

Spiritual Formation at Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary

By Mark Lomax

To assert that most students begin seminary with the expectation that their spiritual life will be profoundly deepened is probably not an overstatement. It is also probably true that most students soon learn that seminary is not what they expected in regard to spiritual formation. Rather than simply having a little talk with Jesus, profound dialogues and debates ensue with the likes of Calvin and Barth, Guthrie and Leith, about such things as the nature and character of God, the person of Jesus, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead of remaining at ease with the deadening patriarchy of the ecclesial Zion they are confronted with the likes of Fiorenza and Williams and Grant about God's covenant being open and large and inclusive enough to welcome strong, brilliant women into the fold. These sorts of encounters do not, however, diminish the hunger and thirst for a closer walk and a deeper relationship with God that seminarians bring with them to the schoolhouse door.

Some seminaries, like the Interdenominational Theological Center where Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary is located, endeavor to teach spiritual disciplines across the curriculum. The idea is to enable seminarians to recognize the interdisciplinary nature of spiritual formation, identify, understand and practice spiritual disciplines, and grasp the importance of living lives of devotion to God as they grow in their vocational identities. Other seminaries offer programs of study that focus solely on spiritual formation. Such programs are designed to both feed the seminarian's hunger for a deeper relationship with God and to equip them to serve the larger church in a more focused way.

Notwithstanding these sorts of endeavors the hunger for some sort of spiritual encounter that transcends previous experiences persists. It is as if God is compelling the church, through its leaders, to become and to remain far more God conscious and Holy Spirit connected now than during recent generations. It is therefore essential that we who equip leaders for the church become more intentional about our devotional lives than we have perhaps been in the past and

that we open ourselves to the possibility of exploring “spiritual” questions that may make those of us who work in the academy uncomfortable.

It is likely that the Holy Spirit of God is gently though persistently guiding and equipping us to actively participate in the process of discernment along with those whom we teach; that we must seek answers to the deep troubling questions our souls are asking just as those whom we teach are seeking to do; and that we together – teacher/mentor and student – pay attention to the contours and details of the journey. Those contours and details can become spiritual maps that can be used to point the way for others who desire to embark the journey to a more profound relationship with God in Christ.

Ultimately seminarians are seeking relationship not only with God, but also with women and men who they respect as scholars and devout servants of God. There is therefore a sense in which seminarians look to professors and deans and presidents to openly share their spiritual maps and thereby open the door, if only slightly, to a closer walk with God.

At the risk of sounding preachy, the church needs a revival. God’s grace and mercy have been activated through this increasing interest on behalf of seminarians in spiritual formation. All that leaders in academic institutions do to respond to this “seeking” will bear much fruit in the life of our church for years to come.