

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary - Seminex Celebration
Feb. 20 2014
Bishop Richard Jaech, Seminex class of 1975

Well...it was 40 years ago today, that Seminex started. 40 professors, over 400 students walked out of Concordia Seminary and the next day began classes at Concordia Seminary in Exile.

This was an act of persistent hopefulness. A decision to live for the future rather than be trapped by the past.

You see the drawing in your bulletin of the tree that has been cut off and a branch growing out of the stump. This was a drawing created by Bob Werberig, who in addition to being a member of the faculty, was also an artist. He took this image from the words of Isaiah that we just heard read a moment ago.

“There shall come forth a shoot from Jesse, and a branch will grow out of its root.”

Seminex was a branch coming up from the stump of a cut-off tree. But what exactly sprouted up, aside from the seminary itself? What came up in the lives of people and in the church?

Every one of you here who went through the Seminex experience will have your own answer to that question, but here are three things that I noticed happening in my life and in the lives of my fellow students and the faculty.

1. A variety of creative ministries for us seminary graduates. Necessity is the mother of invention. Since our church body was not going to hand us an assigned call upon graduation, we suddenly began looking for possible ministries for ourselves, including ministries outside of the normal parish ministry.

Here in Bay Area, Steve Harms, drama ministry; Paul Theiss, apartment ministry; Steve Hitchcock, Lutheran Human Relations Association; Jim Friedrich, Lutheran Social Services. I started a Latin American ministry in what is now St. Mary and St. Martha Lutheran church in the Mission District. A classmate of ours took a job dealing cards in Las Vegas and started a ministry among casino workers in Las Vegas.

In central California, about 14 seminex grads were worker priests, earning part of our income in other jobs. (Now we call that bi-vocational.)

Some of us might have chosen these options anyway, but when the customary path disappears, then you start looking for new paths. When the first growth, the old growth has been cut off, the Spirit of God keeps bringing new life forth in unexpected ways. Thankfully, God is doing that in our midst today again, as we seek new ways to do ministry. Today being bi-vocational is necessary not because of

church politics but church economics. Plus, there are so many new needs opening up in society for creative ministry. The Spirit is taking us to new places.

2. What also sprang forth out of this conflict time was a heightened passion for biblical inquiry. Studying and knowing the bible as deeply as you can. When you can get fired and lose your job based on what you discover in the bible and what you say about the bible, then you either close your mouth and be quiet, or you become passionate about what's there and you use all the tools at your disposal to discover and see what's there because your life depends on it. So for many of us, we became quite passionate about the study of the bible.

Parallel example: 30 years ago groups of young and middle aged people would go to Cuba to help with the harvest of coffee beans. They did it mostly as a way to help the new Cuba survive and flourish as a nation, but there was an extra element that made it extra attractive and necessary. The US government forbade US citizens from traveling to Cuba. It was illegal to go there. When someone forbids you to do something right and good, for some people that means you have to go there. And if they don't want you to go to Cuba, then there must be something very important there that you are going to find there. And if it's illegal, you are committed and alert and alive every moment you are picking those coffee beans.

One good thing that happened in the Seminex experience is that when we went into Professor Kalin's on Galatians, and opened the bible and began to read, we knew we were stepping into an outlawed foreign country where we had been told not to go, and that woke us up and made us very alert. When we went into Prof. Carl Graesser's OT Class on Genesis or Professor Smith's class on John, and they taught us how to use of form criticism and studying the historical context, we knew that we were doing something forbidden for we which there would be a cost. So a sense grew in us that the study of the bible would never be a calm and shallow academic project. It became something you did with fear and trembling, in the best sense. You leapt into scripture with excitement and fear and wonder, because there was always something more to discover but you had to dig deeper and you had to find the truth of the text, because you were staking your life on it.

The present day connection I make with this is that I hope that all of us continue to approach the Bible as a dangerous and revolutionary place that nevertheless we have to go in and explore. Like handling explosives, I hope that all of are alert and driven to get inside and see how it works.

Fortunately, most of us will never be in a church body that prohibits the full study of Scripture. However, there are other forces at work. In our world and in our own hearts, we often don't want to hear everything that God wants to say to us about justice. Most of us occupy a place of privilege in our society. Not all of us, but most of us are white, educated and middle class. We don't want to hear everything that Christ wants to say to us about the right use of power and money. Most of us are straight. Sometimes we don't want to hear everything the Gospel core of scripture has to say to us about how everyone is welcome to the table and prized by God. Who

or what wants to keep the lid on God's word to us. Our social context and the life to which we have become accustomed red-lines certain topics and tells us to relax and stay out. But I hope that the Spirit stirs us up so that the very danger and cost of God's word draws us to go in and study and dig and find the truth.

As the hymn writer says: "The peace of God it is no peace but strife sown in the sod. Yet let us pray for but one thing, the marvelous peace of God."

3. The third gift of the Seminex experience was the new realization, the deeper realization about what faith is. Namely that faith is not just believing certain things about God in our head, but living that faith; not just knowing the Gospel, but living the Gospel.

When I was growing up, the main purpose of religious instruction was to teach people the right things about God and Jesus so that we would absorb them in our head and go to heaven. It was a cognitive task. Now, it does matter what we think and say about God. We see the tragic results when people's picture of God is off. But faith is not just head but also heart and life: It is grounding ourselves in God, entrusting ourselves to God and following God no matter what.

It was an incredible witness of faith for me to see the seminary professors and families, and the seminary staff walk away from guaranteed salaries and established pensions and in some cases their campus houses into a very unknown future for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of following God's call. Suddenly faith was not just believing and speaking things about God but living it.

I confess that I had a very easy, almost risk-free time of it. I was a single student with no family that I needed to support, no house payments, no student loans to cover. My whole family supported what I was doing, both theologically and financially. I was out doing my year of internship in Connecticut when Seminex happened, but when it came time for me to decide what school to come back to for my fourth year, it was the easiest decision in my life. Seminex was where my friends were, where all the professors that I respected were. It was the place that heading towards the ordination of women and ecumenical cooperation and deep honest investigation of the full richness of the Scriptures. It was very painfree for me.

But for others it was much more costly. A loss of salary. Angry splits in the family. Loss of health. A short time after Seminex started, the leadership of the Missouri-Synod abruptly closed down Concordia Senior College in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, where all of us had gone to get our Bachelor Degree before coming to seminary. They viewed the Senior College as an overly-liberal feeder college, so they closed it which meant that whole faculty and staff were also out of work and housing and suddenly in a very unknown place.

The tree was cut down. Dear Mother Church, who like all mothers and fathers sometimes acts in fear rather than faith, Mother Church cut down the tree of many

peoples' hopes and dreams and security. Yet out of that grew up this terrible but necessary opportunity, this marvelous opportunity to live the faith, to live the Gospel with one's whole life.

That finally is at the heart of everything we do. Quite appropriately in the church, we are always working and planning and strategizing to be a good and effective church. We are implementing the best growth plan, the best stewardship plan, the best seminary system possible. At its best that is all important and necessary work for us to do in the church.

But at its heart, to be the church, is to discover ourselves embraced by a God who loves us, who delights in us, who fills us with life. And then, in response to that love, to go out and live God's love, live God's compassion and justice in the world.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord. Not doctrine and dogma and regulation. Not statements about who's in and who's out. We follow Jesus and the way, the truth, the life that is embodied in him. But the thing about Jesus, of course, is that, no sooner to we choose to make him our foundation and anchor our lives in him, that he takes us out of our comfortable house into the world to live out that Gospel life in every way that we can.

I will always remember the last words that were spoken to me in my seminary education. It was that last day of classes before graduation. It was my final class of the day. I was in a New Testament class on Romans taught by Dr. Ed Krentz and at the end of the class period, Dr. Krentz gathered his notes together, put them in his folder and said to us, "Gentlemen, (we were all men there that day) Gentlemen, this is the end of seminary training, but it is not the end of your education. If you want to be effective as pastors, you will continue learning and growing for the rest of your career."

And then he quoted Kai Munk, the Danish pastor of the 1940's who said, "The truth cannot be pickled." The truth cannot be sealed with vinegar in a jar and expected to stay in the same form and shape forever and ever. God's truth is alive and responsive to the world. God's truth simmers and ferments and brews up a new expression of God's love and calling for each new place and moment. God is constantly in dialogue with people in the life questions that we face.

I think that the lively truth of God is emerging and taking shape in new ways in our church today as we search for better ways to care for our planet, better ways to address poverty, better ways to live with our sisters and brothers in other faith traditions, better ways to welcome all to the table.

I am thankful that I happened along at the right moment to be with this faculty and this community of Seminex as they set out, not to carve out a certain version of the truth and then pickle it, but to listen to God, to follow Christ, to live the Gospel in the world. More importantly, I pray that we all remain alert and open to the spirit of

Christ as we are led to new ventures, to new discoveries, to new places to live the Gospel.

May God bless us all as we walk this path of discipleship together. Amen.

O Spirit who did once restore the church,
that it might be again the bringer of good news to all,
breathe on your cloven church once more.
That in these gray and latter days,
There might be those whose life is praise;
Each life a high doxology,
To Father, Son and unto thee. Amen.*

(From the hymn, "O God, O Lord, of heaven and earth," by Martin Franzman.)