

In this together: connecting theological schools with local churches

BY NED ALLYN PARKER

As an institutional advancement professional in pursuit of engaging churches and building new avenues for them to invest in seminarians, I spent seven years throwing the proverbial spaghetti at the wall. Over that period, three pieces stuck (though my proverbial floor is a mess).

Traditional modes of engagement among congregations, theological schools, and students are tried and true. Field education, supervised ministry, internships, and post-graduate fellowships come immediately to mind. These not only have proven track records of success, but they have created what might be called a “symbiotic expectation.” Churches provide experiential learning grounds; theological schools provide the students to learn in them.

At the same time, many congregations have fewer resources, and the theological academy has experienced a dramatic uptick in the so-called “nones” (a term sometimes used for people with no religious affiliation in the US) who experience genuine calls . . . but “calls” to what? That remains unclear, even to those individuals.

Uncertainty and anxiety are plentiful in times of change. And, as faithful people standing at an empty tomb, we rest assured that liminality also births creativity and opportunity.

For institutions looking for less formal and more organic ways to weave learning, creativity, spiritual maturation, and relationship, here are three examples of spaghetti



that stuck for Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School:

1 *Online Devotionals*

Every autumn and winter, we invite students, faculty, staff, advisory council members, and alums to help us create Advent and Lenten Devotional Series. Each of these adopts a theme and takes a different shape—short blogs, reflections, daily prayers, and videos as well as artistic leisure for personal interpretation. Last year, the devotional wasn’t just a themed photo-a-day, but a photo-a-day of a spiritual practice that invited readers into the practice—or to at least to contemplate it (contemplation is its own form of practice, right?). Congregational communities now *expect* that we produce these offerings—posted on social media and curated on our website. Some churches create Andover Newton Advent Calendars; others meet early on Sunday mornings in Lent to reflect together on the posts. Burden is taken from pastors, and Andover Newton community members become mutually invested in lifting diverse voices and perspectives.

2 Seminary Snow Sunday

For years, Andover Newton has participated in Seminary Sunday each January, sending students to preach in local congregations. Like all things community-oriented, this changed during the pandemic. At the end of 2020, we decided to adapt an online version called “Seminary Sunday 2.0.” Students, faculty, and staff recorded different parts of a Sunday service at home, and the staff edited these together and broadcasted the edited service over social media one Sunday morning in late January. That first year, 40 churches advertised and participated in the virtual offering. The following year, some churches

were beginning to meet in a hybrid, socially distanced format. As a New England seminary, we knew the likeli-

hood that churches now accustomed to meeting online would have Sundays when attendance was hampered still further by inclement weather. Around the same time, some of our ordained alums started to ask if we were planning another Seminary Sunday 2.0 service. From that, “Seminary Snow Sunday” was born. In its first year, 50 churches used it. Now an annual offering, churches are given a link to download a Seminary Snow Sunday service (one with Communion, one without), and broadcast using whatever medium with which their congregations are accustomed.

3 Pulpit Supply Program

In New England, there are many factors that contribute to diminishing opportunities for

Not only do students, churches, and theological schools benefit from these deepening relationships . . . but admissions, fundraising, enrollment, and program participation can and likely will improve.

pulpit coverage—whether it’s a single Sunday, sabbatical coverage, or interim ministry. The factors are too plentiful to address here. That said, this is yet one more opportunity for the theological academy to engage with local churches. At Andover Newton, we invite first- and second-year students who are not yet in field education to participate in our Pulpit Supply Program. This program provides congregations with a student for one (sometimes two) Sunday coverage(s). It provides students opportunities to be in safe, nurturing environments to begin to develop their most authentic preaching voices. We offer training both to the students and the

churches, and both evaluate the experience afterward. We limit coverage to a 90-mile radius. This is now our third year of formal coverage.

Initially, we believed we would offer coverage for 12-15 churches—last year, 60 churches were covered by 26 students.

As stand-alone programs, these examples need not be contextually dependent. Any of the three can be adapted and enhanced for various settings. Not only do students, churches, and theological schools benefit from these deepening relationships through experiential learning and new contact-points, but admissions, fundraising, enrollment, and program participation can and likely will improve. It’s too early to quantify our own results yet, but all indicators are positive.



Ned Allyn Parker is Associate Dean for Institutional Advancement at Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut.