The Changing Roles of Seminaries in View of Current Demographic Changes

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I have been invited to explore with you the changing roles of seminaries in view of current demographic changes. Such changes are obvious, and their challenges many. But before we move into what they may mean for our particular situation, it is well to place the current situation and our national conditions within the wider context of what is happening today in the world. Demographic change is not limited to the United States but has become a worldwide phenomenon. When I was growing up in Cuba, the only foreigners I met were North Americans, Spaniards, and a sprinkling of students from various countries in Latin America who came to study at the seminary where I was enrolled. When I first went to study in New Haven, the only foreigners that I met were fellow students at Yale. It was later, while in France, that I met my first Africans – and they too were students from abroad. For over three decades the only Muslims I ever met in the United States were Black Muslims.

Now things have changed. In Cuba one finds Russians, Chinese and Angolans. In Angola one finds Cubans, Venezuelans, and Chinese. I have been in Bolivia in a village where everyone speaks Japanese. There are thousands of Indians in Kenya and in Guyana. The list could go on. But the point is simply that the changing demographics is not limited to the United States. It is a worldwide phenomenon.

At the same time, for obvious reasons, the change is much more noticeable in the North

Atlantic. These were the countries that for a long time colonized the southern hemisphere, and now the formerly colonized are coming to them. So, there are Angolans in Portugal, Peruvians and Bolivians in Spain, Indonesians in the Netherlands, Somalians in Italy, and Latin Americans in the United States. All of this has led to the remark that the Mediterranean is Europe's Río Grande.

Thus, the changing demographics of the United States is not an isolated phenomenon. It is not only that people have been moving to the United States from Latin America and the rest of the world, but also that people have been moving and mingling, period.

Furthermore, while migration is obviously at the root of this new situation, the changing demographics is no longer due primarily to immediate immigration. People who move from one country to another in search of a better life tend to be younger, and therefore in just about every developed country the immigrant population is younger than the natives. In the United States itself, while the growth of the Latino population was obviously propelled by immigration, at present, no matter what politicians tell us, immigration is not the main factor in Latino population growth. According to the data of the Census Bureau, the Euro-American population has almost reached the point of zero population growth. For every Euro-American who dies, the number of children born is barely above one. At the same time, for every Latino or Latina in the United States who dies, nine are born. Obviously, this has to do in part with cultural traditions that promote large families. But it is mostly due to the very young age of the vast majority of

the Latino population.

The same is true of most other immigrant populations. The church that we attend also includes a small Burmese community. Yet, the Burmese children outnumber Euro-Americans by about seven to one.

These demographic changes in the world at large are paralleled by another no less significant demographic change in the church. At the beginning of the 20th century, the vitality of the Protestant Christianity seemed to be centered on an East-West line across the North Atlantic, going from Western Europe to North America. Most Protestants lived in the nations of the North Atlantic. The church in those nations was the center of theological reflection, world mission, evangelism, and vitality in general. By the end of the century, things had changed radically. Coming out of the shadows of the Cultural Revolution, the church in China manifested extraordinary growth and creativity. Pentecostal Christianity in Latin America grew by leaps and bounds, to the point that in several countries its adherents approached the number of Roman Catholics. A fairly small Pentecostal denomination headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee, the Church of God of Prophecy, has 100,000 members in the United States and half a million in the Republic of the Congo. There are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the United States.

Something similar has happened in the Roman Catholic Church. The church in Latin America, for long apparently dormant and stagnant, has gained new vitality. In the late 20th century new

masses were written and became quite popular. A church whose life had traditionally been limited to attendance at mass under the sole leadership of the clergy, now became a church of the masses, characterized by small meetings led by lay people, often with the reluctant approval of the hierarchy. The power of this new church was such that early in the 21st century a Latin American was elected Pope – an unthinkable event 50 years earlier.

In brief, while at the beginning of the 20th century the numeric center of Christianity would have been someplace in the Atlantic Ocean, at the beginning of the 21st century it is in sub-Saharan Africa.

Such change is not unprecedented in Christian history. While for a brief time the nascent Christian church was centered in Jerusalem, soon its center of vitality and mission seems to have moved to Antioch, and then to an East-West line along the Mediterranean basin. Then, at some point around the year 800, it shifted to a North-South line running from the British Isles south through the Frankish Empire and to Rome. In the 16th century, the Iberian Peninsula became the center of Catholic expansion. Beginning in the 17th, the British Isles, the Netherlands and to a degree Scandinavia became the center of Protestant expansion. And then at some point in the late 19th century the map developed with which I grew up, centering Christianity on the already mentioned East-West line across the North Atlantic.

Thus, in a way what is happening today is simply one more of many geographical shifts that

Christianity has seen throughout the ages.

But now there is a different twist to it. Now there seems to be not one center, but many. On the one hand, when one looks for missionary vitality what stands out are things such as the thousands of Koreans serving as missionaries throughout the rest of the world, the Brazilians in Angola and Mozambique, the Nigerian priests serving the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, which the longer produces sufficient clergy, the cutting-edge theological developments in Latin America, Korea, and Africa. But on the other hand, while such vitality may be centered elsewhere, many of the resources are still based in the North Atlantic. If you wish to find missionary zeal, you may go to Korea to Brazil. But if the leadership of the church in Korea or in Brazil wishes to gain greater knowledge of the Christian tradition, of biblical studies, and other such matters, they must still come to the North Atlantic. It is here that we find the great libraries. It is here that we have Christian institutions that have promoted learning for generations. It is here that we have the leisure to reflect in ways that are not possible in other parts of the world.

Thus today, if one were to ask where the center of Christianity is, one would have to say that there is not one center, but many, and that it all depends on what you are looking for.

This is the larger picture within which we are to place the current demographic changes in the United States as a whole and of the church within the United States. I shall not take time to

describe the demographic changes that are taking place in the United States, for it is impossible not to be aware of them. You do not even have to look at the census figures that we often quote. All you have to do is to go out and walk along the streets of Grand Rapids, and you will see signs of demographic change. You will see signs in Spanish, in Korean, and in Arabic. You will see all kinds of international foods that were not available here 50 years ago. You will even see signs of intercultural mixing such as a billboard announcing in English a car with the Spanish name of "Diamante," made by a company called Mitsubishi.

And then, if you look more carefully, you will see that, just as in the worldwide scene, demographic changes in the society at large are paralleled by changes within the church, so right here in the United States the demographic changes in society are also reflected in the church. I do not know this city, but I daresay you will not have to walk very far to find a Korean Presbyterian or Methodist Church, and even less to find a Pentecostal or an independent Latino church. I also suspect that on any given Sunday there are at least as many people worshiping in such churches as there are in the older churches that already existed in the city at the beginning of the 20th century.

What may not be apparent to you as you walk the streets of Grand Rapids is that it is not only the traditional churches that are changing, but also traditional Pentecostalism. Pentecostal churches – at least, the Latino Pentecostal churches with which I am best acquainted – are also facing their own problems. Probably their main challenge is finding ways to reaffirm their

traditional teaching and fundamental experience, that God does answer prayer, while at the same time avoiding the extremes of the gospel of prosperity that claims that if you are a faithful Christian and pray ardently enough God will grant you whatever you want. Pentecostal leaders are asking themselves how to equip their leadership to be able to deal wisely with this issue.

Another fundamental issue facing Pentecostal churches has to do with leadership and its certification. One of the reasons for the growth of Pentecostalism is that anyone can start a church. But then, how does one avoid the extremes of someone who decides that he is an apostle, and who finds others willing to join him in a self-certifying "apostolic network"?

The urgency of these issues is leading many Pentecostal leaders to seek further education. They will seek it wherever they can. This also creates a problem, for there are many fly-by-night programs of theological education, some of them entirely online, whose purpose is either for someone to make money, or to push some extreme theological view that the rest of the Christian community would consider heretical. But there are also many very serious Bible institutes that have appeared in just about every city in the United States and elsewhere. They seek to do the best work they can with the resources they have, and they have the respect of wide constituencies. Yet, they lack all sorts of resources. Many lack a trained faculty. Most lack a decent library. Many need advice as to how to shape and develop a curriculum. But they are doing their best with what they have, and it is our Christian duty to support them in that endeavor.

Many of us may be surprised at the thirst for solid theological learning of many Pentecostal leaders. Allow me to illustrate this with two examples from my own experience:

First, one from Mexico. Several years ago, I was asked by the Assemblies of God of Mexico to come speak to them at a pastoral institute they were planning. They were concerned with the rise of "apostolic networks" and the attraction that these seem to have for some of their members and even their pastors. They told me it would be a fairly small gathering, for it was limited to the Federal District and the state of Mexico, and also because, since in Mexico City it is practically impossible to commute, that most of them would have to pay for their lodging and meals. I was pleasantly surprised when I arrived to discover that there were almost 3,000 pastors in attendance! No one required that they be there. I suppose many came for the fellowship of the event itself. But still, it was a clear sign of the thirst for theological education among these pastors.

The second example comes from an experience in my own home. In the early years after I finished my doctorate, I wrote *A History of Christian Thought*, in three volumes. It was fairly heavy, not just in actual weight, but in content. I now consider it one of the sins of my youth, when as a typical young PhD, I wrote in order to show how much I knew. It soon became a textbook in many seminaries in the US. I must confess that after writing it I read it only because I had to teach it in a team-taught course. After I ceased teaching, I have not read it again in its entirety and have no inclination to do so. I use it now only as a reference in order to check on

something that I used to know and have forgotten. Then, many years later, out of a concern for the many pastors in Latin America who had no formal theological education and who would not be inclined to read anything on the history of the church that was heavy or difficult, I wrote a history of Christianity in 10 fairly small books, trying to make it as simple as possible, and to relate it as closely as possible to the life and faith of the church. Eventually, through a series of circumstances that it is not necessary to narrate here, it was picked up by Harper & Row (now Harper-Collins), I translated and adapted it, and it was published under the title of *The Story of Christianity*. I soon discovered that many seminaries that until that time had used the three-volume set now opted for the simpler *Story of Christianity*. At that point, many colleagues told me that they had made this change because they found that the earlier larger and more difficult three-volume set was too much for their students. I fully understood that.

But then, some two or three years ago, a group of Pentecostal roofers was working on our house. One of them told me that in the Bible institute he was attending they were using a book of mine and asked if I would sign it if he brought it to me. When he did, I was surprised to find that the book that they were using in this Bible institutes, for students who worked during the day and could only take classes at night, and many of whom had very little education, was the longer and heavier treatise that seminaries had been dropping because it was too difficult!

I do not know what they were actually doing with this book. But to me that was a clear sign of a great change that is taking place within some sectors of the Pentecostal community, where

present-day challenges are forcing leaders to seek a better understanding of the Christian faith, of Scripture, and of their mission in society.

It is within the context of all this that we must look at the changing role of seminaries in the light of new demographic conditions. If one looks at available statistics having to do with various denominations, one quickly comes to the conclusion that most of the churches that have traditionally required a seminary degree for ordination are not growing. The major exception is the Roman Catholic Church – and this has to do with immigration rather than with the missionary and evangelistic zeal of North American Roman Catholicism. My own denomination, the United Methodist Church, shows decline in numbers. And the decline would be much greater were it not for the growing number of Latino, Korean, Brazilian, and other ethnic minority churches.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not agreeing with those who say that a seminary education takes away your faith or quenches your evangelistic zeal. I do not think that there is a cause-and-effect relation between a church requiring a seminary education for ordination and its own lack of growth. The connection between these two realities is not education but demographics. The long-established mainline churches have long served a part of society –and a class within that part of society– that is no longer the majority of the population and whose size is diminishing.

Quite purposely, I have refrained from looking at the statistics and programs of this particular seminary. I do not believe it is my task to tell you what you are to do but simply to put forth some of the realities that I see in the larger picture of North American theological education.

This reality includes several factors. But allow me to begin with the most obvious:

First of all, most of the Protestant denominations that have traditionally established and supported seminaries are either not growing or declining in membership. These are also the same denominations that created several of the most prestigious interdenominational theological seminaries.

Second, since these denominations are not growing, and since in many cases their smaller churches are either disappearing or merging with others, there are fewer pulpits to fill, and therefore, there is less need for seminary graduates in those denominations.

Third, in some of these denominations the emergence of ethnic minority churches and the pressing need to provide ministerial leadership for them has led to the creation of alternative routes for ordination. Thus, the United Methodist Church has what it calls the Course of Studies. The Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Episcopal Church have similar programs. The Presbyterian Church in the USA is creating a body of lay ministers – people who are trained outside of seminary programs and are allowed to perform most of the work of ordained

ministers but are not eligible for ordination.

Fourth, the very growth of churches that do not require an M.Div. for ordination means that institutions offering such a degree, and the Association of Theological Schools, no longer have the monopoly of theological education. Today people are being trained for pastoral ministry in a myriad of ways – and some in no way at all save their own experience.

All of these issues, combined with changing patterns in philanthropic giving, have created a serious crisis for many seminaries. Examples abound. The oldest Protestant seminary in the nation had to sell its properties and move to New Haven to merge with Yale Divinity School. In the mid-20th century, Union Theological Seminary was the flagship of Protestant theological education. When I went to seminary, and for many years after that, theological libraries throughout the nation and in many other parts of the world employed the system of classification developed at Union. When the professors at Union spoke on any political or social issue their comments made the headlines of the New York Times. The institution's endowment fund seemed to guarantee continuing success. Yet today, Union's endowment has decreased considerably, and the seminary has found itself in the need to sell part of its campus and t0 place its famed library under the management of Columbia University.

To me, this story about Union is indicative of the danger facing those institutions that are so secure – or think that they are so secure – that they do not need to change with the changing

situation of the church and society around them.

Seminaries are making a number of moves in response to the new demographic changes. There are several Roman Catholic schools of theology that before graduation require sufficient knowledge of Spanish to perform pastoral duties. Many Protestant seminaries are establishing Hispanic programs, or programs for Koreans, Vietnamese, or other cultural minorities.

These programs vary. Some of them are full-fledged M.Div. or D.Min. in Spanish – some mostly online, but most hybrid programs require both online and class work. These programs are making an important contribution to the theological education of the Latino and Latina leadership of the church. In some cases, they have the shortcoming that they must use adjunct faculty to such an extent that the degree is not on a par with the English-language degree. Some also have the shortcoming that they help students to get along without learning English, and thus not be able to take the advocacy and leadership role that is required of them.

Other programs offer a certificate with little or no standing in the educational community at large. Some seminaries have established parallel Bible institutes and open the way for some of the most promising alumni of these institutes to enter the seminary itself as special students, or perhaps, after a probationary period, as full students. Some are founding their own Bible institutes in the hope to take advantage of a new agreement between the ATS and AETH, (the Association for Hispanic Theological Education), so that students who graduate from a Bible

Institute whose quality is certified by AETH can be accepted into an ATS-accredited seminary on an equal standing with other students having a Bachelor's degree.

One common trend that I find as I travel around seminaries in the country has to do with the establishment and growth of two-year Master's degrees focusing on pastoral ministry or some particular aspect of it. As a result of the conditions I have just described, in which there is this vast number of people who have been in pastoral ministry for years, and now find themselves in need of further education, the enrollment in these two-year programs is growing rapidly. Students in these programs most often belong to denominations that do not require an M.Div. for ordination.

By and large, seminaries find it relatively easy to establish such programs, for most of the courses are the same as are taught for candidates for ordination in the M.Div. program. All one has to do is create a curriculum around the courses that are already being offered anyhow.

This is a very attractive proposition for seminaries that find their regular registration in the M.Div. program declining and can now fill the resulting vacancies with these students enrolled in a two-year degree. As a result, there are a number of seminaries whose enrollment has not declined in the last 10 or 15 years, but in which the number of M.Div. students as well as the number of students from their own denomination, is drastically reduced – sometimes by as much as 40%. This provides a valuable service to the church at large, making theological

education available to many who would otherwise not be able to attain it.

This means that the emerging demographic situation is leading seminaries to widen the scope of their mission so as to include not only the training of candidates for ministry in their own denominations, but also the education of leaders for other denominations and traditions, and particularly in preserving and offering to the wider church the most valuable insights of their own particular theological and confessional tradition.

There are, however, at least two considerations that must be taken into account. The first of these is pedagogical. Teaching preaching to a student just out of college who has never preached except on some very particular occasion is not the same as teaching preaching to someone who has been doing it for 20 years. Teaching Scripture or theology, or counseling is not the same for one as for the other. At present, most students in the two-year program do not make a particular point of these differences and are quite grateful that they are able to join the upcoming generations in their education for pastoral leadership. But as their numbers grow, the time will inevitably come when these students in two-year Master's degrees will begin voicing their need for different pedagogical approaches and different course contents. For seminaries themselves, this will mean that they will no longer be able to offer these degrees "on the cheap," by simply bringing students into already existing courses. I know of no seminary that is dealing seriously with this issue. Most are simply postponing it for another time when facing it will be unavoidable.

The other consideration that must be taken into account has to do with the financing of theological education. We are all aware that many seminaries are undergoing a financial crisis. In some cases, this crisis is severe enough to threaten the very existence of the institution. A few institutions, on the other hand, are fairly secure in their endowments, and for them the crisis means simply that they cannot open new programs or must close some existing ones that they consider peripheral to the mission of the school. In the long run, these fairly secure institutions may have a greater problem than the others, for it is easy for them to postpone facing the present demographic challenges until a time when it will be too late.

In any case, if it is true that seminaries that have long focused on the preparation of ministers for a particular denomination will have to widen the scope of their mission so as to serve the church at large, this will have serious consequences for the task of raising funds for these institutions. For generations, denominational seminaries have appealed for support within their own denominations, telling people that they are helping prepare leaders for their own churches. Now it will be necessary to undertake an entire program or re-education of denominational constituencies so that they may see the value of what their seminaries are doing for the entire church of Jesus Christ and for its mission in the world. This will not be easy, and I know of no denominational institution that has even begun to develop a plan to do so.

The current times, and even more so the times ahead, will present great challenges to the entire church and to its institutions. Informed critical theological thinking will become as

urgently necessary as it ever was. I believe that thanks to God's munificence we have been provided with the tools and institutions necessary for a faithful response. I trust that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we shall find ways into the future from which God is calling us.