

Inhabiting a Dwelling Place: Reflections of a Seminary Student and Professor

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In his famous essay, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” Stephen Crites writes that stories are not monuments people simply observe but dwelling places they inhabit.¹ The metaphor of dwelling places evokes conversation, encounters, faces, memories, work, and service—all that takes place within a dwelling place. It is through the dwelling place of narrative that this essay finds its voice. What follows is neither travelogue nor memoir, but the vehicle of story, of dwelling places—sometimes a location, sometimes a teaching situation, sometimes a relationship—suggested an appropriate resource for my reflections on the seminary at its 125th year.

The Education of a Student

I graduated from North Park Theological Seminary in 1961. In my senior interviews I was asked a question by the superintendent of the (then) Middle East Conference, J. Theodore Johnson, that proved to be more personally probing and vocationally prophetic than either of us realized: “How would you describe your theological position?” I responded, “I am a Lutheran Pietist.”

My response was rooted in my North Park education. At the time of my graduation, the earning of a bachelor of divinity degree (BD), now a master of divinity degree, was contingent on meeting several weighty requirements. By the end of the middle year the student became a can-

1. Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971): 295.

didate for the BD degree by passing written comprehensive exams, three hours in length in each of the three fields: Bible, theology, and history. The student who failed in one of the fields had a single opportunity to repeat the exam successfully. Those who passed exams then served a one-year internship in a congregation.

During the senior year the student wrote a thesis in one of the three fields, according to university dissertation standards. My thesis research on Philipp Jakob Spener's doctrine of the church was my first introduction to classical Lutheran Pietism—and my first experience translating a seventeenth-century German text, written in the old Gothic print type. In however elementary a fashion, this was my introduction to the antecedents of Covenant history. Little did I know this project would lead to my academic vocation and the study of another German Lutheran Pietist, Johann Albrecht. Little did I know their world would undergird a teaching ministry at the seminary. All I knew at the time was a call to the ministry of word and sacrament.

The seminary carried out with attentive stewardship its vocation of preparing persons for the ministry of word and sacrament. Competency at pulpit, table, and place of baptism, together with that of the “care of souls” was ours to be tested and mastered. We even had exams in parliamentary procedure. The seminary cared deeply for the church in all its facets and taught us to do the same in our person and in our practice of ministry.

I left North Park with a historical and theological identity. That identity has not changed. I am still a Lutheran Pietist with only this difference: that which was a latent Lutheran dimension has become more theologically articulate. I still have a clear sense of the vocation I was taught at North Park Seminary but with a profounder confidence in the God who is at work through his word. The educational methodology that fostered this identity was in no sense a form of indoctrination. It did include a disciplined learning of the church's confession of faith and the Scripture on which that confession is based. It is that material, long in formation, endowed with faith, hope, and love, that was mediated to us at North Park. It was an education rich in reading original sources—patristic, Reformation, and contemporary—as well as the required textbooks that provided students with a treasury of wisdom and knowledge.

The Education of a Professor

The seminary is full of places of encounter: the classroom, chapel, hallway, and lounge, to name a few. I learned to listen in all of these places. Here

I began to encounter diverse thinking processes, to learn how geography affects relationships, including the student-professor relationship, and how social and political location impacts theological discourse. I offer three vignettes by way of example.

I recall asking a student from Kenya or Nigeria (my memory is not sure which) how he might teach the doctrine of the church in his culture. He told me of a certain tree whose age was older than his people. This great tree had collected so much dust in its branches, crevices, and leaf structures that seeds borne by the winds took root in the collected dust. The seeds grew into a diversity of trees, all living together in the big host tree. Birds of species normally hostile to each other lived in peace in this tree. I learned to not do the “western” thing and analyze this rich response. Theological thinking by storytelling allows the story to disclose its meaning—although I wonder if “meaning” is even too immobile a word. The story itself releases its power, enfolding the listener in it, rather than simply disclosing an interpretation or deducing a conclusion from it.

When I first had the privilege of teaching students from Korea, I had great difficulty knowing how to evaluate papers that called for critical reflection on an author’s ideas. These students were conscientious in the mastery and the restatement of ideas but less so in critical engagement. What I did not know initially was the authority structure of Korean culture, beginning with the family and then relating to other institutions. As I began to see from this perspective, I realized that American efforts to develop critical thinking were more than educational efforts; they were laden with ethical overtones where such student critiques were an improper transgression of authority. It took me some time to work through this, to converse about educational methods in our respective contexts, and to find a way to dialogue between these contexts. I thank my Korean students, many of whom went on to serve Covenant churches, who helped me learn.

A third learning curve emerged when spiritual direction became a seminary degree requirement, and students came to live by its benefits. It was gratifying to be able to make available to my African American directees Cecelia Williams Bryant’s *Kiamsha: A Spiritual Discipline for African American Women*.² “Kiamsha” is a Swahili word that means “that which awakens me.” This book is replete with judicious prayer disciplines

2. Cecelia Williams Bryant, *Kiamsha: A Spiritual Discipline for African American Women* (Baltimore: Akosua Visions, 1991).

and gives African heritage its place as a blessed inheritance. Another key book in this field was James Melvin Washington's *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayer by African Americans*.³ Washington's extensive introduction is a masterpiece of both personal and theological reflection. He recounts his own movement through four identities, from "Negro" to "Black Man," from "Black Man" to "Afro-American," and finally from "Afro-American" to "African American." The movement Washington narrates is pertinent to what spiritual directors might encounter, either in themselves or in others.

Seminary education embraces more than the traditional images of classroom, professor, and student. As a professor I was invited into worlds I had never before entered and to learn from the perspectives of others. Perhaps the seminary, if not already doing so, can facilitate this mutual learning by ensuring faculty receive education on the particular needs of each cultural and ethnic group comprising its student body.

Travel Encounters in Sweden, Estonia, and West Africa

While serving at North Park Seminary, international travel opportunities also deepened my awareness of the world outside of the United States.

Sweden. My wife, Lois, and I were privileged to participate in an exchange professorship with our sister seminary in Lidingö, a suburb of Stockholm. While in Sweden we made it our "tourist vocation" to visit as many cathedrals as possible. In interviews I arranged with the cathedral deans in Uppsala and Stockholm, I asked one question: what is the ministry of a cathedral in modern Sweden? At the time of my visit to the Uppsala cathedral, which is unique in serving as both parish church and national cathedral, the parish was experiencing change and renewal. A survey had revealed a desire for greater intimacy and participation among the younger generation. In this cathedral the high altar was located at the end of the chancel, at some remove from the congregation. The older members of the parish knew only this as the place of the communion liturgy, kneeling toward the altar. The younger generation wanted a simple table around which they could gather face-to-face with one another. These congregants desired immanence. They also desired more lay participation in the liturgy.

3. James Melvin Washington, *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayer by African Americans* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994). The anthology covers the years 1760–1989. Washington was ordained at age nineteen and concluded his life teaching church history at Union Seminary in New York.

The cathedral dean, building on the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, began the practice of having four to five lay people offer the prayers of the church, traditionally offered at the altar. He taught the laity how to form the prayers, but he did not prepare the prayers. On a Sunday Lois and I were present for worship, it was a joyous occasion when five people came forward at the time in the liturgy for the prayers of the church. These were persons engaging in ministry for the first time, doing what the word “liturgy” means: the works of the people. And there it was—a simple table in the midst of the people for the celebration of Holy Communion.

The dean told me that when he preached from the high pulpit it was interesting to observe who sat behind the gothic arches. He noticed that over the weeks many inched their way out into the pew. This led him to reflect on some people’s need for a place to hide or, we might say, for anonymity. At the entrance of the Episcopal cathedral in San Francisco, a statement is posted from the bishop ensuring anonymity to those who desire such. Do we ever think about whether in welcoming people at public worship they may feel too exposed? Is anonymity a gift or a slight?⁴

Estonia. On this same visit to Sweden, Lois and I accompanied a group from Immanuel Covenant Church in Stockholm to Tallin, Estonia, for a weekend visit. At this time Russian hegemony was being lifted, and the Estonian people were reestablishing their own government. Russian tanks were still present in Latvia to the south. I asked our guide, a retired schoolteacher recently baptized, what would happen if such tanks appeared in Tallin’s ancient city square. Her answer was that ten thousand Estonians would gather to sing. Can you image that choir staring down the barrel of a tank gun singing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”? Lois and I knew the power of this act after worshiping at St. John’s Lutheran Church and listening to that vast congregation sing. We were told that the human voice is the central musical instrument in Estonia.

After worship we met with Pastor Tomas Paul who spoke about his ministry. The year he was ordained, his name was put in the press for purposes of public ridicule. We learned of two major deportations of the Estonian intelligentsia to Siberia. He told us of his great joy in hav-

4. David Eigel explores similar themes to that of the Uppsala dean in his article on megachurches: (1) there is more “space” for anonymity so one’s presence or absence is not noticed and (2) a larger staff makes lay service less urgent. “More People, Looser Ties,” *Christian Century* (April 13, 2016): 13.

ing baptized more than 950 people the previous year—and that the children were the chief evangelists. When Russian hegemony began to give way, parents wanted their children confirmed. The children came home from confirmation with questions that their parents, educated in Marxists schools and living apart from the church, could not answer. The parents went to the church for help, and God blessed the ministry of word and sacrament.

Congo. My encounters in Sweden and Estonia, distinct as they were as to content and learning, bring to mind a third learning context. About two years after our work in Sweden, I was asked by the Covenant Department of World Mission to conduct a continuing education seminar in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I spent three weeks in Africa, including one in the Central African Republic, where at the time the Covenant had a distribution center in Bangui, the capital. I had the joy of preaching at the Covenant church in Gemena with my former student, Mossai Sanguma, as a translator. During the liturgy of the morning it was a joy to watch this vast congregation dance the offertory as they brought their gifts to the altar. My former student, Kenneth Satterberg, was engaged in Bible translation with two Catholic priests, trying to render the Gospel of John into the language of a small and largely unrecognized tribe. After many visits with the elders of this tribe to build a basic lexicon, the three translators presented the elders with their first attempt at rendering John's gospel in this tribal language. All they wanted to know was whether or not the meaning was clear. They were astounded at the elders' response: "Even God speaks our language!" Imagine the sense of worth coursing through those words."

World Christianity

The fixed world of my education with which I began this article met its challenge in my introduction to world Christianity. World Christianity is not simply a topic but an entire discipline, challenging church history as it is conventionally understood and taught, drawing attention to the fact that early Christianity was far more geographically vast than conventionally presented.⁵ This growing discipline is too complex to summarize, but I want to call particular attention to the work of Philip

5. See the entire issue of *Theology Today* 39 (July, 2014), devoted to world Christianity. Consult also Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Clifton R. Clarke, ed., *Pentecostal Theology in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014). Note in particular the

Jenkins, a regular contributor to the *Christian Century*. In “Christians in the Gulf,”⁶ Jenkins tells of the remains of a pre-Islamic Christian monastic complex, dating back to around 600 CE, unearthed by archaeologists on Sir Bani Yas, an island of the Persian Gulf emirate of Abu Dhabi. At the time this monastery was built, Christianity had a strong presence throughout eastern and southern Arabia, although the strand of Christianity was mainly the “Nestorian” Church of the East. No later than the fifth century a diocese covered the lands we now call Oman, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. In the time of Muhammad (d. 632), five Christian sees covered the Gulf’s western shores; by the end of the millennium that Christian history had come to an end.

Christians have since returned to the Gulf. As birth rates fell and the oil industry expanded, workers were needed. And so immigrants came from diverse places, many of whom were Christian: 17 percent of the population of Kuwait, 14 percent of Bahrain, and 9 percent of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The current Christian population of the entire Arab Gulf region is between 5 and 10 percent. While Christians are prohibited from evangelizing, they are free to worship and build churches. The Roman Catholic cathedral in Bahrain sits on land donated by the king, a devout Muslim. Even mega-churches thrive. But as if to come full circle, St. Thomas Orthodox Cathedral, seating 3,500, is part of the ancient Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, which traces its origins to Christian missions to southern India during the first and second centuries. This church is a living heir to the very same tradition that built the monastery on Sir Bani Yas Island some 1,400 years ago. How little I know about the world church!

Not least of the value in this global historical awareness is that congregations today are increasingly ethnically diverse. Depending on location, one’s parish may include refugees, immigrants, exchange students, and American citizens of various ethnicities. Some knowledge of this “world church”—at least enough to know where to look for the specific data one needs to do ministry—is a key component of pastoral competence. Knowledge of world Christianity also contributes to pastoral care in preparing congregants for international business, educational, and philanthropic assignments.

chapter by North Park Seminary graduate Valerie Landfair, “Eschatological Prayer in African Pentecostalism,” pp. 93–111.

6. Philip Jenkins, “Christians in the Gulf,” *Christian Century* (March 16, 2016), 45.

The Domestic Front

Pastoral competence is equally tested on the domestic front. That portion of the population called the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) now outnumbers mainline Protestants in America. On the basis of extensive interviews, Linda A. Mercadante identified six positions that were distinctly disallowed by SBNRs:⁷ (1) an exclusionism that rejects all religions but one’s own, (2) a wrathful and/or interventionist God, (3) a static and permanent afterlife of glorious heaven and fortuitous hell, (4) an oppressively authoritarian religious tradition, (5) a non-experiential repressive religious community, and (6) a view of humans as “born bad.” A careful study of this book will show that pastoral care and responses to these persons cannot be thoughtless. In fact, many of their disaffections with the church involve its teachings, especially those concerning God. “In the end, no matter how they explain it, most interviewees seemed to blithely abandon the idea of a personal God who is deeply involved in each individual life.”⁸

A second factor of note is what Mercadante calls “the righteousness of not belonging.” This is a crucial part of the designation “spiritual but not religious,” where “religious” is associated with authority, organization, rules, and dogma. Mercadante observes that for SBNTs, the spiritual pursuit is individualistic. Personal growth takes priority over group identity, and authority is relocated from the external to the internal. Thus long-term commitments are generally eschewed, and religious communities come in for hard times.⁹ This trend demands some hard thinking by institutions of ministerial education.

In his perceptive article on church planting in Holland, Stefan Paas notes that it took a millennium to Christianize Europe and only a century to secularize it.¹⁰ A contribution to this issue of ministry to the secularized comes from Wolf Krötke’s “A Jump Ahead: The Church as

7. Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21.

8. *Ibid.*, 102.

9. *Ibid.*, 192. A painful but intensely self-probing account is John Marks’s *Reasons to Believe: One Man’s Journey among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008). Among his vocational positions, Marks had been a producer for Morley Safer on *60 Minutes*. Seminarians would do well to engage this text.

10. Stefan Paas, “Church Renewal by Church Planting: The Significance of Church Planting for the Future of Christianity in Europe,” *Theology Today* 68 (January 2012), 470.

Creative Minority in Eastern Germany,” a masterful essay on the post-communist culture of former East Germany where the atheism is, interestingly, not militant but passive resignation to life.¹¹ Krötke’s focus on the human relationship of Christians to their neighbors—the mutuality of creation in the image of God—offers a basic starting point. Because of the nature of this atheism, an ethic is needed to help deepen their humanity. What is needed is relationship and, by means of relationship, perhaps the deeper humanity of the person can be recovered so that they do not see themselves simply as products of nature but rather as having a genuine humanity.

The communication of the infinite value of a person’s humanity is gospel. It is not the entire gospel—and we cannot fail to preach and teach the full intellectual content of the faith—but it is the beginning. In Irenaeus’s bold gospel claim, the glory of God is the “human being fully alive.” The “human being fully alive” begs to know what dehumanizes the person, what vandalizes the divine image. I learned this doing more than ten years of pastoral work with survivors of domestic and sexual violence. Both forms of violence usually begin with an attack on the victim’s self-image, aiming to tear it down by words, insults, and accusations. I tried to show victims that they were created in the image of God, that, whereas their abuser used many words in rapid-fire, God uses only one word: you are my *image*.

In order to get a hearing for the gospel, whether from the SBNR or East Germans, we must first come as fellow human beings. In meeting human to human, the Holy Spirit will show the other that we can be trusted with the deeper matters of their lives. Effective pastors know something about context. And they do not make the mistake of respecting the fully human and calling it secular humanism.

To Your Own Self Be True

The study of Pietism has enjoyed a renewed interest. Douglas Shantz has recently published a 499-page history that belongs in the library of every descendant of the movement.¹² Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn have recently published a work that puts Pietism in conversa-

11. Wolf Krötke, “‘A Jump Ahead’: The Church as Creative Minority in Eastern Germany,” *Theology Today* 68 (January 2012): 438–47.

12. Douglas H. Shantz, *An Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

tion with American evangelicalism,¹³ and Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom's *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys* will open the door to ethical reflection.¹⁴

The *Christian Century* published a tribute to Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, the first Protestant missionary to India.¹⁵ Danish King Frederick IV recruited him from the University of Halle, and Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau arrived in India in 1706. Ziegenbalg quickly mastered the Tamil language and dropped the European idea that the Tamil had to become European in order to be Christian. He even attended classes for children in order to learn. He lived among the slaves, seeing all people as made in the image of God. He was learning to contextualize his work and himself. Ziegenbalg began studies of other religions and became the first European expert on Hinduism. He began collecting Tamil palm leaf manuscripts and studied Bhakt's spirituality within Hinduism, which was dominant among the Tamil. He is credited with the origin of women's liberation in India.

Ziegenbalg served the *missio Dei* and within it the *missio Christi*. His capacity to interface with various populations is what the East German theologian Krötke calls for, namely to let the basic humanity of each individual be at work. I give this lengthy introduction to Ziegenbalg's work to show that his preaching the gospel did not have to come at the expense of the Tamil people. Rather, he valued their persons and literature, even their religious literature. My point is that Pietism is populated with people who thought biblically and theologically, pressed for new media of ministry, and were able to see the places where they were already a part of the Lord's vineyard. Pietists contextualized their witness so that their gospel witness could be heard. There is no reason for students not to have a reasonable understanding of the writings that gave shape to the Covenant story; this heritage too must be mined for its riches. Is there a reason the seminary does not offer a required course in "Source Studies in Pietism"?¹⁶

13. Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

14. Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: The Christian Ethic of Pietism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

15. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Mission in Spite of Empire: The Story of Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg," *Christian Century* (September 8, 2014).

16. This would include reading wider than the Swedish component. My suggestions include the foundational document, Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964); Peter Erb, ed., *Pietists: Selected Writings*

Conclusion: God's Two Books

John Calvin attributed to God two books: the book of nature (i.e., creation) and the book of the church (i.e., Scripture). At North Park scientists study the book of nature in the Johnson Center, while exegetes study the book of the church in Nyvall Hall. But these two books studied in separate buildings have one author, God. “We believe in one God the Father Almighty, the maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ,” so the Nicene Creed confesses. Great good would come from colleagues from both faculties regularly “reading” each other’s books together. Pastoral candidates need to know that science is the exegesis of God’s book, thereby perhaps mitigating some misconceptions about science. Scientists would likewise benefit from reading the book of the church in community, engaging the very questions that seem to posit a conflict between science and religion.

Public controversy surrounding gender underscores this point. The deeply complex matter of transgender and intersex persons asks Christians to do their homework in preparation for the congregation to be a faithful “hermeneutic of the word.” Two carefully crafted books on these subjects demonstrate why theology and science need to converse. One is Megan K. DeFranza’s *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God*; the other is Mark Yarhouse’s *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*.¹⁷ Seminary students must develop a certain comfort level with the terms of the discussion as it is carried out in the church, in science, and in public discourse. In this they would benefit from the expertise in the science faculty regarding current work in brain research with regards to psycho-social development and the complexity of genetic factors in certain sexual manifestations.

(New York: Paulist Press, 1983), especially Spener’s “The Spiritual Priesthood”; Gary R. Sattler, *God’s Glory, Neighbor’s Good* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1982); Mark Grandqinst, *Scandinavian Pietists* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), which includes the writings of Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, and Finns beginning in 1771 in Norway; Mark Safstrom, ed. and trans., *The Swedish Pietists: A Reader: Excerpts from the Writings of Carl Olof Rosenius and Paul Peter Waldenström* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

17. Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

It is imperative that, as much as possible, fear be removed, and what better way to mitigate fear than by obtaining information and practicing conversation. Then, possibly, the New Testament text will come to pass, namely that perfect love will cast out fear, for there is no fear in love. God has not given the spirit of timidity and fear but of love and a sound mind. Therewith is a mind and heart well-equipped for a new era.