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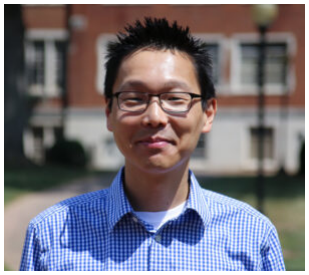

Can the Seminary Faculty Meeting be Saved?

William Yoo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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My family spent a lot of time this summer traveling in our car. As we drove up and down several eastern and southern states, with stops in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, the thing we dreaded most was traffic. We groaned and sighed when coming to a sudden stop as the smartphone displayed a bright red line along our route. Even when Siri tried to comfort us, indicating that we were still on the fastest route, we exchanged looks of disgust and exasperation with one another. But traffic did not deter us from travel, and we were always relieved when we made it to the next destination in our journey. Ultimately, we accepted that the traffic we encountered was inevitable and paled in comparison to the joyous experiences we shared together.

Reflecting on traffic evokes the faculty meeting at my seminary and probably other seminaries as well. Here is an obvious and perhaps irrefutable thesis statement: Theological educators do not like faculty meetings. In fact, many of us despise them. We think faculty meetings are ineffective misuses of time (cue the "This could have been an email" meme) and sometimes dangerous spaces abounding in microaggressions that stem from intercultural missteps and interpersonal conflicts. But we accept that the faculty meeting is part of the job. When I talk with colleagues from other institutions, we commiserate about the faculty meetings at our respective seminaries and observe how they lack the collaborative spirit and invigorating dialogue we have experienced during the Wabash Center's workshops and gatherings. At my seminary, I have offered an expression that is part smile, part frown, and all dread with colleagues when bumping into them on the way to a faculty meeting. The expression is hard to

describe in words, but I will venture to suggest that many theological educators can empathetically visualize my look with ease.

Over the past two academic years, I have taught an interdisciplinary course with one of my colleagues that serves as a concluding capstone for Master of Divinity students in their final semester of study with us. Because the learning aims include synthesizing lessons from other courses and preparing students for vocations in pastoral leadership after they graduate, my co-instructor and I ask the class at the onset what topics they would like to engage together and what kinds of guest lecturers they would like to hear from in the final weeks of the course. One of the topics that arose was church administration, with a question about how to facilitate meetings with laypersons, such as deacons and elders. In the denomination to which my seminary belongs, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), one of the responsibilities of a pastor is to be the moderator of the session. The denomination's Book of Order explains that the session is "composed of those persons elected by the congregation to active service as ruling elders, together with all installed pastors and associate pastors." It is therefore not surprising that some of our graduating students have session meetings in mind and desire to learn more about exercising leadership in meetings.

What is surprising to some of my students is the reality that our seminary does not provide an exemplary model for meetings. One student divulged how it confounded them that the faculty at our seminary, with many professors they admired so deeply, struggled to conduct creative and productive meetings that were different from the corporate world and other secular professional contexts. It seemed to them that their professors were not practicing what they were teaching. Another alumnus, a few years after graduation, told me that they had outgrown some of their naivety about the seminary as an idealized church-related institution. When this alumnus was a student, they would have given anything to be a "fly on the wall" at a faculty meeting. Now they would never want to attend one because they believed that there was no joy in witnessing their former professors at our collective worst.

Can the seminary faculty meeting be saved? I do not know (probably). But here are two recommendations that I have learned from my experiences with the Wabash Center. The first is the importance of clear objectives. Because the Wabash Center convenes faculty and administrators from a wide array of colleges, universities, divinity schools, and seminaries, the leaders at every workshop I have participated in have communicated their goals, hopes, and expectations with precision, care, and consistency. If one goal of a seminary faculty meeting is to ensure that all voices are heard and included, then two expectations are that the participants receive the preparatory materials with sufficient lead time and the meeting itself is moderated in ways that foster mutuality, equity, and reciprocity. Seminaries also need to be honest about their adoption of hierarchical systems from the academy. If the culture of a seminary is such that untenured faculty members listen and do not speak, then it is unreasonable to hope that faculty meetings embody the principles of inclusion and cooperation. If the purpose of a meeting is to simply vote on quotidian matters that require faculty approval, then the expectation ought to be modest and sights should be set on no more than a perfunctory meeting that moves forward the ordinary business of the seminary.

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The second lesson I gleaned from my experiences with the Wabash Center is the generative energy that results from collaborative leadership practices. I observed a leadership team with several persons sharing authority with one another and inviting every participant to enact their distinctive gifts. Each of us were given opportunities, with ample advance notice, to provide leadership that displayed our experiential insight, intercultural intelligence, and distinguishing pedagogy. The spotlight was rarely on one leader for a prolonged amount of time and the leaders wore their authority lightly. When a participant talked too much, or was the first to speak on several occasions, they were encouraged to take a step back and make room for others who may not process as quickly and needed a few moments of silence before fully engaging the discussion at hand. We met in various spaces and with diverse formats that fit the stated objectives of the sessions and cultivated a spirit of imagining and envisioning together.

Of course, our seminaries are not the same as the Wabash Center. The context of a seminary faculty meeting differs from a Wabash Center workshop, but perhaps there are principles from the latter that we can apply to the former. However, I am unsure whether seminaries like mine want to change. At some of our theological institutions, the faculty meeting is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

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