

GUEST EDITORIAL: SEMINARY EDUCATION AND ECCLESIOLOGY

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Seminary education and ecclesiology are closely linked. Without the church, the seminary would not need to exist; without the seminary, the church would have to look for other ways of preparing its ministers and leaders. A clear ecclesiology serves as a beacon that guides the seminary in preparing the future leadership of the church.

Our reflections on seminary education will be largely confined to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We will reflect mostly from the perspective of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, which publishes this journal. "Seminary education" will be understood as encompassing all significant forms of theological and ministerial education, which lead to professional ministry, church leadership, and the teaching of the different disciplines and/or ministry-related skills in seminaries.

Early Developments

The roots of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary may be traced back to the establishment of Battle Creek College (1874). Yet, Battle Creek College was far from being a seminary. It first offered an undergraduate "classical course," with a few elective courses in religion, and a "special course," later lengthened to a three-year "biblical course," with comparatively few enrollees. By 1883, it was offering short programs for denominational workers. This was followed by the abolition of classical studies and the discontinuation of academic degrees (1898-1899). Overall, the central objective of the institution was to prepare church workers. A number of its graduates became ministers, and others became teachers in the expanding educational system of the church.

By the time Battle Creek College was relocated to Berrien Springs, Michigan, and renamed Emmanuel Missionary College (1901), the rapidly growing Seventh-day Adventist Church had already established other post-secondary (or "training") educational institutions in North America and in some of its "mission fields" on several continents. Their purpose was

essentially the same as that of the first college. Distance, cost, language, regional or cultural differences, and other factors made it more practical to establish learning centers in key regions and countries. On the other hand, after the disastrous Battle Creek fires of 1902, the denomination was more sensitive to the strategic importance of not concentrating its assets in one place.

Thus, starting in the late nineteenth century, the basic preparation for the Seventh-day Adventist ministry began to be offered in several regions of North America and the world. By the early twenty-first century, more than eighty Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions offer some form of post-secondary theological education—eight of them at the diploma/certificate level only—for the benefit of the church already established in over two hundred countries (or areas recognized by the United Nations).

Beginning of Seventh-day Adventist Graduate Theological Education

In most countries of the world today, Christian churches appear to agree that three to five academic years of full-time post-secondary theological/ministerial studies are needed to provide basic preparation for the pastoral ministry. This harmonizes with patterns of studies in many other professional programs, where most—if not all—of the three to five years of study are devoted to the specific professional studies being pursued. Normally, no graduate degrees are required beyond the basic degree to enter the chosen profession. Yet, one- or two-year master's programs, as well as doctoral programs, are offered by a number of institutions, especially for those who want to pursue a teaching career.

A significant exception to these patterns is the North American graduate-level Master of Divinity (M.Div.) program. It follows a four-year undergraduate degree program and lasts three academic years. It does not require previous studies in religion and ministry.

By the time the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) designated the M.Div. (called Bachelor of Divinity before 1970) as the first theological degree, a number of Seventh-day Adventist colleges in North America had been offering four-year undergraduate programs with a religion/theology major for decades. Depending on the school, these undergraduate programs usually offered the equivalent of two to three years of religion/theology and pastoral studies, plus a number of general education courses. During the twentieth century, most Seventh-day Adventist ministers in North America took one of these undergraduate programs.

The establishment of the Theological Seminary as a graduate institution of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the late 1930s slowly began making its impact. However, the new school initially emphasized the preparation of teachers of religion, not regular pastors. Most of the students registered for an M.A. degree program. The denominational leaders in North America, by and large, continued to depend on students' completion of the undergraduate Religion program as a prerequisite for the appointment to ministry positions. Even after the Theological Seminary was transferred to Berrien Springs (1959-1960) to become one of the schools of the newly chartered Andrews University, the undergraduate program in religion taught at the former Emmanuel Missionary College continued to be offered on the same campus.

It took several decades for the Theological Seminary to be perceived as the primary center in North America for the preparation of Seventh-day Adventist ministers. The first three Bachelor of Divinity (B.D.) degrees were granted in 1950. By 1981, data provided by the local "conferences" in North America indicated that of 2,135 Seventh-day Adventist ministers, only 22 percent had completed the B.D./M.Div. and 16 percent had an M.A. in Religion degree. In a similar survey (1997), which included 2,825 ministers, 39.8 percent had finished the M.Div. degree, while 20 percent had completed other master's degrees.

The Mission of the Theological Seminary

After seven decades of existence, the Theological Seminary is enjoying its highest student enrollment and its largest full-time faculty. Both the student body and the faculty have a strong international flavor. During the last four decades, the Seminary has added several master's and four doctoral programs (each with its own set of subspecialties). Some of these have been offered partially or totally by extension throughout North America and in overseas locations on virtually all continents.

As of 2004, at least two of the other North American institutions of higher education, which have traditionally offered an undergraduate program in religion, are offering graduate programs in religion or ministry. At the same time, during the last three decades a few overseas institutions have started to offer their own graduate programs in religion and ministry, including some doctoral programs. These developments raise the question of the mission of the Theological Seminary (Berrien Springs) as an institution of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

It is not surprising that the Seventh-day Adventist Church outside of North America has felt the need to start graduate-level institutions for the upgrading of the pastoral ministry. With more than 90 percent of the

church membership and more than 80 percent of the ministers living in North America, the original Theological Seminary is unable to adequately serve the church in those areas. Some overseas pastors attend the Theological Seminary, including a few who are financially sponsored, to prepare them to teach in theological schools in their areas of origin. Of the ones who come to the Seminary unsponsored, a number never return home. Thus there is an urgent need to provide graduate education in different areas of the world. However, financial limitations, the recognition that "graduate" theological education is not generally indispensable overseas in order to serve in ministry, and the fact that not all ministers qualify academically for master's-level work have kept the number of institutions offering graduate-level programs in religion and ministry comparatively small.

With a few exceptions, each of the thirteen world "divisions" of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has only one graduate theological institution. A few of these division-sponsored institutions have a central administration and a number of distance-learning centers on the campuses of existing undergraduate institutions that operate for two months or so each year during the yearly academic break. Thus they do not face the expense of building classrooms, housing, and other facilities. They do not need to move the pastoral family for one or two years, with the almost inevitable chain reaction of ministerial transfers. They can recruit the best faculty available throughout their territory and beyond for the yearly session. Students are normally experienced pastors who do not need to abandon their ministry for a year or more in order to earn a graduate degree. And they are able to apply immediately in the field what they have just learned in the yearly session.

It is more difficult to see the need for additional graduate theological institutions in North America with only some one million church members. It is true that the Baptists have more than one theological seminary, but their North American membership runs into many millions. The Theological Seminary (Berrien Springs) has been able throughout its existence to accept all qualified applicants from North America. It offers, in addition, the option of an M.Div. that requires residence during only half of the program. It has been offering for decades the M.A. in Pastoral Ministry and, more recently, the Doctor of Ministry, mostly by extension, in strategic locations throughout North America.

In the context of world developments in Seventh-day Adventist graduate education, what is the special mission of the Theological Seminary? With its many programs, its large faculty, and its library, it is intended to continue as the highest and most comprehensive center for theological education and

research of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It will go on preparing some of the best professors of religion needed for the developing theological schools around the world. Seminary teachers can also contribute worldwide to the preparation of pastors by serving as guest professors in these developing schools. Seminary faculty will also be most valuable as participants in the work of committees, assisting specialized entities of the General Conference, such as the Biblical Research Institute and the Geoscience Research Institute, and dealing with a variety of other issues, as requested by the church.

Seminary Education and Ecclesiology

A clear understanding of ecclesiology is essential for the effectiveness of a theological seminary in preparing ministers and others to serve the church. The nature of the Christian community is differently perceived by different Christian bodies. Differences in organization, beliefs, mission, and other areas may be such that only ministers and other leaders who fully understand and identify with a specific understanding of the nature and mission of the church may be able to successfully lead.

Seventh-day Adventist seminaries are established and owned by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. They are inextricably linked with this church. They are most valuable when they understand their mission as servants of the church. They are needed to sharpen the church's understanding of its nature, its message, and its mission.

Seminaries are not graduate schools of religion. Their focus is not just the search for and transmission of knowledge. They must excel in their responsible use of scholarly methodologies and resources. But their ultimate objective is not information, but transformation.

Seminaries are most effective as they better understand and fulfill, in their respective areas of influence, their basic role in preparing ministers, Bible teachers, and other leaders equipped to face with vision, realism, and dedication the multifaceted challenges of the church in mission.