

Managing in the middle . . . or what do Revelation 21.1–6a and Augustine of Hippo have to do with long-range planning?

By LACEYE WARNER

As one might imagine, there is more than one meaning to the concept *middle* implied in this title. **First**, *middle* may be used theologically to indicate the eschatological character of our particular time—in between Jesus Christ’s life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming.

A **second** interpretation refers to the significant paradigm shifts experienced in ecclesial life as well as higher education, particularly in the United States and Canada. And **third**, *middle* describes the situation of the chief academic officer and chief financial officer described by organizational charts in institutions of theological education—situated between chief executive officers and faculty, staff, and students. In these, and possibly other, senses, administrators in theological education often find ourselves in the *middle*.

The themes described below helped me to interpret and prayerfully respond to the constant chaos and gift of the chief academic officer’s role with more patience and hope than expected.



Middle as a place on the continuum of God’s reign

Living in eschatological communities as theological administrators and educators requires stamina and imagination as well as clarity of vocation. Like the image of the fulfillment of God’s reign corresponding to the first use of *middle*, evoked by Revelation 21.1a, “a new heaven and new earth . . .,” there is more to what we see in the chaos and challenges of the world around us. Indeed, I believe God invites us to participate in and witness to the unfolding of God’s reign in our midst. While we may love and deeply respect the roles and tasks to which we are called, even stand in awe of those roles and the privilege we have to participate in God’s reign, they are not easy. Clarity of mission and vocation for individuals and theological schools is essential for long-term flourishing and even survival.

Middle in the midst of paradigm shifts

In this time of dramatic paradigm shifts in theological education—the second use of *middle*—there seem to be many more variables than constants. Tracking and predicting trends among enrollments, developing and sustaining degree offerings, utilizing emerging technologies and pedagogies—often with limited funding and facilities—requires diligence and wisdom. For Christians and their institutions seeking meaning from Scripture, according to William Placher, vocation refers to at least two components: (1) a calling to faith in Jesus Christ and (2) a calling to a special task on behalf of God (*Callings*, 1–2). An important part of our roles is to encourage clarity of vocation (or mission), for ourselves and for many others. When vocations of individuals and—institutions of theological education—are unclear and not aligned, disruption or restlessness occurs. In the words of Augustine of Hippo, “I am restless until I find my rest in thee, O Lord.” (*Confessions* 1.1)

In his *Confessions*, Augustine equates love with weight, *pondus* in Latin, which takes us to a place of rest. When

love, and therefore weight, is out of place, one is restless. This use of weight indicates where one’s heart inclines (*Confessions* 13.9.10). Humans become disoriented

and confused due to misplaced love, resulting in restlessness and disruption. This restlessness may also result in turning inward, into one’s self, rather than oriented toward God and neighbor—and be characterized by restlessness rather than rest. The question is not “whether to love?” but “who to love?” and “how to love?” Augustine’s teaching can inform faithful and wise discernment when considering the vocation and mission of theological schools and their leaders.

When loss of alignment and disruption inevitably occurs, whether individuals or institutions, grieving the loss of

a previous vocation is a profoundly important practice, as is facilitating openness to a new vocation—another special task on behalf of God.

Middle as a place on the organizational chart and chain of communications

During my time as chief academic officer, the school—embedded in a university—was invited by the provost to participate in a targeted strategic planning process in response to the Great Recession of 2008–2009. This process required extensive examination of the school’s mission, resources, capacities, and sustainability, resulting in difficult decisions about eliminating personnel, developing new degree offerings, and utilizing innovative online platforms and pedagogies.

My relationship with the chief financial officer during this season was instrumental to the shared vocation and mission of the institution. At times, it may seem that chief academic officers and chief financial officers speak different languages yet—in the midst of our different dialects—there is much common space and shared voca-

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the chief financial officer is ideally multilingual, with proficiency in many languages and an ability to shift dialects to accommodate various

conversation partner(s). Anecdotes can often prevail as arguments in long-range planning, substituting for data and assessment. However, focusing on tangible recognizable benchmarks, an attribute of our shared language, provides the most reliable arguments for the most significant decisions. At our best, we invite others into our lived languages rather than competing as rivals or avoiding interaction all together.

Numerous practices from the areas of communications, business, and leadership often punctuate our days and weeks as academic administrators. I occasionally draw

from systems theory—transparency not triangulation, assessment not anecdotes or avoidance, sharing not secrets. These are useful techniques.

However, the work of administrators in theological schools also draws from a more abundant frame: a shared mission and vocation to participate in God's reign, a shared language to discern the special tasks to which God is calling us, and to rest in God's love.



[Lacey Warner](#) is Associate Professor of the Practice of Evangelism and Methodist Studies at Duke University Divinity School. This article is excerpted from her remarks at a recent meeting of financial officers at ATS member schools.

Readers might also find interesting a chapter by Willie James Jennings, “Leading from the Middle,” in *C(H)AOS Theory: Reflections of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Education*, ed. Kathleen D. Billman and Bruce C. Birch (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011). The book is [available for purchase](#) by the publisher.