Finding Our Way

Daniel O. Aleshire

ATS Biennial Meeting
St. Louis, Missouri
June 28, 2016

Higher education is under increasing scrutiny, and ATS schools attract part of that attention. The church is sensing both threats from a variety of sources and rapid change, and is asking serious questions about the education of leaders and benefits of theological scholarship. Accreditation has been hammered in sophisticated news sources and by serious think tank analysts. ATS schools have more mission than money, more to give than the church seems to want, more educational space than students to fill it, more demands to change than capacity to respond. I could talk all afternoon about the problems while someone sang from The Music Man in the background: “Oh, we’ve got trouble. We’ve got terrible, terrible trouble.”

I don’t think it is possible to deny the trouble. Too much is changing, and too many established systems have weakened. We live in an unsettled cultural moment. I could spend the afternoon arguing that the issues aren’t as complex or worrisome as they are, but that would be less than honest. They are real, and they will not pass with time.

“Our task is to use equal parts of realism and hope to innovate and preserve our way into the future.” —Daniel Aleshire

Our time is not unique. As best I can tell, there has never been a time when substantive issues and serious threats were not present. Some emerged from society, some from churches, and others from the schools. A part of our calling as religious and educational leaders is to face the challenges of our day and see in them our calling to develop new strategies, rework systems, and build structures that will serve this moment and the next. Our task is to use equal parts of realism and hope to innovate and preserve our way into the future.

This afternoon, I want to talk with you about two issues. Both have been the focus of ATS work for years. The really important issues, it seems, seldom go away; they simply continue in ever-changing forms that require new patterns of response. The first is the gift of the changing racial/ethnic composition of the population. How schools deal with this issue will have major impact on both schools and the communities of faith they serve. The second is the educational practices that ATS schools will employ to educate the next generation of religious leaders. How schools deal with this issue will have major impact on how effectively they exercise their core responsibility.

The choice of these two issues is debatable, I know—we have a warehouse full of issues that need to be addressed, and certifying which of them need the most
urgent attention is an exercise in triage that is beyond me. I will stick with these. I think that they are hugely and uniquely important. I am not an expert in either, which will no doubt be illustrated by what I say, but a lack of expertise is not why big issues in the church or society remain unresolved.

**Race and Ethnicity**

Walking out of the matinee performance of Ayad Akhtar’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*, I realized I had just seen a perfect portrayal of “no redemption.” I look for redemption like many people of faith—not so much a happy ending as the redemption that comes when meaning or the good contends faithfully. *Disgraced* ends with no redemption.

The setting for the play is an upscale New York apartment. A secular Muslim attorney, Amir, is advancing at the law firm and is confident he will be named a partner. His white wife, Emily, is an artist who paints Islamic themes and forms. The couple’s good friends include Tory, an African American colleague in the law firm, and her Jewish husband. The hopes of North American society are being realized in this little microcosm of persons enjoying a pleasant evening: people of four different ethnic backgrounds, three different religious traditions, and two different races are traveling life together.

As the play progresses, the four are together having drinks before dinner on another evening. Tragedy unfolds. In the context of comments about Islamic extremism, Amir defends the integrity of Islamic teaching, even the controversial text about wife beating, although he has personally rejected religious Islam. The evening becomes tenser when Amir learns that Tory, his African American colleague at the law firm, is being named partner, not he. He is despondent. The evening continues its downward spiral when Tory becomes suspicious that her husband and Emily might be having an affair. After Tory and her husband leave, Emily confesses to Amir that she and Tory’s husband had a one-night affair when they were in London for an art show some time back. Amir’s despondence deepens into rage, and he strikes Emily hard, then again. The scene ends.

In the final scene, Amir is packing boxes in his apartment. He has lost his job, and Emily has filed for divorce. The friendships are over, the marriage is over, the professional advancement is over. A play that began with hope ends in devastation. Amir looks at a portrait that Emily had painted of him and thrusts his fist through it. Lights out, end of play, no redemption.

Race and ethnicity have played troubling roles in North American society. Willie Jennings’ brilliant analysis in *The Christian Imagination* demonstrates how, from the earliest moments of the slave trade, European Christians developed theological frames for interpreting slavery and justifying Christian involvement in slave trading and ownership.

This past spring, New Brunswick Theological Seminary undertook efforts to name the slave-holding history of some New York and New Jersey Dutch landowners who provided economic support during the early days of the seminary. The higher education press has been following the Georgetown Memory Project, an effort to document the identity and descendants of more than 200 slaves owned by Jesuits who were sold to rescue Georgetown from financial demise in the early 19th century.

The northernmost battle of the Civil War was fought in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and Gettysburg Seminary’s Schmucker Hall was used by both the Union and Confederate troops at different times during the battle. That building is now the Seminary Ridge Museum, and one of its exhibits is devoted to the Christian arguments for and against slavery.

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A century after the Civil War, faculty and students from many ATS schools were deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement. Several ATS member schools in the South were the first higher education institutions in their states to integrate. The story of James Lawson, one of the first African American students at Vanderbilt Divinity School, is as moving as any I know in theological education. It is a story of his commitment to the Civil Rights movement, the divinity school faculty’s solidarity with him, support of other university faculty members, and the subsequent change in a venerable university. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was formed at Shaw University, and David Forbes, who just retired as dean of Shaw Divinity School, was one of the founders of SNCC. Jonathan Myrick Daniels was a student in the 1960s at what was then Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge. He went to Alabama to work in integration efforts and was murdered.

A half century after the Civil Rights movement, wide-ranging legislation has been adopted in the United States to ensure equal rights, cultural changes are evident, and the racial/ethnic percentage of the population has increased. Persons of Hispanic/Latino/a descent now exceed the number of persons of African descent in the United States, and the percentage of the population that is of Asian descent has grown in both the United States and Canada.

Perhaps redemption draweth nigh.

Two years ago, the ATS African American deans and presidents were meeting at Shaw University Divinity School. It was their first meeting after the shootings in Ferguson and Cleveland. They drafted an open letter to their ATS colleagues that included a comment David Forbes had made: “the socio-economic and political realities that led to the establishment of SNCC at Shaw University 54 years ago are actually eclipsed by the realities of this day.”

The increased racial diversity of North American population has fueled new patterns of racism. This Biennial Meeting is occurring only a few miles from Ferguson, Missouri, the site of the shooting of an African American and the calls for racial justice that followed. The city of Ferguson is local, but the racial prejudice that was on display there is national. It found its way to an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, where a white racist visitor was welcomed to a Bible study and murdered nine people sitting around the table. Not all consequences of racism are violent, but none of its consequences build up the human family or advance the reign of God.

It has been a year of racial unrest on many American campuses. Protests have included demands to rename buildings that honor persons involved in slavery, to remove deans and presidents who were perceived not to understand the problem or to have done too little about it, to hire significantly more faculty of color, to require courses on multiracial and multicultural realities, or to increase enrollments of students of color. Students report micro-aggressions and the inability or unwillingness of institutions and their leaders to understand the fabric and texture of their lives as students of color.

While I have identified US race and ethnicity issues, Canada has its own version of them. Sexual abuse in Canadian residential schools early in the 20th century was the focus of litigation at the end of the century. A significant purpose for those schools, however, had racial overtones. Native children were removed from their villages and families so they could be re-enculturated into a white Canada. The significant immigration of Chinese and Koreans to Canada in recent decades has created new tensions. Canada never imported Africans for slavery; it has a legal stance that supports

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multi-culturalism, but prejudice still finds its way into human lives, and wherever it does, the human family is diminished.

We are still not redeemed.

North America is dealing with many social moral issues. We are conflicted about sexual orientation and marriage equality. We are struggling with an economic system that makes the wealthy wealthier while working class citizens struggle to maintain a declining standard of living. In the United States, struggles continue about gender roles, abortion, immigration, and gun violence. So, why focus on race and ethnicity?

While ATS schools disagree on many of these other issues, they are agreed that racism is destructive, even evil. Race and ethnicity touch almost every member school. Students of color and visa students now constitute almost 40 percent of the total ATS enrollment and 20 percent of the faculty. In the decade of the 2040s, the US population will cease to have the white majority it has had since the Declaration of Independence was signed. Few issues are as associated with disparities in wealth, educational attainment, or cultural opportunity as are race and ethnicity. Religion and racial prejudice are comingled. Social research has documented that something about religion can increase racial prejudice and something about it can decrease it. Toward the end of his long career in public ministry, a television news interviewer asked Billy Graham what he thought was the worst sin he had seen. As I remember the response, he said “racial prejudice.” He noted that everywhere he had been in the world, he had seen some form of racial prejudice that resulted in some group being unfairly disadvantaged. His own ministry record suggests that it took him a while to learn this lesson, but his statement suggests that he learned it and saw the ubiquity of the problem.

Many ATS schools have engaged this issue with hard work over time. It has not been enough, however. The more schools deal with the issue, the more issue there is to deal with. We want racial inclusion in our schools and racial justice in society, but it is difficult work that never seems to be done.

What should be done? I have three suggestions.

**Three suggestions**

**Live with the dis-ease**

Perhaps the beginning point for addressing this persistent issue is to learn to live with the dis-ease it evokes.

Kadi Billman teaches at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. This past year, students there engaged several tough discussions about race. She reflected on this past year in the context of something very early in her teaching career:

In my earliest days of seminary teaching in the early 1990s, I taught a class session on engaging conflict. An African American woman taking this course (one of two African American students in the class) and I agreed to speak with one another about race in a kind of fishbowl conversation, so that others in the class could at first listen in and then join the conversation. Early in the conversation, I became aware that my stomach had knotted up and my heart was beating faster. I said something like, “I noticed that when the words ‘race’ and ‘racism’ were spoken aloud, my stomach got tight and I felt tension in the room.” She (the African American student) responded, “That’s interesting. When the words ‘race’ and ‘racism’ were spoken aloud, that’s the only time in this whole semester my stomach got unknotted.”

I wonder how much our tendency to avoid pain keeps us from some of the serious discussions that we need to have. And, I wonder if the tendency of people like me to avoid the pain that this issue evokes results in intensifying the pain that people of color experience. There is no virtue in feeling pain. Individual or institutional pain will not redeem racist structures, but there is no pain-free way to address racial prejudice.
**Take responsibility**

The second is to take responsibility. Mark Young and his colleagues at Denver Seminary have been addressing issues of racism and racial prejudice this past year. The seminary board authorized a working group on race relations because there had been continued tension between the seminary and the African American community in Denver. After a year of work, Mark reflected both personally and institutionally on racism in a written statement that was subsequently adopted by the seminary’s faculty and board and is posted on the school’s website. Here is part of what he wrote:

> Coming face to face with my complicity in supporting a racialized society has turned me inside out. The realization that I have benefited from a social and economic system that has been built through a shameful history of racially driven segregation, oppression and injustice, even though I may not have intentionally perpetrated such acts, has challenged my sense of identity, my narrative of personal accomplishment, and the shallowness of my faith. At times it felt as if the sky was falling. But it didn’t. What is falling is my willingness to deny, to explain away, and to be indifferent to the scourge of racism.

This issue requires coming to terms with our culpability as white citizens in structures that have privileged us and oppressed others. There is simply no way to address this issue abstractly or indirectly. Each of us has a racial history, and for people like me that involves coming to terms with what we failed to see, taking seriously the testimony of racial/ethnic persons, and assessing our own patterns of prejudice and the social structures of a racialized society. Willingness to endure pain and engage our culpability are necessary for moving forward, but not sufficient. More is needed.

**Take intentional action**

This issue requires intentional action over a long period of time. As best I can tell, Eden Seminary was the St. Louis area seminary that was most engaged in the issues around the Ferguson shooting and efforts for social change that followed. Eden was as involved as it was because it had been attending to issues of race and social justice for decades. Many of the ministers participating in protests were Eden graduates. Leah Francis Gunning, an Eden professor at the time, carefully documented what people had to say and how they understood their involvement in events around the Ferguson shooting in her book, *Ferguson and Faith.* I suppose that having worked for many decades, Eden has a right to claim that it has led the way, done its job. That is not the case. This past year, the faculty worked on a new curriculum that Academic Dean Deborah Krause introduces in this way:

> Inspired by this witness and how God is working in the world, the faculty has ordered the new curriculum toward leadership formation that emphasizes particular capacities to engage in the struggle for racial equity (along with intersecting oppressions), develop collegiality with people of different faiths and no faith, and pursue one’s vocation with resilience and adaptability.

After decades of work on issues of racism and social justice, the work is not finished. This is Dorothy Day kind of work—it is about “a long obedience in the same direction.” No matter how much we do, more will need to be done. Racial prejudice will go away when human and structural sin go away.

Other ATS schools have been doing a lot. Students from many schools went to Ferguson; schools have used recent racial tensions as the focus of classes and field education. It is not as if ATS schools have been doing nothing. The opposite is true. But, more schools need to do more, and they need to continue doing more. Racism is not a building that can be torn down and made into a park. It is more like vines that cover the hillside and kill the other vegetation below. You can cut it back only to watch it grow back.

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8 Leah Francis Gunning, *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community* (St. Louis; Chalice Press, 2015).
As ATS schools do their work, some may well differ from Eden’s cultural and theological assessment and strategy for intervention. Different theological contexts and different racial/ethnic constituents in a school churn racial/ethnic issues in different ways. Racial prejudice affects different racial/ethnic groups in different ways. This issue is laden with theological convictions and social theories that will require schools to address it in more than one way. While there is likely no common formula that reaches across different communities of discourse, each of those communities needs to undertake its long obedience.

I mentioned James Lawson and Vanderbilt earlier. At the urging of Martin Luther King, Lawson transferred to Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville from Oberlin School of Theology so he could work as a trainer in non-violent methods in the Civil Rights Movement. He emerged as a central figure in protests at segregated lunch counters in downtown Nashville, and the university trustees voted to expel him. The divinity faculty came to his defense and threatened to leave if the decision was not rescinded. Several members of the medical faculty said they would leave, and take their grants with them, if the decision were not changed. The board subsequently changed its decision and Lawson was readmitted.

Decades later, the Divinity School invited Lawson back to Nashville to receive an award. Joe Hough, then the dean of the Divinity School, hosted a dinner at his home for James Lawson and Harvey Branscomb, the chancellor of the university at the time that Lawson was expelled. At the dinner, a very aged Branscomb told Lawson he was sorry for his complicity in the incident and asked for his forgiveness. Lawson told the former chancellor that he had forgiven him a long time ago. A few years ago I watched the service inaugurating Emily Townes, an African American social ethicist, as the current dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School.

The scent of redemption is sometimes in the air.

Most of us would affirm the theological perception that we are not redeemed once and for all, at least on this side of the work of God. We are being redeemed. And as we are being redeemed, there can be a little more justice, a little more human wholeness, a little more of the reign of God. Bit-by-bit changes may be insufficient for justice to roll down like waters, but in a desert, even a trickle can bring life.

Tomorrow afternoon’s plenary will focus on theological education after Ferguson. It is not intended to be a discussion of race and policing, although Ferguson clearly raises that issue. It is not intended to be a discussion about the general issues of racism in this society, although the discussion can never be distant from that reality. It will be a discussion about theological education in the context of the current status of race and ethnicity in North America. What does it mean to educate white students who will spend a career in ministry negotiating the changing racial composition of North American population? How can white students be educated to be more racially aware and more culturally amphibious than they have been? What characterizes effective theological education for students of color, many of whom will engage their ministry after seminary in communities of color? If it is an honest conversation, it will create some dis-ease, invite our personal engagement, and perhaps motivate us to continue work that is good and start needed new work.

Educational Models and Practices
I want to turn to the other issue for the rest of my time this afternoon. The educational issues the schools are facing do not have the same social signature of racism, but they are no less crucial to the present and future effectiveness of theological education.
I know how I like to be educated. I like good lectures, good books, and trying to get a thought straight enough to write it down. A really good lecture is not so much about passing on information as it is about framing understanding, providing insight, and giving context. A good book explores an issue in systematic ways and builds an argument or thesis in the context of competing positions. Writing is the most painful way I learn, but for me, one of the best. Good writing winnows out thoughtlessness, which I have a lot of, forces clarity, which I have too little of, and provides the context for meaning making. I am educated by all of these. I likely succeeded in school because these three activities were the principle pedagogical strategies used in my education. They are so powerful for me that it is hard for me to understand that they are not equally effective for other learners.

My students, however, taught me otherwise. Some of them did not learn well by listening to lectures, and writing itself was so difficult they could never use it as a strategy for a thought. They taught me that they learned better from experience because they learned by doing, or from discussion because they discovered what they thought in interaction with others.

Decades ago as a professor, I had a course on faith development that I had worked on hard and written a book about, and that relied on a good combination of the work of others and my own original work. One semester, that course was going nowhere. It was the posterchild for pedagogical failure. About four weeks into the semester, I picked up the wastebasket in the corner of the room and had each student put his or her syllabus in it. The rest of the class period was spent redesigning the course. We wrote a new syllabus together. One student worked at the Hebrew school in Louisville and said that he thought he could get the headmaster, who was a Holocaust survivor, to come. We put it in the syllabus, along with several other things I had never thought of as well as a few I didn't know anything about!

Later that semester, the headmaster of the Hebrew school came for class. As he began talking, he walked up and down the aisle putting a gold coin on the desk of each student. My anxiety went up. Some of these students were pretty desperate for money, and I worried that he would leave to tell people that he made it through the Holocaust but Baptist seminary students did him in! He asked them to look at the coins and pass them around to their neighbors. Then came the explanation for why he had brought them. His family kept gold coins hidden in bodily orifices and used them to bribe guards or make purchases that helped them survive the Holocaust. After becoming reestablished in the United States, he made a hobby of collecting gold coins to remind himself of what his family had endured. By experience, testimony, and touch, students learned. I doubt if anyone remembers a single lecture I gave in that class 30 years ago, but I am sure no one has forgotten the day when they listened to a witness with a gold coin in their hand.

ATS is working on the largest project it has ever undertaken. It is about educational models. We are working with the perception that an educational model includes the persons who are the focus of instruction (the students), what the educational effort intends students to learn (the curriculum), how subjects are taught (pedagogy), and what administrative resources are necessary to make the model work. You will hear at the Thursday morning plenary about how much ATS schools are doing to expand their educational models, serve their constituencies, and educate students. It is a huge amount.

Who are the students of ATS schools? When my father-in-law was a student at seminary in the 1930s and 1940s, the only students were persons intending on pastoral ministry. When I was a student at the same seminary in 1969, the student body included persons intending to pursue pastoral ministry, persons intending to pursue a range of ministries in religious education, and persons intending on ministry careers in church music.
There were other vocational options, to be sure, but these were the dominant ones. Now, the range is much broader. ATS schools have programs for lay professionals, for lay persons who simply want to know more about their faith, for persons with ministry interests far beyond congregational and parish ministry. We are educating counselors, social ministry professionals, persons focusing on leadership, and a host of others. Ministry occupations have expanded, and what was not considered a ministry career in previous decades is considered one now.

Not only are we educating students for a broader range of ministry vocations; they are going to seminary in increasingly varied ways. A large percentage of students study part-time. It now takes an average of four years for ATS students to complete an MDiv and four years to complete a two-year master’s degree. According to the estimate of academic deans, only about 25 percent of students enrolled in ATS schools live on or near the campus. The other 75 percent of students increasingly require block class schedules, evening and weekend classes, and hybrid courses.

What should these students learn? Two hundred years ago, the few students who did attend higher education for their ministry training tended to learn the classics—not the classical disciplines of theology but the classical disciplines of a liberal arts curriculum that included divinity. In the late 19th century, more students were going to theological schools, and they learned primarily what we sometimes call the classical disciplines—biblical studies, theology, history—all which were very new as separate academic disciplines. By the early part of the 20th century, when ATS was formed, students were expected to learn the “classical” areas of study and more nascent areas that we now know as religious education, church administration, missions, evangelism, and pastoral care. The curriculum has expanded in two significant ways: the older disciplines have expanded in their scope, and a host of new disciplines have been added. The study of scripture has many interpretive lenses, and we want students to have some familiarity with those lenses. Church history is no longer the history of the church in the West; it includes the history of church in the East and global South. The pastoral disciplines have increased to include sociology of religion, cultural analysis, congregational studies, conflict analysis, and leadership studies. The curriculum has expanded to include study in whole new areas like counseling studies that would lead to state licensure.

How are these increasingly diverse subjects to be taught? When I was in seminary, the dominant pedagogy reflected my intuitive learning style: lectures, reading, and papers. Pedagogical strategies still include lectures. (Even Jesus uses this strategy in the Sermon on Mount, albeit with no PowerPoint slides.) In addition to lectures, we now have patterns of seminar study, group work, experiential patterns of education, education by extension, and most recently, distance learning. Like most of the changes in theological education, all of these pedagogical additions have come with no subtractions. A faculty member may well be expected to be a good lecturer, able to facilitate group discussion toward learning goals, capably of using student projects as a teaching resource, and able to teach online, which is an altogether new pedagogical invention.

By now, you may have perceived where I am heading. Theological schools are now educating students for a much broader array of occupational forms of ministry in ever more varied patterns of course delivery. Faculty are responsible for guiding students in a much larger array of subjects with a broader and differentiated array of pedagogical strategies.

If ATS member schools had an endless stream of new money to fund these changes, if they had the necessary resources to administer the broad array of needed innovations and services, they would be working on strategies for the most effective application of resources and efficient management of money. Unfortunately, the growing complexity of good theological education practice has not been accompanied with increased resources. Schools have worked hard to do it all, and
they are accomplishing more than any reasonable estimate of resources would suggest could be done. Most ATS schools are overloading themselves with efforts to implement their missions. The beneficiaries of their overload include students who can study in more ways than schools can afford to provide and communities of faith who have well-educated leaders even though they are no longer able to provide the financial support they once did. If schools were in food service, most have the financial capacity to offer blue plate specials but are trying to serve gourmet buffets. The institutional ox can only tread grain so long.

What will future educational models be, and how can they be sustained? What educational models can meet the multiple needs of stressed communities of faith, be faithful intellectually to the ever growing fields of knowledge, and provide the diversity of pedagogical style and educational delivery that students require?

Theological education is not bereft of good educational strategies, even if it never learns another one. How will educational strategies be sustained over time? The answer to that question likely requires finding the strategy that most closely meets the needs of the schools’ constituencies that can be funded by aggressive fund-raising efforts.

This answer likely means that educational patterns that, in the past, have tended to be very similar across theological schools will, in the future, become increasingly different. ATS members that have learned to accommodate theological diversity among member schools will need to become comfortable with educational diversity as well. The Thursday morning program will not only share what ATS has learned is happening broadly; it will invite you to discuss what is happening in your schools. Most of the initial work on this huge project has been housed at ATS; the next stage will shift the work to member schools who will have the opportunity to apply for grants to address issues of educational mission, innovation, educational sustainability, and faculty development.

**Conclusion**

We could have sung about our troubles this afternoon, or cried in our soup, or wished that our task was to address readily solvable little issues instead of ever-persistent big ones. These vexing big issues would be inundating if we had an insignificant little Gospel. But we don’t. Our Gospel is about taking on evil itself, suffering because of it, and being raised transcendent over it. Maybe a Charles Wesley text is truer for us in our time than anything from *The Music Man*. Remember this verse from the hymn many of us sing at Easter?

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

It is that last line that I want to sing the loudest. Ours the cross—we will not escape the hard issues or troubling times. Ours the grave—we will not escape the consequences of difficult times or ineffable issues. Ours the sky—the difficulties do not constrain us, grace emancipates us, we are being redeemed. We shall be redeemed!