NOT YOUR
FATHER'S
SEMINARY

HOW SEMINARIES MUST REINVENT THEMSELVES—A CONVERSATION WITH LEONARD SWEET ON "NEXSEM"

Have you been back to your seminary (or college) alma mater recently? Chances are good that the buildings may look the same, but the students and the learning methods have changed radically. Like everything else it has touched, the Internet has changed seminaries forever. And the 20th century predominance of young, white male students is ending in the 21st century.

Leonard Sweet has seen the changes in seminaries from the 20th to the 21st century firsthand, and is highly regarded for his discernment of culture and how the church (including theological seminaries and colleges) needs to change to be faithful. He currently serves as the E. Stanley Jones professor of evangelism at Drew Theological School in Madison, New Jersey, and as a visiting distinguished professor at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. His most recent book is *The Church of the Perfect Storm* (Abingdon), and he is the creator of Group's online sermon resource PreachingPlus.

YOU'VE BEEN ADVOCATING A NEW MODEL FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION CALLED "NEXSEM." WHAT DOES NEXSEM LOOK LIKE?

The essence of theological education in the future must feature the spiritual formation of the person through forming a life shaped by biblical relationships, a passion for knowing God, an understanding of the "ways of the ancestors," and an indigenous expression of faith in a specific cultural context.

Seminaries need to reinvent the ways in which theological education delivers ideas, information, best practices, and prophecies to the tens of thousands of religious leaders who have the closest day-to-day contact with people. We need a mix/match of learning opportunities, including classroom, online, face-to-face, immersive HILTs (high-impact learning techniques), advances (Christians don't "retreat"), hybrids, and so on.

NexSem wants to define "leadership development" more as discipleship training—forming godly character in followers of Jesus, forging a sharp theological trajectory through life, and building strong relational skills with a high degree of contextual intelligence.

Learning in the future will be *both* at-a-distance *and* up-close. It will need to be more "Facebook." Learning will be more face-to-face (and even "in your face"). The days of students traveling great distances to hear three-hour weekly lectures and take notes from the professor's scratchings on a chalkboard are numbered—like it or not. Instead, instruction will be highly participatory and relational, even monastic. It will involve personal mentoring from professors and peers, ministry apprenticeship, and quality learning that is both at-a-distance and up-close. Whoever will do the best online and offline collaboration and coordination will inherit the educational world of the future.

WHAT IS THE LOCAL CONGREGATION'S ROLE IN NEXSEM?

The local church is by design the most effective incubator of spiritual leaders on the planet. Who raises up leaders, who mentors leaders, for God's mission in the world? Ephesians 4 clearly mandates that church leaders don't only "do" ministry, they also equip others to live out their baptism as "ministers." There must be a more effective way for seminaries and congregations to raise up and mentor leaders for God's mission.

YOU'VE STATED ELSEWHERE THAT TOO MUCH OF PREACHING ASSUMES A "GUTENBERG CULTURE" RATHER THAN A "GOOGLE CULTURE." IS THE SAME THING TRUE FOR SEMINARIES?

The Web is the primary delivery system for learning and faith development today. Books were the primary delivery system in the modern world. It's time we brighten the lights and turn up the heat on a problem that we all know we have: Too many seminaries are preparing church leaders for a world that's no longer there. That's why I don't require "papers" but "projects," which can be completed in any or all of the five major media forms: print, audio, video, software, Internet.

What President Abraham Lincoln said in his 1862 annual message to Congress serves as the call to arms for missional education in the 21st century: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country." Seminaries need to wake up, shake themselves out of old habits, and see the world afresh.

I got an email the other day from someone in Slovakia. His grandmother's house has no indoor toilet, but it has high-speed Internet access. Have you seen where the number of text messages sent and received every day exceeds the population of the planet? Even the

MTV generation isn't watching all that much TV or MTV anymore. The Internet is best seen now as a utility, like water or electricity.

I believe deeply in the value of theological education. The only question is whether seminary education as we practice it is the best delivery system for the 21st century.

IS IT POSSIBLE THAT SEMINARIES ARE IRRELEVANT?

No, but we need to face facts: Much of inquiry and imagination is *so* last century. Plus, some of the most "successful" pastors in the United States today were never "credentialed" by any seminary, such as Jim Cymbala of Brooklyn Tabernacle or Bill Hybels of Willow Creek or Brian McLaren of Cedar Ridge. Just as some of the most successful business leaders such as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Steven Spielberg never finished college, many pastors of successful churches either never went to seminary or dropped out. A survey in the 1990s revealed that the pastors of 75 out of the 100 largest churches in America did not have seminary degrees.

Studies conducted by Hartford Seminary reveal that congregations pastored by seminary-trained leaders are less likely to "deal openly with conflict," are "far more likely" to lack a sense of mission or purpose, and quickly "feel threatened by changes in worship." At the end of the day, the ultimate credentialing is not, "Do you have a degree?" but "Can you do ministry?"

Military historian Stephen Ambrose tells how Andrew Higgins, who built landing craft in World War II, refused to hire graduates of engineering schools, even though there was a lot of detail and invention involved in making those boats. He believed engineering schools taught their students what they *couldn't* do. His engineers were all self-taught. He started off at the beginning of the war with 20 employees. By the middle of the war, he had 30,000 people working for him. They turned out 20,000 land- ▶▶

ing craft. Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "Andrew Higgins won the war for us. He did it without engineers."

FEW WOULD DISAGREE THAT PASTORS NEED TO BE LIFELONG LEARNERS. YET YOU'VE SAID LIFELONG LEARNING IS IMPERATIVE. WHY?

For one thing, the "shelf life" of information is getting shorter and shorter. Many of us are operating from an information base that's so stale it's rancid.

For another, lifelong learning helps to reduce the isolation that too many pastors have either chosen or gotten themselves into. Lifelong learning must enable imaginative, innovative, and transformative experiences to overcome the current norm of pastoral isolation and the various obstacles to participating in peer-engaged continuing education. Older pastors may actually need to learn how to learn, and to see the interconnections between various complex systems. By the way, the business world is calling continuing education human capital management or enterprise talent management.

Finally, we must get over our apprehensions about the Internet. It can be argued that the most anti-social technology ever invented was the book, which is one reason Socrates was so opposed to writing and left no writings of his own. Too many pastors are bookworms in the worst sense of the phrase: They are cobwebbed in their Gutenberg cubes. I find it interesting that Cisco Systems has recently outlawed all offices for all its employees. Digital technology means your office isn't space in a building, it's the space where you are.

HOW CAN CHURCHES AND SEMINARIES WORK WELL TOGETHER (OTHER THAN FEEDING STUDENTS TO THEOLOGY SCHOOLS)?

There are a burgeoning number of "teaching churches" (or "learning churches," as I prefer to call them) that are training leaders without any thought of seminaries. Most seminaries are either ignoring them or dismissing them. A smart few are partnering with them. But too often not only do these churches and seminaries not talk to each other—they live in parallel universes. Leaders of

the future need new partnerships and linkages between seminaries, judicatories, local congregations, and emerging ministries. We must do theological education and ministry formation together, not separately.

The mission of ministerial education needs redefining. Thus our focus will not be on "theological" or "ministerial" education but on "missional" education—not on the certification of leadership for denominationally credentialed ministry, but rather on the content and context requirements of missional ministry that can effectively build diverse bodies of Christ for this emerging culture. Theological education is too clerical in orientation, too focused on future clergy. It needs to focus much more on how to build the future of the church.

HOW WOULD THE CURRICULUM NEED TO CHANGE?

The action-reflection model is assumed. Paul didn't train anyone *for* ministry; he trained them *in* ministry. Ministry development should enable students to learn ministry in practice and not train them for practice, to be reflective practitioners. ▶▶

ONLINE EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE SEMINARY

In the future virtually all seminaries will have online courses. It is the fastest growing delivery modality for good reasons. It does not pluck the pastor out of the local church, and it provides better education in some ways. Here are five advantages we have discovered at Indiana Wesleyan University.

Student Engagement. In a traditional classroom, students can hide and slide their way through a class session. Online discussions do not just disappear into thin air but stay around posted for all to see for weeks. It's harder to freeload online and you can never "just go and listen."

Quality of Dialogue. Online classes give students extra time to reflect and respond thoughtfully instead of just talking. The resulting dialogue is often at a higher level than classroom discussion.

Better Prepared Professors. Some professors do a "walk on" in traditional classrooms, but in online classes detailed

preparation and planning are required. And it forces one to think more creatively about how students can accomplish the outcomes.
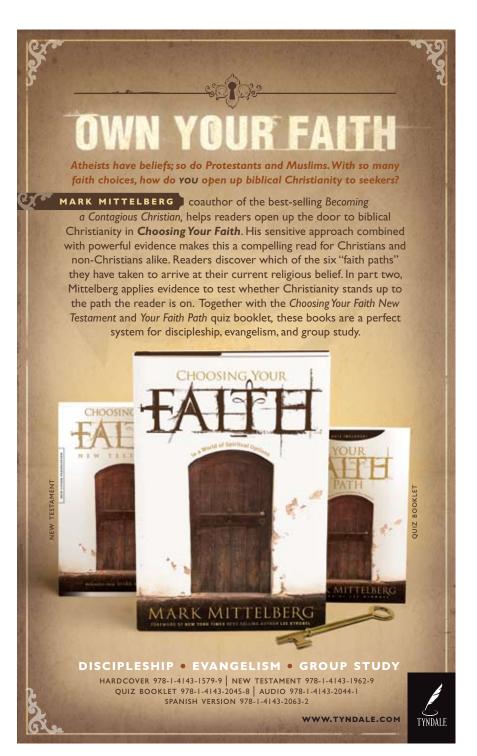
Race, Gender, and Age. Interaction with screen text removes subtle biases. A student's written ideas make the impression, not their physical appearance.

Grounding in Ministry Context. Online students don't have to move away from their local churches to learn how to minister in the local churches. They become less acclimated to academic culture and tend to remain rooted in the life of their congregations and communities.

Face-to-face education will never completely disappear—nor should it. However, online courses will become a permanent part of the way we educate pastors in the future.

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I don't propose to develop a new "core curriculum" for theological education because the whole concept of "curriculum" is problematic to me. Church leadership today requires a mentor plus action/reflection methodology in which the character, spiritual authenticity, and missional passion of the mentor are more important than the curriculum. This is the new "core" around which some form

of the old "core curriculum" in Bible, patristics, church history, theology, Christian education, church administration, etc., will be recapitulated. It will be a self-organizing approach to contextual learning in which students can choose participation in a network of teaching churches and public/corporate sector opportunities across the globe along with Web-based interaction for ongoing coaching. An open-source system trusts faculty mentors to guide learners to other faculty whose "core curriculum" best suits that student's particular needs. In the 21st century, *who* you studied with will be a more important question than *where* you studied.

The mis-education of the church's leaders is all too apparent in the pervasive problem of the "3Ms": money, mileage, and marriage. The traditional teaching model of seminaries requires a student to travel to a specific location, spend approximately 1,500 to 1,600 hours in a classroom, pay tuition amounting to at least $30,000, turn in a specified number of reports and papers, and pass the required written examinations. All these pressures put enormous stress on marriages and families.

The irony is that the accumulation of knowledge does not lead to the formation of a person. The accumulation of courses does not lead to the formation of a pastor. NexSem faculty won't "teach" anyway. They should organize learning and mentor learners. The ultimate syllabus is the student.

One's baptism is one's ordination into ministry and one's commissioning as a missionary. Every baptized disciple has both a ministry to the body and a mission in the world. NexSem will exist to train all disciples for their tent-making ministries and missions.