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***Reflections from a pre-tenured faculty member***  
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In what follows, I will share a few thoughts on my vocation as a theological educator in the pre-tenured stage. I am grateful for the wisdom I received over the years from mentors and colleagues in the field, and I offer these thoughts merely as reflections.

**First, theological education is an imbricated vocation.**

Theological education is increasingly a multilayered vocation that is carried out in the imbricated settings of seminary, academia, the church, and the world. Many of us serve in multiple roles—teachers, researchers, ecclesial leaders, and public scholars. This can be very fulfilling but also challenging because of the numerous demands it places on our resources. It was not long ago that theological educators had to do well in perhaps two of these roles to merit tenure. Increasingly, the expectation is that we excel in all these areas and perhaps do more. So, how does anyone do it all? Few really do. The good news is that these are not entirely disparate, unconnected areas. There is generally a symbiotic relationship between teaching, research and other aforementioned aspects.

In my experience, research invariably informs and sharpens teaching. Classroom conversations, in turn, provide the impetus and new ideas for ongoing research. I find the mutuality between these two aspects to be enriching and generative. Similarly, most of the lectures I give outside formal academic settings, at churches for instance, are related to my research. And I try to turn these lectures into articles in academic journals or in public forums such as the Huffington Post. This is one way to get some mileage out of these commitments, but it also ensures that the various aspects of my vocation remain connected to, and reinforce, each other.

**Second, position yourself for the short term . . . and the long haul.**

***The short term.*** We often hear about how necessary it is to know one's institution, its ethos and expectations for tenure. A challenge is that, at many institutions, tenure requirements are not always explicitly and clearly spelled out. Am I expected to publish two books and 10 articles to get tenured? Or, five books and 20 articles? In what kind of journals do I need to publish these articles? Do I get credit from those three pieces I published in popular journals?

The truth is that there are no clear answers to such questions, and this can result in a subjective interpretation of requirements. The good news is that, in general, your colleagues are very invested in you. They want you to succeed. This has certainly been my experience. They want to support you, but it is important to make it easy for them to do so, not just by checking all the boxes but also by making yourself indispensable to the institution, volunteering to serve on key committees whenever possible and proactively building collegial relationships. The last is especially relevant, as you can be a prolific

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scholar and an excellent teacher and still not get tenured if you have not developed healthy relationships with colleagues at your institution.

Along those lines, seek out mentors, within and outside your institution, who can help interpret institutional dynamics and procedures and advocate for you.

Positioning yourself well at your own school is not always sufficient. It is equally important to focus on positioning yourself with long-term career goals in mind. I have seen several friends and colleagues at other schools work very hard to meet tenure criteria at their institutions. They have served on multiple committees and became so involved in their institutions that they quickly lost sight of the long-term. As helpful as the former is, there are several unexpected factors that could come into play. You might need to move for family reasons. You might realize after five or six years that the current institution is no longer the best fit to pursue newly envisioned vocational goals. Or, given the rapid changes and challenges in theological education, an institution could suddenly close. For reasons such as these, it is important to use committee work, administrative responsibilities and other opportunities to craft a vocational identity that can position you well within and beyond your own institution.

### **Third, mutuality defines my vocation as a theological educator.**

I love my work and find it to be very rewarding. This is true (perhaps less so ☺) even when I am staring at dozens of term papers that await grading. Part of what makes this work so rewarding are the frequent opportunities it provides me to explore the subject matter with students, inspire and equip them to look at biblical texts in radically new ways, and shape their worldview. As Sheryl Sandberg might put it, “Vocation is about making others better, as a result of your presence, and making sure that impact lasts even in your absence.” But my teaching is often defined also by attempts to invite students into my intellectual and spiritual spaces as conversation partners and allowing them to shape my worldview. As I see it, a good measure of the effectiveness of my teaching is the extent to which students have impacted my thinking and enabled me to look at biblical texts in new ways. In a similar vein, as a theological educator, I am called to challenge the church to be an agent of transformation in the society and, in turn, be challenged by it. When carried out intentionally and faithfully, such a relationship based on mutuality can be deeply edifying and life-giving to everyone involved. Along these lines, theological educators should constantly explore new ways to facilitate such mutual transformation within and outside the classroom.

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