what you win them to."

I am moderately convinced, to put it lightly, that the diminished commitment to Christian education at many levels and at many forms is not good news, and that it ought to be turned around for the sake of the church of tomorrow.

Our nostalgic honoring of the quadrilateral, it seems to me, is one in which experience has come to rule, enthusiastic experience has come to rule, tradition has been tossed out in both of its meanings, reason has become passive, intellectually obeisant, and scripture has been reduced to bumper stickers, to permissions to pray for prosperity, to a plethora of self-help books, and to pre-millennium rifts on the Apocalypse. That is not to me a sign of glory. I think worth paying some attention to the necessity of turning around the commitment to Christian education within the UMC and perhaps beyond.

I think it is the role of the ordained elder and deacon who must rise to the surface to provide the leadership if there is to be a sustained effort. I believe only with this leadership are the laity going to be empowered to engage in a ministry which they often willingly claim but now find shaky, that only with this leadership can the church break out of failing patterns and build new patterns with a truly reformative newness of direction.

A metaphor: There was a time when some people here at the seminary bought shares in a sailboat and tried to learn how to sail the little boat on a lake. I bought into

that, but soon bought out of it. Others, like Jim Nelson, became really fine sailors, who not only knew how to sail but also knew the names of all those things on the boat. One of the other sailors tells this story about himself. He took his little boat, which was on a trailer, to the lake and put it together. He put the mast up, and the boom on, and then he strung up the sails, and put the ropes on, the rudder on. The boat also a keel board which you shoved down into place after you had drifted off a little bit from the dock. Then it was time to catch the wind and be in business.

Well our colleague did that on a beautiful day, a day of rest and relaxation, a day for refurbishing his very soul. The wind was good, the lake was pleasant, and the sunshine was nice. It was only when he was nearing the opposite shore and began to think that it might be time to turn that he realized he had not put down the keel board. Soon after that he realized that the keel board was back on the dock. Soon after that he found himself stranded in the shallow waters of the opposite shore. It quite ruined his day. Embarrassed, frustrated, how was he going to come all the way back around to get that keel board? The fact is if you do not have a keel board or a keel on a sailing ship, you are helpless before the wind, you are helpless in the midst the waves.

If everything is going right, it might not make a whole lot a difference for awhile, but if things get windy and the waves get somehow very interesting and you find that you must steer your way through troubled waters if you are going to go where God wants you to go, then you had better have a keel. I think Christian education is in the keel building business. I believe Christian education provides depth. I think teaching-learning provides perspective. I think this ministry provides the connection to the awareness that "we have been here before," regardless of where we find ourselves, stunned by whatever may have happened, "we have been here before." We, the people of God, have been here before, if we just knew it, and we would know what we did good and bad, if we had learned.

Teaching-learning gives us the skills of hearing, talking, and understanding each other and the Divine. It gives us the experience of comradeship of a shared call, and a shared agenda. I'm convinced of three things, first there has been a decline in commitment to Christian education. The second is that this is very bad news and needs to be turned around; and the third, the ordained leadership in full cooperation with the laity have a significant and crucial role to play in accomplishing the turn-around. I have tried to establish that there has been diminished a commitment. I have tried to establish that there are strong grounds for choosing to turn around. I have tried to establish that the clergy together with dedicated laity must engage in this task together.

My thesis for the second lecture will be that if this commitment needs to be recovered, and our students need to take a role in this, then new patterns of the church's life as a learning, serving, worshipping community need to be discovered, and that the ordained clergy whose preparation we have a hand in must be taught in ways that they can set the pace and provide the guidance. My other thesis will be that the seminary must reshape its life in order to be the community of experience, in order to be a learning, serving, worshipping community, and that the shape and form of our life together is our biggest challenge. The experience I have had at this school, gives me great hope that we will have the courage to do that task.

There are three kinds of professors, I tell my students. There are those for reasons known only to themselves and to their therapists, who believe that education must always **exceed** the time available for it. Students can give you a list. There are also professors with a reduced compulsion who believe that education must expand to **fill** the time allowed up to the very brim. Then there are others, and I count among them probably 98% of the students, who believe that when you're done, you're done. We're done.