The Hidden Curriculum
of Seminary Education

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This article argues that the impact of the hidden curriculum found in most forms of seminary education is profoundly negative. The prevalent methods and structures used in most theological education—including missiological education—subtly undermine the content and intent of our schools, producing graduates who are often ill-equipped for their subsequent roles in church and society. Theological education can only be effective when the hidden curriculum receives as much attention as the explicit curriculum, when it is intentionally designed rather than unintentionally accepted. The article concludes with twenty-five practical ways in which the hidden curriculum can become a positive holistic learning experience.

Introduction

The following is a true story—only the name of the key character and a few of the peripheral details have been changed.

Gregory was an exemplary student at theological college, gaining high grades and being known for his keen philosophical mind. Gregory’s denomination had provided

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him with a scholarship through seminary under the condition that he serve the denomination for three years after graduation. His first appointment was to serve as pastor of a small church in a regional city. The church had been without a pastor for over 6 years. Gregory was very enthusiastic and looked forward to being able to teach all the wonderful new ideas he had learned at seminary.

Shortly after arriving and settling in the city Gregory announced at the end of Sunday worship that the following Friday afternoon an exciting new adult education program would begin. Keen to see as many participate as possible, he telephoned key leaders in the church to invite them personally. Gregory was confident that addressing the theological ignorance of this sleepy congregation would transform it into a vibrant church with a powerful impact on the community.

All week long Gregory studied and prepared, and spent most of Friday setting up the classrooms: one in which he would teach Introduction to Church History from 4-5 pm, one in which he would teach Introduction to New Testament from 5-6 pm, and finally the class in which he would teach his pet subject, Introduction to Systematic Theology from 6-7 pm. At 4 pm he waited . . . and waited. At 4:30 two of the stalwart old ladies of the church arrived together. About 20 minutes later an elderly couple arrived. All four stayed for an hour or so and then left. No others came.

Not to be deterred, Gregory focused on the Introduction to New Testament which seemed to interest these four the most. He again encouraged from the pulpit and by phone, and waited in anticipation for the following Friday. This time nobody came. Gregory’s enthusiasm was shattered, as were his feelings of hope for the church. It was only with reluctance and not a little cynicism that Gregory completed the minimum 12 months at the church, at which point he asked to be appointed to a youth ministry position in another location. Two years later he left ministry to study towards a PhD in theology.
While this story may be extreme, sadly it is repeated to a greater or lesser degree with far too many seminary graduates across the globe. Is there any wonder that so many of our congregations refer to seminaries as cemeteries, and despise so much of the product of our labour?

While many reasons could be posited for the widespread critique of our schools, I would suggest that one of the primary factors is our ignorance of the profound impact of the hidden curriculum, and our consequent failure to address its potential negative impact. My basic thesis in this article is that theological education can only be effective when the hidden curriculum is intentionally designed rather than unintentionally accepted.

The Hidden Curriculum: A Definition

But what is the “hidden” curriculum? Most of us, when we think of the word “curriculum,” think of the course descriptions included in our college catalogs and the syllabi we hand out to the students at the beginning of each term. But this is only one form of curriculum, what is technically known as the “explicit” curriculum: those publicly known, stated and planned educational events that are commonly understood by all those who are participating.¹

The irony is that while we often devote many long hours to planning our catalogs and syllabi these are generally far less influential in the education of our students than is the hidden curriculum: the potent sociological and psychological dimensions of education, which are usually caught rather than intentionally taught.²

The hidden curriculum are those pervasive environmental features of education that include such things as the nature of behaviors which

² Although not the first sociologist to use the concept, the phrase “hidden curriculum” was originally coined by Philip Jackson in his seminal work *Life In Classrooms* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968).
are encouraged, the type of relationships modeled, and the values emphasised in the learning community.

The hidden curriculum is subtle but is in fact far more powerful than the explicit curriculum, as the messages we communicate through how we teach embed themselves deeply within the psyches of our students and influence their attitudes, motivations, and behaviors in a way that our words rarely accomplish.

The following simple story may help illustrate the point:

Mary was a young twenty-eight year-old woman who taught a Sunday School class of ten year-olds. Mary was teaching the children the importance of loving one another. During the class over half the questions were answered by “good” Christine; when it came time to pray, Christine was asked to do so; when a passage was to be read, Christine read; and on top of all this, the offering was taken up by Christine. Meanwhile two particularly active and playful boys—George and John—received frequent rebukes, were spoken to harshly, and finally sent to the Sunday School Superintendent.

Now while Mary’s lesson was supposedly on loving one another, the real lesson she taught—the hidden curriculum of her lesson—was this: “love is conditional on good behavior”; “love has favorites”; and “there are some who simply cannot be loved.”

Here, as elsewhere, we see an uncomfortable truth that has been well documented by sociologists of education but largely ignored by institutional leaders: the hidden curriculum always overrides the explicit curriculum. In other words, if the explicit curriculum and the hidden curriculum conflict, the message learned will be that embedded within the hidden curriculum, not that taught in the explicit curriculum. Consequently we ignore the hidden curriculum at our own peril.

The hidden curriculum is pervasive in education. The way a teacher dresses, the presence or lack of humor, the thoroughness of attention to some topics and the skimpy treatment of others—all

3 Pazmiño, Principles and Practices, 93.
these communicate to students something about what is important and what is not. Parker Palmer observes that “… the whole culture of the academic community with its system of rewards and punishments … [and its] rules and relationships … comprise a ‘hidden curriculum’ which [has a] greater formative power over the lives of learners than the advertised curriculum.” It is for this reason that responsible curricular planning takes very seriously both the explicit and the hidden curricula. Effective education can only take place when the hidden curriculum is intentionally designed rather than unintentionally accepted.

The Hidden Curriculum in Seminary Education

As with every educational institution, our seminaries, Bible schools, and missionary training centers also have a hidden curriculum. Sadly, this hidden curriculum often trains our students in the exact opposite way to what we teach in our explicit curriculum and what we claim in our institution’s purpose statements. While every institution approaches its education differently, and consequently provides a different form of hidden curriculum, I would like to suggest some common hidden messages that many theological institutions communicate to their students.

Schooling = Education

One of the most common lessons we teach seminarians is that the best way to help people grow spiritually is for them to be schooled in the Bible and theology. Put more simply, we teach our

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students that “schooling” = “education.” The story of Gregory, cited previously, is a classic example of this form of training. In virtually every seminary grading and other forms of approval hinge on the cognitive mastery of biblical, theological, and historical data which can be expressed on papers or in examinations. A premium is placed on the accumulation of information, and this priority on head knowledge is subconsciously transferred to ministry. As a result, those individuals who have handled information well (as exemplified by good grades) are likely to be selected for leadership roles in the local church, rather than those individuals who may exhibit a godly life but who do not have good grades.

As I travel around the world I see the schooling model clearly reflected in the standard classroom layout used in seminaries:

Even as we enter a class such as this we know the presumed role of the teacher: instructor, director, professional expert authority, an

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7 “In school we are taught that valuable learning is the result of attendance; that the value of learning increases with the amount of input; and, finally, that this value can be measured and documented by grades and certificates.” Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1970), 56.

8 Lawrence Richards, A Theology of Christian Education (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 159.
intellectual master in the field of study. There is a subconscious emotional distance created by the classroom layout that restricts a sense of freedom in opinion and discussion. “Knowledge” is viewed as an external commodity to be digested like lunch, and “learning” is often little more than conforming to a teacher’s expectations. It is the instructor who sets the agenda, who determines the syllabus, who is the center of attention. Too often the teacher lectures in monologue as though he or she is the only one who has anything important to say and that the others will be served best by listening.

The unspoken assumption in formal classroom settings such as these is that the students are ignorant “open receptacles,” eagerly awaiting the answers to life’s issues. Often this approach reflects the worst of what Paulo Freire describes as the “banking” system of education, or what E. C. Lindeman called the “additive process,” in which the teacher receives from the students exactly what has already been imparted from the teacher’s academic repository, while retaining total control over the goals, content, and evaluative criteria of the educational activity.

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I recognize that this portrayal is rather negative, but it is unfortunately all too common. Is it any wonder that our seminarians take this same emotionally distant “expert authority” pattern into church ministry? Our students learn so well from the impersonal and formal setting of the typical seminary classroom that they themselves develop an impersonal and formal style of ministry following seminary.\textsuperscript{15}

**An Academic Approach to Ministry**

Through our research-oriented book-centered approach to education we also train our students to believe that knowledge can only be found in books and an academic approach to thinking. Should it surprise us, then, when our graduates bring this academic approach into their local church ministries or in their cross-cultural encounters as missionaries? In the face of all the research done into the way adults learn,\textsuperscript{16} our seminary trained leaders pay little heed to the accumulated knowledge of those sitting before them, instead delivering well-studied treatises that are frequently irrelevant to those who attend.

Often I hear seminary graduates complain about the lack of transformation they see in their congregations, their teaching and preaching apparently having little impact on the lives of the people they serve. Too rarely do our graduates consider that the inability of people to experience personal spiritual transformation might in fact be due (at least in part) to their comparable inability to relate the message to the lives of those they teach.

Our graduates model very well their own seminary experience. How rare are the seminary professors who relate their teaching to the lives of their students. Sadly, the emphasis all too often is on the

\textsuperscript{15} Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education*, 238.

\textsuperscript{16} A discussion of the growing field of andragogy is beyond the scope of this paper. For a valuable introduction to the significant differences between how children and adults learn see Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6\textsuperscript{th} ed. (Amsterdam, HOL: Elsevier, 2005), especially pages 58-72.
delivery of vast quantities of biblical, theological and missiological information rather than on modeling the Christian life. Edgar Elliston comments,

The formal or schooling approach to theological education … is typically isolated from the “real life” of the community where it is located and from the community where the students will ultimately serve. … It provides an opportunity for advanced theoretical considerations in a teacher-centered hierarchical context. The goal of “academic excellence” is sought sometimes as an end in itself without involvement in the community to be served or in the lives of the students.

This problem is hardly unique to theological seminaries. Stephen Brookfield has observed the same phenomenon across the fields:

One of the most frequently offered criticisms of programs of professional preparation by graduates who subsequently inhabit the “real world” of practice is that such programs are strong on theory but weak on practical application. It is not unusual to hear practitioners declare that their first few months of practice were spent unlearning the lessons of graduate training programs.

We do a better job of qualifying students for the Christian version of Trivial Pursuit or Jeopardy than we do of preparing leaders who can draw people closer to God and affect the way they live their

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19 Brookfield, 201.
lives.\textsuperscript{21} While we teach orally “the Word became flesh” we teach psychologically and methodologically “the Word became text.”\textsuperscript{22}

Very often I hear the argument that the training of seminarians in the disciplines of critical thinking is an important preparation for ministry in an increasingly complex world. I would agree! But too often the term “critical thinking” is limited to the comparison and analysis of academic texts. How much more demanding and complex a form of critical thinking occurs when we ask students to become “practical Christian thinkers”\textsuperscript{23} or “reflective practitioners”\textsuperscript{24} through asking them to analyse, synthesise, and evaluate theoretical academic material in the light of practical life situations, and vice-versa.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} Thom and Joani Schultz, \textit{Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: And How to Fix It} (Loveland, CO: Group, 1993), 54.


Knowledge-Centered Hierarchy

Too often we train a knowledge-centered arrogance in our students. There is a tendency in many seminary classes to make frequent reference to the original languages and scholarly books, often belittling straightforward interpretations as simplistic and praising complex interpretations as “scholarly.” The clear hidden curriculum embedded in this approach is that only the educated (professors in particular) can truly understand the Scriptures. While I appreciate the concern for letting the Scriptures speak for themselves rather than imposing our own preconceived notions upon them, I nonetheless wonder if we do not train our seminarians to learn a certain arrogant disdain towards the simple faith of many believers. Certainly we teach our seminarians that most church goers are incapable of coming to the true understanding of the Scriptures, and so need us scholars to tell them. In other words, only those properly trained (namely professors and their graduates) should interpret the Bible. While paying lip-service to the great Reformation teaching of “the priesthood of all believers,” our hidden curriculum teaches that there is a new priestly hierarchy with us academics comfortably seated at the top.

Leader Control

The situation is further exacerbated by the tendency of professors to control the syllabus totally. One of the most insidious outcomes of curricular control is the extent to which it undermines the creativity that is essential to our being created in God’s image. Ivan Illich observes: “Once young people have allowed their determining the understanding we have of any particular concept or principle.

26 Illich comments that “students are academically processed to be happy only in the company of fellow consumers of the products of the educational machine,” Deschooling Society, 49.

imaginations to be formed by curricular instruction, they are conditioned to institutional planning of every sort. ‘Instruction’ smothers the horizon of their imaginations.” 28 If, however, we affirm the value of individuals as created in the image of God, then we must provide opportunity for creativity through broadening the variety of instructional methods we employ, enabling our very different students to learn and apply God’s truth in very different ways. 29 These different ways can reflect their own individual learning styles while remaining consistent with God’s demands.

How many of our instructors ever consider consulting with their students before delivering the syllabus as if from on high? Far too often our classrooms consist of a professor controlling the questions asked and determining the correctness of the answers given by the students. 30 The tragedy is that our students take the same model into their church ministries after leaving our hallowed halls. Just as our curricula are largely irrelevant to the lives of our students, the teaching our graduates take into their churches far too often is frankly irrelevant to the lives of their congregations. 31

One Size Fits Nobody

Too many seminaries take a “one size fits all” approach to theological education, providing little in the way of flexibility and student choice within program and course requirements. As with “one size fits all” clothing so, too, with theological education: the end result is “one size fits nobody.”

28 Illich, Deschooling Society, 56.
30 Cf. with Illich’s accusation that in educational institutions “most resources are spent to purchase the time and motivation of a limited number of people to take up predetermined problems in a ritually defined setting,” Deschooling Society, 28.
31 Cf. with the assertion of Paulo Freire (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. by M. B. Ramos [Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1970]) that he can teach any adult to read in 40 hours or less if the first words encountered are charged with political meaning and consequently connect directly to the lives of the learner.
While paying lip-service to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, through minimizing student choice in the courses they can take, our hidden curriculum bespeaks a commitment to graduate uniformity that simply cannot be justified theologically. The contrast with Jesus’ individualized and incidental approach to leadership training is dramatic.\(^{32}\)

**A Fragmented, Conceptual Understanding of Reality**

Another major lesson taught through the hidden curriculum of our seminaries is a fragmented, conceptual understanding of reality\(^{33}\) that is more consistent with mechanistic modernism than it is with Christian epistemology.\(^{34}\) Our seminaries are compartmentalised into...

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\(^{33}\) The prevalent fragmentation evident in theological education is discussed in some depth by Edward Farley in his seminal work, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983). See also Joseph Hough and Barbara Wheeler, eds., *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a Focus for Theological Education* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1988). In contrast with Farley, Robert Banks suggests that the source of the fragmentation of theological education is ancient, going back to the separation of learning from active service to God that began as early as the late second century in the Christian “schools” of Alexandria (*Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 144-145). If this is so a more serious reappropriation of the apprenticeship model used by Jesus and the apostles must occur before adequate integration can take place.

departments—Old Testament, New Testament, Systematic Theology, Church History, Practical Theology (does the title imply that Systematic Theology should be “impractical”?), Christian Education, and so on—with departments often vying with one another for their chunk of the curriculum. We teach Biblical truths in logical sequence, organized in categories which are essentially impersonal, and discussed and analysed at an almost purely theoretical level. Even so-called “practical” courses tend to give much theory and little practice. This is not to say that content taught is untrue or unimportant. It is simply to say that the classroom teaching process does not attempt to tie biblical truth to the total person. As a result, students are trained to study and master Scripture and theology as fragmented and conceptual rather than in a personal or relational way.

Our graduates take this understanding of reality into their ministries, compartmentalizing Christian faith and ministry, and seeing theology as a philosophical exercise that has little relation to the way we live our lives. Is it any wonder that the sermons in our churches rarely facilitate meaningful change in our congregations!

One of the greatest tragedies of Protestant theological education worldwide is that Westerners have exported this non-Christian Enlightenment-induced fragmented and conceptual understanding of reality to non-Western societies that have a strong heritage in holistic learning. As a result, in seeking to satisfy a Western-dominated secular academia, too many schools in the non-Western world have turned their backs on holistic models of learning that are far more consistent with a Christian understanding of reality.

Ministry is about Competition Not Cooperation

The seminary setting, like the secular school, tends to throw individuals into academic competition with one another which encourages interpersonal distance rather than closeness. Virtually


Richards, A Theology of Christian Education, 159.

Few institutional leaders question the competitive nature of academia, and I have often heard people justify the competition on the basis
all the assignments we set are solitary and individualistic, and our students learn loud and clear that ministry is about individual competition rather than cooperation in community.\textsuperscript{38} They learn that at all costs I must be a better pastor and my church must be a better church than the pastor and church down the road. And this in a Body called to the unity of faith through the bond of peace!\textsuperscript{39}

In every seminary I know a premium is placed on grades despite their questionable value in terms of predicting occupational achievement, and despite overwhelming evidence as to their destructive nature\textsuperscript{40} and the ungodly attitudes they promote. Is it any wonder that so many of our students come to measure success in life and ministry on external bases,\textsuperscript{41} often hiding their own internal spiritual poverty?

Interestingly, a recent study found that those students who achieve the highest grades academically are actually those who prefer to work individually, who show a willingness to conform to existing rules and procedures, and who do not enjoy creating, formulating and planning for problem solution.\textsuperscript{42} These qualities are the exact opposite of the creative and visionary leadership so desperately needed today. Our current curricular forms simply function to “reward with good grades those students who assume an

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\textsuperscript{38} See also Hough and Wheeler, eds., Beyond Clericalism, 1.
\textsuperscript{41} Illich, Deschooling Society, 58.
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orientation towards reproducing" what is presented to them, in other words, passive conformity. Our competitive grade-driven approach to teaching has repeatedly been demonstrated to produce poor learning outcomes. Lynn Stoddard observes, “Much of the learning in traditional systems … is for the purpose of passing the next test.” As soon as the test is over “information is put into the brain’s ‘closed file’ … because it has already served its purpose.” Sometimes I wonder whether our faculties have forgotten “that their chief instructional role is to promote learning and not to serve as personnel selection agents for society.”

43 Cano-Garcia and Hughes, “Learning and Thinking Styles,” 425. Compare with Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, Diversity and Motivation, 277. Similar results were obtained in a study of valedictorians, to which the researcher commented, “To know that a person is a valedictorian is to know only that he or she is exceedingly good at achievement as measured by grades. It tells you nothing about how they react to the vicissitudes of life,” Karen Arnold, quoted in Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence (New York, NY: Bantam, 1995), 38.

44 I wonder whether this might also explain why university and seminary faculty—including myself—who have achieved the highest degree of success in the academic system are so poor at visionary curricular planning!


46 Ohmer Milton, Howard R. Pollio, and James A. Eison, Making Sense of College Grades (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), 224. Brookfield observes: “A common view is that one must attend university-sponsored programs of professional preparation and in-service development because of licensing requirements and for the possibilities of promotion and salary increases this brings. The idea that one might become a more insightful or effective practitioner as a result of attendance at such courses is greeted with an amused scepticism,” Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning, 201.
The Mind is the Most Important Part of the Human Personality

The current framework of theological education is based on a faulty epistemology – one that finds its roots in Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment, not in the Scriptures. In simple terms the Enlightenment proposed that the mind is the arbiter of all truth, a perspective that stands in stark contrast to the Christian understanding of truth as personal, rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, and expressed through the great holistically-oriented command to love the Lord God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.\(^{47}\)

It should give us pause to consider the enormous amount of content we pass on to our students, rarely seeing the content as a call to response. By teaching in this way we train our students to believe that Christian ministry is about transmission of content, not the transformation of lives through active obedience and a life of practical integrity. Should it then surprise us that so many people in our churches have plenty of good theology but live no differently from those around them? In both seminary and church we have focused almost exclusively on orthodoxy—right belief—while the Christian church remains sorely impoverished in the equally, if not more, important area of orthopraxy or right behavior.\(^{48}\)

Courses addressing spiritual formation and prayer are frequently absent from our curricula, or at best play only a minor role, as though these are peripheral issues unworthy of serious theological reflection and careful training. Do we train our students to see spirituality as something for the ignorant Pietists whom we tolerate in our churches because we have to? It is noteworthy that an extensive survey of seminaries conducted in 1992 found that less than 40% of students


\(^{48}\) This distinction was highlighted in the “Final Statement” of the First Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians held in Dar es Salaam in 1976, see S. Torres and V. Fabella, eds., The Emergent Gospel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), 269. It is also reflected in the curricular emphasis on theology and ethics urged in Hough and Cobb, Christian Identity and Theological Education, 105ff.
felt that their seminary experience helped them grow spiritually.\textsuperscript{49} Such shocking figures should shake our schools to their foundations! In the same way the lack of courses in peacemaking and interpersonal relations communicates very effectively to our students that conflicts in church and society are so insoluble that we can do nothing about them.

At a more profound level, by adopting the enlightenment agenda in our theological schools do we communicate to our students that the scientific world view is more valid than a Christian faith perspective? That study is more important than prayer in Christian ministry? That the Holy Spirit’s role in teaching and preaching is secondary, peripheral, or even non-existent?

A common objection to what I am saying is that this is not the seminary’s function; the role of the seminary is to train the mind, and let the interpersonal and other dimensions of personality and leadership style be developed by the seminarian’s own local church. The problem with this objection is that it is unrealistic, ignoring over 100 years of research in the sociology of education. By primarily focusing on information transmission seminaries not only teach but train, providing a powerful model that the future minister will indeed tend to follow. True, the acquisition of knowledge is an important role of the seminary, but let it be in a form that we want modeled by our graduates when they “teach the Word” in their local churches!\textsuperscript{50}

**What We Teach about Mission**

While most theological colleges give token acknowledgement to the importance of mission, our hidden curriculum too often teaches that for Christian life and ministry mission is at best peripheral, at worst a necessary evil. Almost without exception the listing of core courses begins with Biblical studies, which is followed by systematic theology and church history, with ministerial studies taking up the rear. Courses in missions and cross-cultural studies are too often perceived as “not fitting in” anywhere convenient.

\textsuperscript{49} Reported in Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 200.

\textsuperscript{50} Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education*, 160.
The study of church history generally focuses on Western and particularly Protestant history, giving token acknowledgement to the Eastern Fathers, but largely ignoring all that has transpired in the non-Western world. The message delivered is loud and clear: the True Faith is Western and Protestant, and these are the only people who matter. For the past 1500 years the only people who have made a significant contribution to the life of the Church have been European and North American.\textsuperscript{51} Even in the study of missions the focus too often rests on Western Protestant history, and draws on the ideas of Western missiologists, thereby reinforcing the Western hegemony of thought and practice in a context where it is the South and East of Christianity that are growing, not the West.\textsuperscript{52}

At a more subtle but profound level, through our emphasis on residential learning in campus centers with rigid curricular requirements—and through the paucity of meaningful stakeholder assessment of our programmes of study—we teach that the mission of the church is centripetal rather than centrifugal.\textsuperscript{53} Mission is about

\textsuperscript{51} Over 30 years ago John Mbiti wrote, “It is utterly scandalous for so many Christian scholars in [the] old Christendom to know so much about heretical movements in the second and third centuries, when so few of them know anything about Christian movements in areas of the younger churches. We feel affronted and wonder whether it is more meaningful theologically to have academic fellowship with heretics long dead than with the living brethren of the Church today in the so-called Third World.” See his “Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church,” \textit{Lutheran World} 21:3 (1974), 17.


\textsuperscript{53} The notion of centripetal (inward) and centrifugal (outward) movement of mission, borrowed from the language of physics, was first
doing things in our place in our way, rather than listening and responding to the needs of the community. The large sums of money that are invested in the physical plant of our campuses, with the multiplicity of classrooms, offices, library, chapel, and other facilities, communicates loud and clear that mission is an expensive operation, and by default that mission should be controlled by the rich (generally the West).

What We Teach about the Bible and God

Perhaps my greatest concern with the hidden curriculum of our seminaries is what we teach our students about the Bible and God. Our practice of careful dissection of the Scriptures and our advocacy of a “scientific approach to Scriptures” subtly but powerfully communicates to our students that the Bible is dead (after all you only dissect dead objects), a text fascinating to study but largely irrelevant to daily life.

Too many of our professors teach without prayer or recognition of our need for the Holy Spirit’s direction in our teaching. By so doing we run the very real danger of communicating to our students that God does not care about what we are teaching, or even that God is not present in academic classes. Do we subconsciously deliver the message that God is the enemy of truth? Certainly we communicate to our students that prayer is only of secondary importance, and possibly we reinforce the commonly held belief of too many in our congregations that faith is a private matter and should not intrude on other areas of life: academics, social relationships, use of money, lifestyle, and so on. All too easily we deliver the message to our students that there are aspects of life that are spiritual and others that are not, rather than seeing all that we are and do as intimately related to our identity as spiritual beings.

Some Practical Suggestions

Do institutional theological programs have any options to the rather dismal picture painted above? I would say, absolutely! The call is upon us as responsible theological educators to strive to a greater level of excellence. As we seek to enhance the curricula of our schools it is essential that we look not only at the content of the courses we fit into our catalog, but also at the structures, processes, and methods that we promote. The hidden curriculum must absorb as much of our attention as the explicit curriculum. What prevents creative change is a clear and honest acknowledgement that there is a problem, and the recognition that theological education can only be effective when the hidden curriculum is intentionally designed rather than unintentionally accepted.

To this end let me suggest twenty-five specific and practical ways in which the hidden curriculum can become a positive holistic learning experience rather than a destructive factor in the educational efforts of our schools.

1. Strengthen mentoring and spiritual direction. My first suggestion is one often made but rarely applied: the establishment and continual strengthening of mentoring and spiritual direction in our schools. Why not follow the example of many of the Catholic orders and appoint to each student upon entry into the program of study a spiritual director, or mentor, who holds students accountable for the development and integration of all the dimensions of the personality in the process of learning?\(^\text{54}\) In this way greater

\(^{54}\) For further insights into the process of spiritual direction see William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis, MN: Seabury, 1982), and Jeanette A. Bakke, *Holy Invitations: Exploring Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000). Even here there is the danger of focusing on technique rather than God-directed formation, forgetting that spiritual direction in Catholicism is closely linked to the tradition’s strong emphasis on vocation rather than professionalism in ministerial training. See George Schner, “Formation as a Unifying Concept in Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 21:2 (1985), 94-113.
oversight of the spiritual and ministerial formation of the student is maintained. The mentor is responsible to meet regularly with the student to pray with him or her, and to challenge the student to grow in his or her relationship with God. To incorporate such an innovation the school will need to be proactive in training those who will play the role of mentor/director, and these people will need to have their instructional workload reduced to free them up for this crucial role in the students’ overall formation.

2. Establish accountability groups. As part of their program of study students are placed in groups of three to five—perhaps led by a faculty member—which meet regularly (at least monthly, preferably weekly). At the meeting members of the group talk about their ministerial questions, intellectual struggles, and what they are doing to develop their spiritual life and emotional intelligence. All of this sharing is in an environment of prayer.

3. Require journaling. Require students to keep a journal in which they register key ideas from every class. They then record their personal responses in terms of how this material has helped them in their relationship with God and/or others, or in self-knowledge, or ways in which they have put the material to work in life or ministry. At the end of each term students are only be allowed to pass if their journals have been completed satisfactorily. Perhaps the journals can be combined with the mentoring and/or accountability groups. While journals can be kept class by class, an even richer educational experience may well emerge out of an overall integrated journal.

4. Emphasize practical ministry needs. Require all professors to provide a practical component to their courses, discussing

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55 The issue of personal and communal formation is central to the vision of Robert Banks for a missional theological education. See in particular Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 199-207.
the implications of the content for daily life, and developing assignments that require students to do critical reflection on real life situations. Perhaps reduce the course content and give more time to discussion of key themes that are of significance to contemporary daily life. Challenge students to live in obedience to the theology they study. To accomplish this goal, however, the school needs to change from the current professorial recruitment—focusing on academic qualifications—to recruitment that actively seeks professors who balance strong academics with meaningful ministerial experience and profound spiritual maturity. It is remarkable how much institutions have changed in this area. It used to be the case that seminaries would actively recruit reflective fruitful pastors to teach, pastors who would not necessarily have the degrees, but who would be provided the means to gain the necessary qualifications once they began teaching.

5. **Provide greater variety and options in the institution.** Within the institutional courses of study give greater flexibility for course electives within degree programs. Recognise and give credit for valid learning experiences in parallel with formal seminary studies: internships, reflective practice, and so on.

6. **Team teaching integrated courses.** Encourage instructors to develop integrative courses and seminars that are team-taught, thereby modeling team ministry and integrative skills in thinking and practice.

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56 The negative repercussions of the developing move from the pastor-teacher to the academician in the seminary are addressed at several points in John H. Leith, *Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

57 Some specific examples are given in Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 177-178.
7. **De-emphasise grades.** Limit the number of assignments for which grades are given. Ensure that all corrected work focuses on helping the student learn and grow rather than simply striving to do what needs to be done to get a passing grade. If possible, move away from a tight grading system to alternate assessment procedures, particularly learning-outcome assessment. Perhaps focus on mastery learning which requires students to acquire excellence before being passed. For example, if the student does not reach the standard of at least B+ the course is recorded as incomplete until the standard of excellence is reached. Sometimes I hear the argument that grades are necessary if students are to continue on to higher studies. Such a belief is fallacious: many universities—including such prestigious institutions as Harvard and Brown—are receiving and accepting a growing number of students whose applications contain no grades whatsoever.

8. **Integrate theory and practice.** Encourage and facilitate “sandwich” study (one term at school, one term in ministry) and/or internships, followed by opportunities for reflection through integrative seminars. Refuse to accept students fresh out of Bible college or university, rather require at least two or three years of work in society as a prerequisite for ministerial training. Take classes out of the campus and into the workplace, meeting and reflecting with practitioners and applying the theory to practice.

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59 In fact Michael Goldberger, of Brown University, has commented that students who come with a dossier of work rather than simply an academic transcript “receive more time of review and they may, in fact, have more opportunities to impress the admission officer reviewing the file,” quoted in Kohn, *Punished by Rewards*, 359, fn 27.

60 Further suggestions for theory-practice integration are given in Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 177-179.
9. **Integrate the syllabus.** Why do students have to take five 3-credit courses a semester? What prevents institutions from offering three 5-credit integrated and team-taught courses, or even providing one 15-credit course that involves total integration of the material, thereby moving beyond curricular fragmentation towards holistic education?

10. **Develop the curriculum from the purpose statement.** Begin with what is needed to accomplish institutional goals and develop courses accordingly. Make courses such as spiritual formation, spiritual theology, and peacemaking and reconciliation become the core to the curriculum, as well as a greater emphasis on ethics and ethical practice.

11. **Recognize the centrality of mission to the curriculum.** Ensure that intentional courses in mission theology, history, and practice play a central role in the core curriculum. Hold faculty accountable to the missionary basis that should underlie every course taught in the institution. As already noted, consider integrative work that helps students see mission as central to the heart of God. Would it be possible, for example, for a church historian, New Testament scholar, and missiologist to team-teach a course on the book of Acts as a core course in the curriculum?

12. **Take courses into the marketplace.** Instead of meeting in the institutional classroom, hold key classes in offices, hospitals or universities, thereby communicating in practice—as well as word—our centrifugal missional calling.

13. **Hold the institutional budget accountable to the vision, mission, and values of the institution.** At the most basic level this means placing an equivalent value on people as is placed on the institutional plant. Also of significance is including funding for student and faculty mission to the surrounding community and beyond.
14. **Nurture spirituality in the classroom.** Encourage all instructors to teach in a spirit of prayer and humility, as a model of teaching and learning under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Acknowledge publicly and privately the presence of God in the classroom. While some may perceive this to be “unacademic,” it is certainly not untheological! Rather than isolating academia from faith we should welcome their healthy interaction.

15. **Challenge students to live in obedience to the theology they study.** When academic knowledge alone is stressed, students are allowed to live with a disconnect between what they learn in the classroom and the real world outside. By reducing the content of courses and giving more time to the practical application of the key themes, professors will be able to help students live out with integrity what they learn in the classroom.

16. **Emphasize practical critical reflection.** Both through set assignments and in classroom discussion challenge and equip students to do critical reflection on real life situations. Relate the field of study synthetically with the practicalities of ministry and the implications for our daily lives, through case studies or reflection on field work or practical assignments.

17. **Respond to differences in learning styles.** Provide and

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61 Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, 202-203.

even require a variety of learning environments through group project work, journaling, creative teaching methods, reflective field work and internships. The possibilities here are only limited by our imaginations.

18. **Involve students in the development of the curriculum.** This includes getting students involved in the development of course content and/or assignments. In general, a learner’s commitment to work towards a learning goal is directly related to the sense of control he or she senses in the learning environment.

19. **Train faculty in education, communication, and motivation theory.** Being a good theologian does not necessarily make a person a good theological educator. But surely being an excellent professor demands as high a level of excellence in education as it does in theological reflection. Only when our instructors are effective holistic educators can we expect the emerging leaders entrusted to our care to become effective holistic educators. In particular we need to train our faculty to focus on learning, not just primarily on teaching. When learning is emphasised, mastery rather than hurdle-jumping becomes the target.

significant for those who are not Western, white, and male. For example, an increasing body of research has pointed to a fundamental difference between the ways men and women learn. See in particular Carol Gilligan’s seminal work, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Rebecca Chopp has suggested that the dominant academic model of theological education is the product of the dominance of white male voices in the structure of theological institutions. See her *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 8-15. In light of the growing recognition of cultural differences in learning styles it is imperative that multi-cultural theological education respond appropriately. See, for example, Judith E. Lingenfelter and Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Learning and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003).
20. Train faculty in the use of creative methodology. Too many instructors are bound to a traditional lecture mode of instruction. They need to recognize that more reflective and interactive approaches—such as small group discussion, forums, interviews, case studies, role plays, field trips, visuals, and so on—have been consistently found to result in a far greater level of learning. Even those instructors who are chained to a lecture methodology can learn to be better communicators.

21. Develop cooperative assignments. Such cooperation may involve two or three students, or even perhaps all-class assignments. Ensure that every class include at least one group work project as a means to promoting a cooperative, rather than a competitive, understanding of teaching and learning, and of ministry in general.

22. Use inquiry teams in the presentation of the material. At the beginning of the term students can be presented with the key issues at stake in the course, and can then be asked to form teams to investigate these issues and present the material to the class. The professor thereby becomes more of a facilitator than an instructor.

23. Develop self-assessment strategies. Train students to be honest with themselves through self-assessment. Help them to connect theory with practice, the target always being self-improvement and striving for excellence.

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63 A good start would be Marlene D. LeFever’s popular text Creative Teaching Methods (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 1985).


24. Use learning contracts rather than set assignments. Learning contracts affirm the learner’s responsibility to learn, as well as helping students to self-assess their progress.66

25. Give the rationale for assignments. Adults hate busy work and hurdle-jumping. They respond well when they understand the purpose of a required assignment. When they are told the reasons behind a learning task, students are more likely to respect the instructor as purposeful and learning-focused. As a result, they are more likely to be motivated, recognizing the value of what is being required.

Conclusion

It is probable that your institution has already adopted some of these above suggestions, but there is always more that can be done! The possibilities are only limited by our courage, imagination, and commitment.

The point is that as responsible theological educators we can no longer accept the status quo of a hidden curriculum that undermines the very essence of our purpose. The challenge is before us to give as much time to the intentional design of the hidden curriculum as we do to the explicit curriculum, and in particular to seek a holistic multi-dimensional approach to learning that alone can lead us on the path to excellence in curricular development.

66 See Knowles, et al., The Adult Learner, 265-271; Wlodkowski, Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn, 165-168, 280-283. For a discussion of both the possibilities and difficulties associated with individualized learning contracts within a more traditional institutional context see Brookfield, Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning, 69-89.