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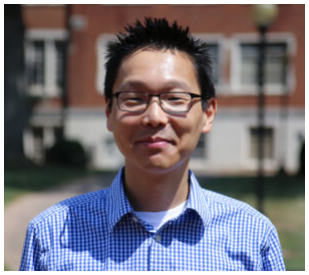

Why I Am Rooting for Progressive Seminaries

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On October 7, 1962, Robert H. Walkup preached from the book of Job at First Presbyterian Church in Starkville, Mississippi. Walkup graduated from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1941 and had been the pastor of this congregation for nine years. Before Walkup accepted the ministerial position in Starkville, Walkup made clear to the church officers that he had "a very tender conscience on the race question." In the days prior to Sunday worship, there were riots ninety miles away in Oxford protesting the enrollment of the first African American student, James Meredith, at the University of Mississippi. More than two hundred Mississippi national guardsmen and U.S. army soldiers were injured, and two white civilians were killed, across three days of violent skirmishes on the college campus. Roughly three hundred white persons were arrested for their participation in these uprisings seeking to prevent Meredith's enrollment.

Walkup recognized the "widely shared opinion" that the wisest pathway for white ministers was to be silent on the increasing pressures of racial integration. It was an emotional issue and even the slightest mention of integration on a Sunday morning could inflame some congregants. Some clergy were concerned about the pervasive anxieties and simmering tensions that church members brought with them into worship services. And many preachers understood that it did not take much for some members to bemoan a sermon that made them uncomfortable and criticize a pastor for ushering disunity and division into their beloved congregation.

Yet Walkup was convinced that silence was not an option. He had accompanied church members through times of joy and sorrow for nine years, and the task before him was to speak the truth in love. Walkup found in Job's questioning of God, especially in Job's confusion and anger about why he was experiencing such calamities, a message for the congregation he was leading. Walkup observed that white people throughout the southern states were also wondering why the push for integration was disrupting their lives. He then explained that divine providence is penal, educational, and redemptive. For far too long, white Americans had oppressed Black Americans in unjust systems of slavery and segregation. Walkup interpreted the riots at the University of Mississippi that resulted in two deaths as punishment from God for "the long years of our semi-quasi approval of lynching." He encouraged his congregation to behold the unfolding civil rights movement as an opportunity to learn about the consequences of racism, repent for these sins, and pursue the redemptive purposes of God.

Walkup's sermon was published three years later in Donald W. Shriver Jr.'s first book, *The Unsilent South: Prophetic Preaching in Racial Crisis*. Shriver was educated at Union Presbyterian Seminary and pastored a congregation in Gastonia, North Carolina before entering the doctoral program at Harvard University. Shriver therefore witnessed firsthand both the possibilities and challenges toward racial justice in white congregations. In publishing a collection of sermons that white clergy such as Walkup had actually preached in southern pulpits, Shriver endeavored to highlight what was possible. Ten years after publishing this book, Shriver became the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City and helped to steer the institution through severe financial obstacles and sustain a bold educational mission integrating faith and social justice.

Progressive seminaries continue to educate pastors, chaplains, counselors, and faith leaders in myriad ministry contexts. There are certainly other theological schools, including evangelical seminaries, that are seeking to confront white supremacy and enact racial justice, but I find progressive seminaries are distinctive because they possess an intersectional commitment to persons of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ persons that is closer to embracing the fullness of God's shalom, Christ's love, and the Holy Spirit's welcome. Progressive seminaries are flawed and imperfect (more on that in a moment), but I delight in the testimonies and transformations of students, staff, and faculty within these learning communities. In my seminary classroom, it was powerful to recently listen to one queer student share about their experience in a book club with queer and transgender friends. This student told us of how they often mentioned that they are in graduate school without divulging it is a seminary because of the harm and hate several in their group had encountered in churches and from self-professing Christians. After the student revealed they were in fact studying at a seminary, and found there a supportive and empowering environment, one friend expressed surprise but added that it was good to know that such a place actually existed.

Some progressive seminaries, however, are in precarious situations. I teach at a denominational seminary (Columbia Theological Seminary) that has decreased from 428 students in 2003 to 247 students presently. Several other PC(USA) seminaries have had similar declines. In 2003, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary had 280 students, Louisville

Presbyterian Theological Seminary had 193 students, McCormick Theological Seminary had 399 students, and Union Presbyterian Seminary had 384 students. The most recent data shows 173 students at Austin, 99 students at Louisville, 162 students at McCormick, and 181 students at Union. Beyond PC(USA) seminaries, two other examples are Brite Divinity School (281 students in 2003 to 109 presently) and Claremont School of Theology (480 students in 2003 to 201 students presently).

At one level, I recognize that the lower enrollment at these seminaries reflects membership declines within several mainline denominations. And I believe nearly every theological educator has heard some version of the mantra that closures and consolidations are to be expected since the high number of historically mainline seminaries is an unsustainable vestige of a past era. Yet I lament the low morale and lack of vitality at some progressive seminaries. I am also concerned that some students seeking an in-person liberal theological education will perhaps have fewer local, or even regional, options. Finally, I am attentive to the potential loss of scholarly contributions with less faculty positions at progressive seminaries. Scholarly production is by no means confined to an academic post, but I am acutely aware of the institutional support that some faculty need to conduct painstaking research, write numerous drafts, and ultimately publish their work.

At another level, I must include honest criticism alongside my affirmation. Progressive seminaries need to take a hard look at themselves and acknowledge their stumbles and failings. Evidences of institutional complacency are seen in outdated websites, limited social media presence, and an over-reliance on familiar yet insular networks for recruitment. Several progressive seminaries have also suffered from either choosing or not removing quickly enough the wrong administrative leaders. One sad irony is the dissonance between the radical lessons in the classroom and the conservative operations of the schools themselves in some progressive seminaries. Students are taught to apply all the subaltern wisdom, womanist vision, and liberation theology they learn from their seminaries, but the seminaries retain the same hierarchical structures and exclusionary silos that have long hampered collaborative processes and creative pathways. I am rooting for progressive seminaries, and I hope you are, too. I also want progressive seminaries to be as interested in dismantling oppressive systems in their own institutions as they are in the church and the world.

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