

Seminarians Become Justice Locavores

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An Editorial by Patrick David Heery

Tell someone you go to seminary and you're likely to hear, *So... uh... what's seminary?* Those who have heard the term before, on the other hand, often conjure up images of medieval monastic life and 5 AM prayer calls (I don't know if I ever got up at 5 AM during seminary and if I did, it wasn't for prayer). Churchgoers who live near a seminary will know that it is a place of spiritual, intellectual, and practical preparation for ministry. But ask even them about social justice training on these campuses and you will probably encounter blank stares.

Seminaries are seen to be just about as relevant to justice organizing as churches are these days—which isn't saying much.

So *Unbound* went on a mission to talk with seminary and divinity school students about their experiences of justice advocacy and ministry. We asked them: What challenges do you face? What issues do you care about? What would you like to say to the wider church? What are your concerns for entering ministry?

Over three months later, we have collected interviews, articles written directly by students, and a couple articles written *to* students. These students come from all across America and represent such schools as Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas, and the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

I want to thank all of the students who took the time, energy, and sometimes risk, to write for *Unbound* about justice on their campuses. It was just under a year ago that I myself graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, and I know that it is not often easy, or encouraged, to speak up. On the one hand, my three years at Princeton rooted me in my call to social justice ministry, providing me opportunities (and an impeccable education) I never thought possible, but it was also a time of frustration and loneliness, as I encountered a culture that valued justice but was often not willing to risk much for it. I recall one administrator advising me not to get “too involved” with those extracurricular social justice projects because I was there “to study.”

I am now honored to know so many students who reply with vigor: *Those social justice projects are my education.*

What excites me about this journal issue is that it, we hope, will serve as the entrée to resourcing a national network of theological students committed to social justice. It won't be something others design for them; it will be their creation, their vision, much like this journal issue.

A New Culture on Seminary Campuses

Emerging cultures on our seminary campuses present new challenges and opportunities for effective, national organizing. Chris Iosso, General Editor for *Unbound*, recalls that, in the late 1970s, it was South Africa divestment that galvanized students into a movement across seminaries and college campuses, with some ecumenical elements. For better or worse, that kind of issue-based organizing is not likely to be successful anymore.

Many seminarians are increasingly, what I am calling, “justice locavores.” Locavores, of course, are people who eat only locally produced food as a way to reduce environmental impact and to deepen their commitments to the local community. The local foods movement is also deeply relational: you get to know the people who produce your food; you visit their farms and homes; and, you form friendships with other reusable bag-toting people as you saunter through the local farmers’ markets.

As locavores, seminarians are focusing their justice efforts on local communities, and they are doing so often because of the relationships these efforts offer. In these articles, you will find California students supporting the unionization efforts of undocumented immigrants; Georgia students laboring to stop the Georgia execution of Troy Anthony Davis; New York City students focusing on urban poverty and access to fresh, healthy food; and Texas students ministering with immigrant detainees. And, those California students are not just supporting *any* workers; they are supporting the food workers who had served in their cafeteria for years—they are fighting for their friends.

It is precisely for this reason that LGBTQQI¹ equality and issues of sexuality are so prevalent among many of our students’ reports: because this is less about an issue and more about people—about friends. In fact, “issues” conventionally defined are often not the motivators or unitors here: seminary issue-based organizing has tended to create silos of justice interests with little campus-wide coordination. Issues are easily pushed to the margins of our schedules when faced with more immediate pressures like papers to write. Friendship, however, is much harder to marginalize.

When explaining why Harvard Divinity School students got so involved with the Occupy movement, Katherine Pater explains that students joined less because of the issues and more because of the opportunity to form relationships and to join a community of people similarly frustrated and called to take action.

The focus on local justice needs (as opposed to more abstracted international issues), in other words, is often a prioritization of personal relationships—and is a distinctive trend when compared with many congregations’ focus on international short-term mission and charity, while they ignore, or even participate in, local oppressive structures.

National organizing, therefore, will need either to model itself after the Occupy Movement with its loosely connected string of local communities (though Occupy’s effectiveness remains uncertain) or to identify issues, like LGBTQQI equality, that emphasize personal relationships. Other issues, like incarceration or environmental justice, can be reframed. For instance, at Princeton, when we were founding our eco-justice group, we framed sustainability as relational:

with the earth, with God, with each other, and with the grounds and custodial staff who cared for our immediate environment and yet who were often confined to invisibility on the campus. We got to know those staff and built friendships. We worked side by side with them as we planted trees for Earth Day, did campus clean-up, and constructed a compost site and community garden.

But effective organizing will require starting not with issues, but with the chance to build relationships among one another, across campuses, because ultimately it will be that support, trust, and friendship which will sustain a movement.

A New Generation of Young Adults

While many seminarians are second or third career students, this observation reveals some interesting differences and similarities when compared with American young adults. For instance, while these students' engagement with justice distinguishes them from other young adults (who tend to be preoccupied with an individualistic consumerism), their emphasis on the formation of personal relationships (as opposed, say, to civic ties) is consistent with their peers.ⁱⁱ This priority presents important possibilities for community organizing. The generations of Ella Baker and Saul Alinsky have long told us that we must organize by being, first and foremost, relational.

But it also presents a significant challenge. If one's chief objective is to maintain personal ties, conflict, even if for the purposes of justice, is a threat. Christian Smith and his team of sociologists posit, in fact, that this conflict-avoidance is a strong motivator for young people's avoidance of religion and politics, which invite passionate, occasionally ugly, disagreement.ⁱⁱⁱ Seminarians have clearly made it over that first hurdle: they have stayed in the church; they are not relativists. But like their peers, many prioritize peace over justice, unity and harmony over truth-telling conflict.

Take, for example, a letter from the Columbia Theological Seminary Student Coordinating Council presidents, who invite students to ask themselves, "Does God want me taking binary opposition against another over housing? Is the determination of my Christian love a housing policy?" They are referring to Columbia's housing policy, which currently does not provide housing to same-gender couples. The implication seems to be that campus harmony is more important than ensuring fair housing for all. Furthermore, the letter seems to construe opposition itself as bad. Now of course the Columbia community is struggling to mend relationships, and so the plea is understandable. But I think it reflects a larger trend among our seminaries and, if sociologists are correct, among young adults in general.

Princeton Theological Seminary student, Josh Newton, says as much when he asks whether diversity is enough. He writes, "In hasty attempts to have healthy communities now, institutions engage conflict-avoiding diversity practices that often ignore topics such as privilege and hegemony, because such discussions create tension and discomfort. But, tension and discomfort for whom?" Dr. David Abalos similarly observes that many of our seminaries are teaching "security, continuity, and cooperation" but not confrontation. The objection is not to having healthy, unified communities—as if that could be a bad thing! The objection is to a superficial unity that merely masks deeper conflict, often sacrificing the marginalized to some generalized "common harmony."

But if seminarians increasingly become justice locavores and emphasize the “local” (where private and corporate interests intersect), we may begin to see new possibilities for organizing. Claremont School of Theology students *are* risking conflict, alongside food workers, by protesting and participating in civil disobedience. Students *are* risking conflict as they fight for lesbian and gay equality at Columbia Theological Seminary, for the hiring of Latin@ faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary, and for economic justice at Harvard Divinity School and elsewhere.

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The Round Up

The following are summations of the 23 articles contained in this issue.

The Students

There's little question about it: seminary and divinity school students care about social justice. They are often very articulate and able to think complexly on the subject. Many are engaged with direct ministries that have justice implications. A smaller, but nonetheless sizeable, group of students are engaged in advocacy for systemic change. They are remarkably hopeful: they believe that the church will catch on, eventually. They are skilled at fostering community across both demographic and ideological barriers. They deeply care about people, even those with whom they stridently disagree, and are always ready to offer pastoral care.

Admittedly, seminary students are under great pressure: they have papers to write, families to tend to, churches needing ministry. Many have to get part-time jobs while being full-time students; many are saddled with overwhelming debt. At the same time, they are trying to figure out their faith, discern their call, grapple with previously held convictions drawn into doubt, and also maintain some measure of personal health. So when seminarians say they are busy, that they don't have time for more conflict, they aren't kidding. But frankly, I don't buy "I'm busy" as an excuse for not getting involved in justice ministry. Farmworkers in Southwest, Florida, have found time to organize for justice through the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and I promise: they are busier and more tired. What motivates the Immokalee Workers is that they have direct vested interest in their justice work. For too many seminarians, like churchgoers in general, justice ministry remains abstracted, disconnected from their personal lives. One student tells of a friend who says, "I'm a woman and I'm trying to get ordained, and that's my fight, and I'm okay with that... that's enough." Now what would happen if we started seeing fair labor practices for farmworkers or same-gender partner housing as *our* fight?

The Issues

Most students reported an array of justice issues and ministries, including everything from environmental justice to incarceration to peacemaking. Almost ubiquitous was the issue of sexuality, broadly covering LGBTQQI inclusivity, same-gender marriage, ordination standards, housing and bathroom policies, pastoral care, and the cultivation of safe space for diverse sexualities, genders, and viewpoints. Some student bodies are experiencing considerable division, others are not, but all seem to be making this conversation a priority. Many schools are also seeing a coalescing of energy around issues broadly framed under the rubric of gender, race, and class.

See the first pages of this article for an analysis of an emerging emphasis on the "local."

The Organizing

Current organizing for justice on seminary campuses is as diverse and plentiful as their justice concerns. The Women's Center of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, just this year, has organized a performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, displays of women's art, lectures, efforts to recognize and end child abuse, and a seminar entitled, "Mending Masculinity, Ending Violence." At the Claremont School of Theology, students are standing in solidarity with food workers and organizing nonviolent civil disobedience. At Columbia Theological Seminary, the

gay-straight alliance, *Imago Dei*, is mobilizing students, alumni, faculty, and staff to ensure housing for same-gender partners, while also fostering a safe space for conversation among all, including those who disagree. Interdenominational Theological Center students are actively pursuing HIV/AIDS advocacy and ministry in the greater Atlanta area. Latino/a students at Princeton Theological Seminary are working to integrate the Latino/a experience into the school's curriculum, particularly through the hiring of a Latino/a faculty person. At Union in New York City, the Poverty Initiative carries on the legacy of the Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign...

But generally lacking is any concerted effort to organize entire campus communities. Students, who may otherwise experience a strong sense of social unity, tend to fall quickly into their silos or niche issues. Some student organizations have genuinely tried to improve collaboration and to operate more strategically, but these efforts do not usually meet much success. One, at least temporary, exception is in the recent Harvard Divinity School student participation in Occupy, which brought together the environmentalists, the LGBTQ activists, the economic justice advocates, and many others.

The Support

Most, if not all, institutions offer plenty of justice-related academic courses and intentionally integrate alternative perspectives and justice concerns into the general curriculum. Enroll in seminary and you will find classes called African American Hermeneutics, Feminist and Womanist Ethics, Political Economy of Misery, Christianity and Social Power, and Encountering the City. You will also find programs such as Princeton's Hispanic Theological Initiative and the Gammon Center for the Study of Race and Religion. Multicultural-focused Fuller Theological Seminary offers Korean and Spanish-language schools.

If there is any curricular deficiency, it is an insufficient emphasis on *praxis* (practical application). Many students said that their professors valued advocacy, but did not go out of their way to encourage students to engage justice outside the classroom. Students identified Field Education (which places students in churches, hospitals, prisons, non-profits, and other internship sites) as the one place they could depend on for integrating theory and action.

The Challenges

Students consistently claim not to have enough time or energy. They are often overwhelmed with classes, field education internships, jobs, families, and other commitments. Other students note that their institutions frankly have different priorities: they might care about social justice, but are more concerned with conflict-avoidance, pleasing Boards of Trustees, maintaining the status-quo, and conducting PR. But it can be difficult just to mobilize students, who often are at seminary simply to take their classes and as one student says, *get in and get out*. They might be looking for a spiritual retreat from the world, a continuation of their college experience, or a purely academic-focused setting.

In other words, seminarians are divided in how they perceive their theological education. Many, including those who write for this issue, understand seminary as a time for doing ministry right now. Many others, however, understand seminary simply as *preparation* for ministry. If they do ministry, it is *out there*, something they do in their field education sites; it is not something they

bring back to their campuses. They are not going to devote time to making seminary policies, for instance, more just, because that is just not why they are in seminary.

What They Have to Say to the Church

Seminarians obviously think about the Church a lot. They want to see congregations focus more on local justice action and be more conscious of systemic causes (e.g. not just feed the hungry but ask why people are hungry). Some Presbyterians expressed frustration over the recent decision by some congregations to leave the denomination over Amendment 10-A, which made gay ordination a possibility. They see the church as a family, and family members should not just walk away whenever they do not get their way; we have to stick together, we have to keep talking—because that is what families do. At the same time, many believe that the church must continue to grow in its commitment to inclusivity and embracing the entirety of God’s family. Students almost universally pointed to the need to explore innovative ways of doing church, utilizing social media in particular. Perhaps most importantly, these students said: *the church needs to go outside its own walls*. Our priority should not be growing membership numbers; our priority should be serving and forming community with the people beyond our institutional walls.

Notes

ⁱ LGBTQQI refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and Intersex identifying individuals.

ⁱⁱ Christian Smith, et al. *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 223.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. 203-4.