



Theological Education in Pastoral Formation

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Abstract “Theological Education in Pastoral Formation” identifies key issues that both Hispanic and Asian North American churches face in the theological education and formation of pastors and ministry leaders.

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INTRODUCTION

According to a recent report provided by the Association of Theological Schools, the number of non-white students—which includes Hispanic and Asian North American (HANA) students—enrolled in U.S. and Canadian seminaries has increased 55 percent over the past two decades.¹ Furthermore, the same report indicates that 80 percent of Asian American students and 64 percent of Hispanic students chose to attend evangelical schools. As a growing number of HANA students enroll in predominantly white U.S. evangelical seminaries, how are they being shaped by their seminary learning experiences? What are some key challenges HANA students and faculty members encounter at these schools? What might be different about how Hispanic and Asian North Americans respond to their theological education in these settings? These are some of the questions that shaped our track conversation as we examined the role of theological education in the process of training HANA pastors. All participants in this track had done at least a part of their theological education in North American evangelical seminaries, and all but one currently work at a major U.S. evangelical seminary, either as a faculty member or an administrator.²

I. KEY ISSUES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

In examining the experiences of HANA students and faculty members in predominantly white evangelical seminaries, our group identified the following three key issues as being significant: experiences of displacement, lack of contextualization, and the definition of “successful” ministry.

EXPERIENCES OF DISPLACEMENT

For many HANA seminarians, a pervasive sense of displacement characterizes their seminary experiences in multiple ways. For one, their seminary learning is often disconnected from their church

¹ The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, “Racial/ethnic students represent largest growth area for theological schools,” <http://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/documents/racial-ethnic-growth.pdf> (accessed October 10, 2014).

² Our track members serve at Talbot Theological Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Seattle Pacific University’s School of Theology, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

communities and experiences. Many HANA students received their calling to vocational ministry while participating in their own ethnic immigrant churches, churches shaped by particular histories, social locations, and faith traditions. For many, their plan is to return to these churches after they complete their theological education. Their desire to serve their own faith communities play a key role in these students' understanding of their "calling" from God and explain why they are going through the costly process of a theological education. However, their seminary courses are designed largely *by and for* those who participate in predominantly white ecclesial communities and carry on an Enlightenment/Western-centric logic, thus creating a profound and unsettling sense of displacement for many HANA students. Many HANA seminarians often wrestle with the question, "Why am I here?"

At the same time, evangelical seminaries, compared to their mainline counterparts, have not yet developed constructive approaches to engage cultural differences, issues of the power and privilege, and institutional racism. The lack of emphases in these areas, in turn, hinders these schools' ability to hear and process HANA students' concerns and perspectives. Even when there are discussions about race and racial reconciliation on these seminary campuses, these conversations are too often narrowly framed around the conflict between blacks and whites, thus displacing HANA members from such conversations. As a result, schools fail to optimize opportunities they have to forge meaningful partnerships with HANA students and faculty members in making constructive changes so that they can be more effective in training all their students for today's diverse and globalized world.

Finally, the absence of organized HANA learning communities on these campuses cause HANA seminarians to feel isolated during their theological education. During recent decades, many mainline seminaries have established "centers" for Asian American or Hispanic Ministries, intentionally providing a space for communal learning and mentoring for their HANA students while developing theological and ministry resources for HANA churches. Most evangelical seminaries thus far have not provided such institutional spaces for communal learning for the growing number of HANA students. Instead, what these students experience on their campuses is a culture of what one educator calls "insistent individualism."³ In such an institutional culture, where meaningful communal practices and values are rarely embraced, HANA students and faculty members often feel displaced, as if they are guests in someone else's house.

THE LACK OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Intimately related to the issue of displacement is the lack of contextualization that characterizes many evangelical seminaries' approach to theological education. Given the growing enrollment and financial challenges they encounter, most seminaries are compelled to recruit students from all backgrounds, including HANA students. However, these theological institutions are not, on the whole, adequately prepared to equip students from diverse backgrounds for their future ministries. Theological reflections modeled on these campuses are primarily shaped by a set of questions and categories that emerged primarily from European and Anglo North American church contexts, often neglecting those issues and challenges that are significant to "other" churches, including HANA churches. Similarly, ministry courses that are offered often highlight pastoral and congregational ministry practices that might be effective in Anglo churches but may not work as well, or might even be counterproductive, in other settings.

Furthermore, in their seminaries, many HANA students do not have opportunities to reflect upon the history of their own faith communities, how their cultures and Christian faith intersect in their congregational settings, and what might be their particular calling in today's globalized world. Compared to mainline seminaries, evangelical schools have been slow to offer courses that focus on non-Anglo churches' histories, theological reflections, and ministry practices. Perhaps even more critically, evangelical seminaries have hired far fewer HANA faculty members, even though an overwhelming

³ John B. Bennett, *Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality* (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, 2003).

majority of HANA students currently attend these schools. Consequently, many HANA students go through their theological education without mentors who understand their faith communities and the particular issues these congregations face, mentors who can teach and model contextualization.

The added complexity here is that not all HANA students feel called to serve in their ethnic churches; instead, many are preparing to serve in a variety of different cultural contexts. While many aim to return to their ethnic immigrant churches, some plan to serve in pan-ethnic churches (i.e., English-speaking multiethnic Asian American or Hispanic congregations), while others prepare to serve in multiracial or predominantly white churches. In fact, in today's increasingly diverse ecclesial contexts, all seminarians, not just HANA students, need to be equipped to serve in a wider range of cultural contexts. In the past, most seminaries offered at least a course or two in the area of contextualization, primarily seeking to prepare students for overseas missionary work.

As of today, the fact of the matter is that ethnic theologies are still being represented as subaltern theologies within the academic theological establishment of North America. They fall into an adjectival category: Korean-American, pan-Asian, Chinese-American, Hispanic, and so forth. Classical theologies and the like, on the other hand, fall into the substantival category and are referred to simply by totalizing nomenclatures: biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, Christian theology, or simply *theology*. Therefore, the naming of different theological discourses is more than appropriate when such names express self-reflection and self-representation. The point of criticism here is that we need the same to happen with Western discourse (i.e., Anglo-European Christian history and not merely Christian history; the same goes for British-German systematic theology, Western spirituality, etc.). In addition, today, seminaries need to think about requiring all their students to take courses on contextualization and, perhaps more importantly, encourage faculty members to intentionally model how theological and ministry contextualization is done in each course.

DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

The third issue with which HANA students and faculty members wrestle is the image or definition of vocational success that is explicitly and implicitly emphasized in their seminaries. Every organization, including academic institutions, has its own set of heroes, individuals who embody the institution's values and goals. For most evangelical seminaries, the heroes that they lift up before their students often are successful megachurch pastors who are known widely for their preaching and leadership expertise. These pastors are often invited to speak at special gatherings on campus and their books are often used as texts. While there are many non-Anglo pastors who have significant ministries in their own faith communities, these pastors are often overlooked. In such a setting, HANA seminarians, like their peers, are repeatedly exposed to a particular narrative of success, which many eventually internalize, even when the leadership style might not serve well in their own ethnic contexts. Other HANA seminarians, on the other hand, resign to the idea that they cannot be "successful" in their ministries because they cannot be the next Bill Hybels or Tim Keller.

Like their students, HANA faculty members are also under pressure to embrace a particular narrative of success as faculty members. In order to be hired, promoted, and to successfully attain tenure at these institutions, they are strongly encouraged to do certain types of research and publishing, typically those that meet the expectations of predominantly white academic communities, whether they be academic guilds or tenure committees. Consequently, these scholars feel pressured to do their scholarly works to address questions and issues that earn academic approval, even if they have little or no relevance to their own church communities. Many HANA faculty members lament that their activities of research and scholarship pull them even further away from their church communities. Furthermore, due to institutional policies and practices that tend not to affirm deep involvement in their congregations, HANA faculty members feel that they are often going against the current when they are regularly involved in congregational preaching and teaching ministries. Since many HANA faculty members began their

vocational journey in order to serve their churches, these institutionalized definitions of and pathways to success can create significant and ongoing inner conflict and angst.

II. HISPANIC AND ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN SEMINARY EXPERIENCES: EXPLORING POSSIBLE DIFFERENCES

DISPLACEMENT

Historically, both Hispanic and ANA communities have experienced a profound sense of displacement in U.S. society. Perceived as “perpetual foreigners” and “probationary Americans,” members of these two communities have often felt displaced in their own country even when their families had lived in the U.S. for many generations. Sadly, many Hispanic and Asian North American students, as mentioned above, continue to encounter similar experiences of displacement in their own evangelical seminaries, their Christian learning communities. Their shared experiences of being treated as strangers and outsiders in multiple contexts, including at their seminaries, can forge a common bond to bring together Hispanic and Asian North American seminarians and faculty members.

At the same time, due to differences in their histories, their social locations, and how they are perceived by the dominant group, members from these two communities also experience displacement somewhat differently. Hispanic seminarians often feel that they are greeted with a degree of skepticism from the seminary’s academic community because they are viewed as academically handicapped to go through graduate-level theological education. Consequently, Hispanic individuals who choose to attend U.S. seminaries feel the added pressure to prove their ability to perform academically—to work harder to demonstrate that they can be contributing members of the seminary learning community. Some Hispanic individuals, on the other hand, choose not to explore the possibility of pursuing a formal theological education, concluding “there is no place for us here.” This is further complicated by the historical awareness of those Hispanics belonging to communities that never migrated to the United States, as in the case of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, who in spite of their status and history are treated as outsiders even by newer Anglo-American migrants.

Asian Americans, on the other hand, suffer from other stereotypes that can also marginalize them. There is a widely shared recognition that Asian North Americans come from cultures that prize educational achievement, reinforcing a perception that these students work hard to complete their theological programs at their seminaries. However, there is a stereotype that Asian and Asian North American seminarians simply care about the goal of attaining the highest academic degree, and that they are not interested in education per se. While recognized to be high achievers, Asian North American students, in the end, are also viewed as less-than-optimal learners. Such negative views formed against HANA students, whether it is as “unprepared under-achievers” or as “competitive over-achievers,” can further deepen the feeling of displacement for these seminarians.

THE LACK OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

The monocultural, Euro-centric nature of theological education found in most evangelical seminaries poses a challenge of contextualization to all students, including HANA students. However, our track conversation also highlighted the possible differences in how Hispanic and Asian North American seminarians respond to this issue of contextualization.

Among Hispanic members of the track group, there was a strong consensus that Hispanic theologians, pastors, and seminarians recognize the important role that their culture plays in understanding their beliefs and practicing their faith. One member summarized their widely shared conviction this way: “Our culture carries our faith, and the two cannot be separated.” On the Asian North American side, there

seems to exist a wide range of perspectives on the relationship between faith and culture. On the one hand, most first-generation Asian immigrant churches aim to hold on to both faith and culture, identifying that the task of maintaining ethnic culture and transmitting it to the next generation are important functions of their churches. Many second-generation congregations, on the other hand, react against this orientation, often seeking to “de-ethnicize” their churches. These Asian North American evangelical churches tend to over-spiritualize their understanding of the ethnic identity and ministry of their churches while at the same time uncritically adopting the ministry practices and values of mainstream evangelical churches.

Another important difference is the role ecumenical dialogues play in doing theological reflections in HANA faith communities. According to Russell Jeung’s study of Asian American congregations in the Bay area of California, one of the significant characteristics of these churches is that mainline and evangelical congregations have distinctly different ministry orientations and directions, and that most churches in these two theological camps tend not to dialogue with one another.⁴ His study found that while Asian American mainline congregations emphasize their racialized group identity and their calling to engage in the ministry of justice from their social location, Asian American evangelical congregations tend to focus primarily on personal faith and reaching out to those who are connected through friendship ties and shared cultural interests. To put it differently, Asian North American evangelical pastors and congregations seem to have little or no opportunities to do critical theological reflections that take seriously their multiple contexts of ministry.

Hispanic congregations, on the other hand, given their common history of colonization and evangelization in Latin America and the United States, seem to have identified common loci for their understanding of the ecclesial community. While they too have those congregations that are more evangelical and more liberal in their theological orientations, they are coming to the recognition of the importance of their shared (and longer) history, their common language (i.e., Spanish), their strong shared identity as a “*mestizaje*” (mixed/multiracial) people, and the church’s need to address both the spiritual and social needs of their people. Partly due to their ongoing and collegial dialogue with those who come from different theological heritages, Hispanic evangelicals, compared to their Asian North American counterparts, seem to have a more robust and developed understanding of the relationship between their culture and faith, therefore being more attentive to contextual factors as they do their theological reflections and develop ministry practices.

DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

Growing up in immigrant homes, many of us were constantly encouraged by our parents to pursue the “American Dream” as they repeatedly reminded us that this was the reason they decided to immigrate to the United States. For HANA seminarians who are preparing for vocational ministries, the narrative of the “American Dream” can easily be transformed into the narrative of “successful ministry.”

For many Asian North American seminarians, being successful pastors may mean leaving behind their ethnic faith communities. Starting in the 1990s, Asian North American churches experienced what is often called the “Silent Exodus,” as many frustrated second-generation Asian American church leaders and members left their ethnic immigrant churches to look for more autonomy and freedom in shaping their congregational ministries.⁵ Since then, many Asian North American seminarians have linked their “success-in-ministry” narrative with a version of the acculturation narrative. Most seminarians begin their ministry journey by serving as a part-time youth pastor at their ethnic immigrant churches. However,

⁴ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

⁵ Helen Lee, “Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian Church in America Reverse the Flight of Its Next Generation?” (*Christianity Today*, August 1996, 50–52).

upon graduation, many hope to serve in broader ministry settings, envisioning the move to pan-Asian American and then ultimately to multiracial congregational ministries...and all the while moving to larger churches. In this success narrative, it can be said that one's success can be measured partly by the growing distance between one's ethnic church and oneself.

Similarly, Hispanic seminarians and lay leaders are expected to assimilate or mimic the pattern of success and progress proposed by Anglo Protestant missions. However, given the experience of five centuries of forced Western evangelization, many Hispanics have learned to resist such a pressure and created alternative ways to reconcile their ethnicity and their westernized faith. Many third- and fourth-generation Hispanic pastors continue to serve in their ethnic congregations, engaged in bilingual and bicultural ministries. Similarly, most Hispanic seminary faculty members also continue to participate actively in their ethnic churches. One of the Hispanic members of the track noted that a Hispanic theologian would lack credibility if she were not respected as a preacher in one's own ethnic church. The enduring commitment to and relationship with one's ethnic church, then, continually shapes Hispanic pastors' and theologians' understanding of what a successful ministry is.

III. CONCLUSION

How HANA seminarians experience displacement, the lack of contextualization, and the "success" narrative during their seminary years offer a number of helpful insights to seminary educators and to HANA churches. For those who are serving as administrators and faculty members in evangelical seminaries, it is important to find ways to welcome and embrace students and faculty members from diverse cultural backgrounds, not as "guests," but as fellow members of God's household (Eph. 2:19) so that theological reflections that are done and ministry stories that are told fully reflect the experiences of all God's people. With the racial/ethnic composition of minorities in the general U.S. population projected to grow to majority status by 2040, U.S. evangelical seminaries must start making these critical changes if they are to continue to carry out their mission in an increasingly multiracial and multicultural world. HANA faculty members and students can be invaluable partners in facilitating such changes.

For HANA churches, it is important that they think creatively and collaboratively about the task of providing a more optimal theological education to their future pastoral and lay leaders. What might be a constructive partnership between HANA churches and seminaries look like? Given the current budget and enrollment challenges they face, many seminaries are actively seeking to strengthen their ties with various church communities. With the help of HANA theologians and pastors, seminaries at a minimum might be able to identify and address certain blind spots that exist in their current practices of teaching and learning. Furthermore, recognizing that seminary programs by themselves cannot carry out the task of training future pastors, HANA churches can collaboratively create new spaces for learning and formation for their pastors, encouraging seminary graduates to find mentors and peers with whom they can continue their pastoral formation journey. Perhaps future HANA gatherings will play a strategic role in developing and expanding such spaces of mutual learning and partnership.

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