

# Looking back from the end of the road: 7 insights from a retiring seminary president

BY MICHAEL COOPER-WHITE

*Cooper-White shared these reflections on his 17-year presidency at Gettysburg Seminary during his final meeting with the ELCA seminary presidents and chief administrators in San Antonio, Texas, on January 19, 2017.*

When I embarked on the journey of Gettysburg Seminary's 12th presidency 17 years ago, I could not have foreseen how it would conclude. Assuming this calling just as I turned 50, I wondered if it would constitute the final chapter of my active ministry; as things have turned out, it did. If I thought about it at all way back then, I probably imagined I would retire and pass the baton to a successor who would serve as Gettysburg's 13th chief steward. Instead, the end game of my service has been working in partnership with a wonderful colleague, David Lose of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, in a process of consolidation whereby an entirely new entity, United Lutheran Seminary, comes into being on July 1, 2017. The story of these two schools' flirtation for more than a century, and how we have been able to go where several earlier attempts at merger could not, is an interesting one in itself; but that's one for another article or book.

Here, I share a few insights and tentative conclusions (since I intend to keep on learning and reflecting and may change my mind on some matters), which may be of some value to colleagues at the outset or in earlier phases of a seminary presidency.



## **1** *Never lose sight of the unique privilege of your calling.*

In the whole of North America, there are only a few hundred individuals who are afforded the high honor of being at the helm of a school of theology. While an honest assessment will reveal the limits of presidential influence in any seminary or divinity school, the reality is that to a greater degree than most individuals working in our arenas, presidents/deans/chief executives do exert considerable sway on the future of religious life in our nations.

## **2** *Cling to a perspective-giving image that will sustain you, especially on the difficult days.*

I encourage seminarians to seek such a metaphor or guiding paradigm that can help them through the tough times as well as happier eras. My own is that of Gettysburg Seminary's founder, Samuel Simon Schmucker. In early July of 1863, Schmucker returned to the campus after it had endured the greatest battle ever fought on

American soil. By the hundreds, corpses of Union and Confederate soldiers, buried hastily just beneath the soil, glowed in the dark at night. Overwhelmed by the human and animal carnage, local residents were unable to bury the felled horses, so their rotting flesh reeked with an unimaginable stench. Some 600 wounded soldiers lay in the seminary's main classroom and administration building; the cries of anguish rang out day and night for weeks after the battle. Amidst the most challenging times in my presidency—when tempted to whine or throw myself a pity party—I've reminded myself of brother Schmucker, reflecting, "I've just never had that bad a day!" Keep perspective. Remind yourself and others that God is in charge and our calling is to be faithful and to exercise our best wisdom, recognizing we will make mistakes and sometimes cause harm to others. Being sustained in a presidency for the long haul requires the ability to forgive oneself as well as others.

### **3** *Recognize that your most important role is to surround yourself with capable colleagues.*

Often, I have envied multi-gifted colleagues who seem to excel in every aspect of their leadership. Superb administrators, they are also gifted and eloquent speakers, provocative writers, and inspiring leaders. My own wheelhouse has a much smaller inventory. But I believe I have excelled in one area in particular—the ability to identify, hire (for salaries far below what most could earn elsewhere), and encourage really gifted and committed ministry partners. In the course of a long tenure, transitions will occur, and the ability to support new leaders' entry and early years is especially important. Another aspect of this is having an adequate measure of self-confidence so that we can invite to serve alongside us colleagues whose expertise and abilities far surpass our own. In many areas of the work, my associates are far

more capable than I, as is the case with the entire faculty in their areas of expertise. If one is easily threatened, a seminary presidency is best left to others. The institution deserves the right to employ the most talented and dedicated individuals willing to serve.



Schmucker photo courtesy of Gettysburg College

### **4** *Share most of the credit; take all the blame.*

As small or major institutional goals are achieved, it's natural for folks to express gratitude and even admiration for the president. In many cases, that acknowledgment is well-deserved. But as any of us who have been organizational leaders must humbly acknowledge, many of the great things we've been part of are due in greater measure to the

genius, hard work, and competence of others. While I've undoubtedly failed at it sometimes, over the years I have attempted to share the credit or even ascribe it all to colleagues, board members, and others involved in complex large endeavors. On the other hand, when it comes to failures, receiving complaints and accepting blame for missteps, my attitude has been, "At Gettysburg Seminary, I am ultimately responsible for everything." I hope that such a stance has instilled confidence in colleagues that I have their backs and won't throw them under the bus.

### **5** *The rhythms of work require a delicate balance.*

Over the course of the years, I have observed a wide range of work styles on the part of seminary leaders. Some presidents spend the majority of their time away from campus, while others of us tend to stick close to home most of our days. Both extremes are susceptible to imbalance. I have witnessed presidents who are constantly on the speaking circuit, convinced that in being highly visible public figures they raise the banners of their schools. Some do; in other cases, things may falter at home if one is too often on the road. Similarly, presidents who resist the required round of donor visits, constituent

relationships, and ecclesial encounters may be isolating their schools in unhelpful ways. As with most things, it's a matter of balance, and an area where periodic check-ins with trustees and others can help one strike the proper proportion.

## **6 Sabbaticals and other extended periods away can be tricky.**

My unscientific and casual, from-afar assessment of presidencies that have unraveled leads to the conclusion that many began to falter during a presidential sabbatical. From a "systems theory" perspective, it's a given that when a key leader is out of that system, others will rush in to fill a vacuum. Even in healthy presidencies, where no one is consciously out to replace the lead person, this dynamic can occur. In my early days at Gettysburg, I heard a recently retired president comment, "I never really regained my leadership after a six-month sabbatical." Strong veteran vice presidents had assumed broad decision-making authority, and others in the school began looking to them rather than the president, even after his return. Six years into my presidency, I was granted a six-month period that was broadly understood to be a "semi-sabbatical." By returning to campus for a day or two every two to three weeks, I reminded the seminary community that I was still the one in charge, and I believe that any unwitting impulses by others to supplant my leadership were thereby held in check.

## **7 Discern what the Spirit, church, and institution require of you for just such a time as this.**

When he retired from Philadelphia in 1999, Bob Hughes wrote a fascinating reflective piece on how he had experienced the evolution of four phases during his presidency. These evolving self-identities coincided with changes in the ELCA and theological education. From president-as-pastor, to program-developer, to CEO, to fundraiser, Bob described the changing complexity and escalating expectations of our calling. Looking toward the future, from now nearly two decades ago, Bob foresaw the need for his successor to be a strong and visionary leader-president. At this juncture, I think all of

you moving forward need to be leaders who are sustainability-seekers. Some may be game-changers. Think surgeons, not family doctors, exercising what Eric Gritsch described in his *Introduction to Lutheranism* as the "serpenthood of ministry" balanced with the more popular and perhaps easier "servanthood."

That leads me to conclude with two guiding quotes which, along with my perspective-giving image, have been critical for me, especially in the hard times:

Long-term president at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, Donald Senior, observed "Those in administrative leadership have to care for the institution as a whole, not just one part of it . . . . The work of the administrator is plunged into the public and communal dimensions of an institution, having to interact with all the groups and interests that make it up. Surely, having to work with the community of people that forms an institution, of people in all their glory and all their shame, involves us in something that is close to the heart of the gospel." (*In Trust*, New Year 1999).

Reflecting upon his 16 years as president of Union Seminary in New York City, Donald W. Shriver wrote, "Someone has to speak for a constituency that, in the nature of its case, is unable to speak for itself: the potential future inhabitants of the school . . . . Educating any generation of humans to the welfare of future generations will never be easy. The ecology movement teaches this truth in painful abundance." ("The President as Pilgrim," *Theological Education* 32, supplement 3, 1996.)



[Michael Cooper-White](#) announced his retirement from the office of presidency at Gettysburg Seminary effective June 30, 2017.