

I am about to say something that you do not often hear from a dyed-in-the-wool, card-carrying, self-affirming Presbyterian: I wish I were an Episcopal bishop. At least I wish I were one this week. From what I have seen of your agenda, you are treating yourselves to a feast of perspectives on what will be the social and religious realities in the years to come and how churches like yours and mine should respond.

Before I suggest how leadership should be formed for today's and tomorrow's context, let me add to your already groaning board my own sense of what that context will be. I'll be brief. Just two predictions.

In the third millennium, North Americans will choose their religious identities rather than having them assigned by ethnicity or family tradition. This trend is already well underway. Last month I went to a double wedding in an Episcopal church. The spouses were two former Roman Catholics, a life-long Jew, and someone who is Buddhist as well as Episcopalian. Most of the guests were members of the congregation. Inveterate researcher that I am, I talked to dozens of them about their reasons for joining. Most were attracted by the church's mission outreach to the homeless and hungry—the largest such program in the city. Others were there because of the congregation's openness to LGBT persons. Only a handful of my unscientific sample could be described as white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Episcopalians by birth. Most of the congregants chose their Anglican identity—as the sociologists say, they achieved it.

The loosening of ascriptive ties to particular traditions means that all our churches have a wide field for recruitment. It also means, however, that there are no guarantees. Choice is a phenomenon that both giveth and taketh away—especially the young. You may have heard of the rabbi, the Roman Catholic priest and the Episcopal bishop who all had bats in the belfries of their respective sanctuaries. The rabbi, grounded in traditional Jewish reverence for creation, called the pest control people who chased the bats away and sealed the cracks so they couldn't come back. The Catholic priest invoked just war theory, got a shotgun and killed the bats. The Episcopal bishop took her Book of Common Prayer to the belfry of the cathedral and confirmed the bats, whereupon they flew away and were never seen again. In a culture of choice, the chances that the children of Episcopalians will be Episcopalians themselves are slim.

Second prediction: There will be less religious adherence in the years to come. Americans remains the most religious country in the Western world—almost everyone believes in and prays to something—but patterns of belonging are changing fast. Christian churches are losing both attenders and members. In the mainline, this is not, as many believe, because conservative and non-denominational churches are stealing our sheep. Most people who actually leave mainline churches don't go anywhere. Our chief competitor is the Sunday morning newspaper. Those who congregate at the local brunch spot have not stopped believing, but they think they can do that just as well—maybe better—on their own than they can in a religious community.

And those who do join or attend regularly are less stuck on us than “members” used to be. Today's members get their religious goods and services from all over: one congregation for a Bible study, another for the preaching or music, a third for the church school for their kids; and beyond congregations, there are books, blogs, and media figures who shape our members' views and values. The name of the religious game in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America is eclectic. In the

future, no religious tradition is going to have exclusive claim on the hearts and religious ideas of those affiliated with them.

So what does this mean for religious leadership and how it should be formed? It means that the model that has dominated Christian ministry in the mainline since the 1950s is not going to work. My name for that model is chaplaincy. By chaplaincy I mean ministry conceived as private service, worship leadership and pastoral care more or less exclusively for those pay for it. Chaplaincy in this sense is not confined to hospitals, prisons, schools, military units, and the courts of secular and religious rulers. It has become the dominant model of parish ministry as well. Religious faith is now an intensely private matter, at least among us well-mannered mainliners. Stephen Carter says that it has become Americans' favorite hobby. Like a hobby, religion is domestic activity, practiced indoors, where priests and ministers mostly take care of their own. Some charitable work in public is approved, but if parish clergy try to spend any substantial amount of time in the public arena, you know what happens: they get pulled back. I can imagine that bishops feel these same pressures. You are ours, you hear from your people and clergy. Stay home and take care of us. The broader culture and the wider society will take care of itself.

But they won't. The chaplain model worked fine in the 1950s, when almost everyone had their faith nurtured in a mainline congregation. But in the multitasking society of the present and future, where people drop in and out of churches, change faith traditions as easily as their hair color, make their own creeds, profess their faith on social networking sites and Tweet their prayers—in this environment, private, in-house ministry has limited impact.

For the Gospel to be proclaimed and heard in the coming context, we need a different kind of ministry: more powerfully learned, more public, more deeply formed and grounded, and more skilled at building institutions .

A word about each of these qualities. Powerfully learned. In a world where access to information is increasing exponentially, religious leaders have to know a lot. Let me be clear: we do not need pedants. But we do need Christian ministers who can help an instant messaging society knit millions of disparate pieces of data a coherent world view that creates community and sustains life. To accomplish this that takes knowledge, not only of Christian theology and other religions, but also of their relationship to science, philosophy, history and human behavior. Religious leaders must also have consummate communications skills—that's the public part. Because fewer people are darkening church doors and because those who do come have many different backgrounds and get their ideas and values from multiple sources, ministers must be prepared to preach, teach and model the faith for diverse audiences—well beyond the church as well as within it. The modeling is a special challenge: Living the faith in ways that speak to a world that is now deeply suspicious of clergy and other religious figures—that is going to take deep spiritual grounding. Some old models of integrity have collapsed, in full public view, and new ones are called for. And last, skills to build institutions. It's no accident that in denominations like mine and I think yours, the majority of congregations are small, but the majority of members are in larger congregations. Size per se is not, I think, the attraction. People in a radically unsettled world are drawn to stability. I am a big fan of small churches—I belong

to one—but if our traditions are to have a base in the future, all our institutions, regardless of size, need to be durable. Our leaders must know how to make them so.

How will leaders like these be shaped and formed? Today’s seminary programs are not adequate to the task—too many of their graduates are insufficiently learned, or learned in the wrong ways: too many are oriented to tending their little flocks, not to the wider world Christ came to save; too many of the graduates are spiritually self-absorbed; too few are spiritually centered, tough and selfless; and too many are clueless about what it takes to build a strong institutional base for their ministry. Seminaries in their present form are not providing leaders for the coming context.

But: there is no future for your denomination, or mine, or any religious tradition, without theological seminaries. I will not pick what I know is a bone of contention in your denomination, about whether priests should be trained on campus or in their home dioceses. But I will say this: the future of your church requires faculties who devote full-time to making the connections between faith and other kinds of knowledge—that cannot be done on the fly—and future religious leaders need an intense encounter in some setting with the teaching of one of those faculties. Those future leaders also need to learn to think and act institutionally. They get that in the best field education and international immersion programs. They need exposure to persons—faculty and students—from all over, to hone their skills in listening to and communicating with persons very different from themselves. And most of all, religious leaders for the coming context need what the best schools do best: they need to be profoundly upset. A church executive once described to me the effect on him of education in his denomination’s strongest seminary: “The faculty took us by the heels, turned us upside down, so that all the theological change fell out of our pockets, and when they set us down, we had a Gospel we could stand on for the rest of our lives.” The kind of confrontation that leads to theological, spiritual, and personal groundedness, which is the core of the kind of ministry the future will require, can happen in a variety places, but it most dependably occurs in the best schools.

As you well know, the Episcopal Church has too many seminaries and too few strong ones. You bishops don’t have the formal power to rationalize the system of theological education. You do, however, have enormous influence. By where you decide to send your postulants—and I will go so far as to say that most of them should spend some time related to an accredited theological school in some way; by whom you choose as partners in your local training programs for clergy and laity; and, not least, by the encouragement you can give to donors (every potential major donor to seminaries resides in one of your dioceses): by all these means, you can lend support to the seminaries that are building for the future. You can and should favor those that not only have forward-looking programs, but that also are taking the steps that will make them durable, sturdy, strong in the future, by their competent management, creative partnerships, and where necessary by exploring—dare I say the word?—mergers.

This great tradition needs seminaries to survive, and the seminaries need your help. Please give it them.

Barbara G. Wheeler  
House of Bishops, Phoenix, Arizona  
September 20, 2010