
Innovative Theological Education: Three Innovations

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During 2017, Reimagining Theological Education profiled three programs demonstrating innovation in theological education. We conducted interviews of leaders in two programs and gathered information from presentations at our conference and panel discussion in Atlanta on November 8-10, 2017.

Graduate Certificate in Social Enterprise, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, GA.

In an interview with and presentations by Melissa Browning and John Heinz, who led this program, we discovered:

The Graduate Certificate in Social Enterprise grew out of a recognition by Melissa Browning, Assistant Professor of Contextual Ministry, McAfee School of Theology, that seminary students and graduates who lean toward innovation are not a great fit for traditional churches, and often would be better served by entrepreneurial ministries. However, such students were generally not ready for social entrepreneurship accelerators because they lack necessary skills with money and innovation. Melissa wanted to design a program that would build those skills in seminarians and alumni.

Toward that end, Browning and John Heinz, co-director of Centerform, designed and piloted a certificate program open to seminarians, alumni and community members in the summer of 2017 in partnership with McAfee and Centerform. The program contained 9 hours of coursework for seminary credit designed to build and practice skills for social entrepreneurship accelerators. The 9 hours were spread over 3 official courses in the theory and theology of social enterprise, business and social change,

although in practice topics and material from those three courses were blended into a month-long intensive. The option of auditing the certificate with no coursework credit given was also offered. Topics explored in the coursework included theology, design thinking, strengths finder, community research, prototyping, and pitching proposals.

During the intensive, students were assigned to one of three contexts: “refugees in Clarkston, one group was working with people experiencing homelessness in woodruff park, and the third group was working with returning citizens.” Students were sent into these contexts to gather information on stakeholder needs and generate ideas for social innovations. The program used the pedagogical innovation of gamification, where assignments were all voluntary quests that won points, except for checks on the assigned reading. Students could create quests for each other. Students could get points for bringing in outside people as resources. For the purposes of the social enterprise that students would design, earned points equaled “equity” for their project.

The program was designed as an open system so that anyone could come in and out at any time to add to the conversation. Students led sessions and were encouraged to bring their gifts and the people that they made connections with fully into the system. One community member, a person experiencing homelessness, connected with students as they did research in their context, joined a few days in and ended up completing the class. Browning and Heinz connected students with experts and judges to help them develop their projects, but reported that students brought in the most significant connections themselves.

Students had to develop a project that would represent an innovation that both added value to the world but also added value to the lives of people in their studied context. Students learned through instruction on design theory how to throw up ideas, let them fail, and start right over at a fast pace. Students had to show competency in these skills to receive the certificate. One student got passing

grades but could not execute the skills and so didn't receive a certificate. The program was continually evaluated using Critical Incident Questionnaires for student feedback. Students could submit these questionnaires up to once per day for a few points in their account, and these represented in real time what helped students learn.

Browning and Heinz report five lessons learned from this pilot program. First, gamification was the key to student engagement and community connections. Second, students needed business language but including that instruction in the course dragged the energy down, so perhaps making that a prerequisite would improve future iterations. Third, the short term intensive worked well and would be a good fit for a modular or stacked credentialing process. Fourth, the open system classroom gave students access to the larger world and conversation beyond a closed instructional system. Finally, students gained leadership skills along with key skills in trying, failing, pivoting, by the way the course rewarded experimentation. Browning, Heinz, and McAfee School of Theology are currently exploring how to turn this pilot into options for going forward with this type of program.

United Church of Canada EDGE Social Innovation Challenges

In write-ups and presentations by Rob Dagleish, Executive Director of EDGE: A Ministry Development Network, we discovered:

The Social Innovation Challenges originated out of the EDGE program of the United Church of Canada. The first Social Innovation Challenge was held in Toronto in 2015. EDGE partnered with foundations, higher education institutions, and the Center for Social Innovation to develop the program. The reason for the initial development of the Challenge was the question of how to utilize church resources and properties for social innovation. The United Church of Canada decided that 10% of their

mission budget would be dedicated to supporting social enterprise. The Social Innovation Challenges were one way this support was actualized.

Over the last 2 years, the program has held 10 challenges, and 400 people have participated in the mentorship program, giving social activists inside and outside the church business understanding and tools through mentoring. Each participant is assigned a mentor, a pitch coach, and a small business consultant. Each challenge had an average of 43 people each pitching their idea for 90 seconds. The gathered group then decided together which ideas would go forward to the final pitch event that would determine which ideas received support. The two finalists from the most recent summit were faith based projects. Both received seed funding for their proposed social enterprises.

Dalgleish reported several lessons from the Social Innovation Challenges:

Creativity is messy, and innovation requires open flexible space. The organizers did not necessarily expect participants who did not make the final event to continue their participation, but all but one non-finalist attended the most recent pitch event. This demonstrates the human capital that is generated through such collaborative approaches to developing innovative projects for social innovation. In a recent online conversation held by EDGE which invited anyone who wanted to talk about social innovation to join, 13 universities participated. This indicates that seminaries are interested in social innovation. Dalgleish also reports that seminaries in Canada are starting to talk to business schools about developing partnerships for social innovation, and that the Challenges have encouraged them to be cross disciplinary so students get partners and knowledge they need.

Non-church partners were invested in the Challenges, but curious about why church organizations would do this work. Dalgleish reported a conversation with non-church partners that identified three shared priorities: financial sustainability, environmental impact, and social impact, and that the church brings a fourth priority: spiritual impact. Non-church partners were more interested in

the social innovation work than church partners. Churches tended to be concerned about how social enterprises could affect their ministries. Dalgleish observes about social innovators, “Our current system is antagonistic to that kind of person” so to overcome that lack of support, mentorship and personal relationships are key.

Urban Seminary: Open Access for Practicing Pastors

Through an interview with Larry Teem, Urban Seminary founder, and conversations with and a presentation by Trey Lyon, Urban Seminary instructor, we discovered:

Urban Seminary, founded in 2002, began as a Bible and theology study for staff members of an urban ministry, FCS, in Atlanta, GA. A small local Baptist seminary where some of the staff members were engaged in coursework closed. When that happened, Teem gathered the staff members to continue learning together. These beginnings grew into a program delivering a core of theological education to those called to urban ministry, completely free of charge. A local church that had once been very large and was now quite small for their extensive space opened up classrooms for use by the Urban Seminary.

Over time, Teem realized a greater mission than simply educating FCS staff. He recognized that some urban pastors and leaders of urban ministers had lots of practical knowledge from practicing ministry but no theological coursework. The program was then opened to just such pastors and leaders. One of the pastors at that church, Trey Lyon, was invited to teach in the program, and through that experience recognized the gaps in his own seminary education.

Urban Seminary operates outside of traditional accreditation structures in order to serve those in systems where that sort of academic accreditation is less important than having a basic theological

education for the work they do. Typical examples of students include those serving in urban ministry who did not finish college and those already pastoring without theological training. Students have included truck drivers, food service workers, military personnel, chaplains, the head of a large nonprofit, and those serving in many forms of urban and other ministries. The program remains small, with 5-15 students enrolled in courses on average.

Urban Seminary holds one class every quarter. This means that some required classes only come around once every two years, so it can take some people quite a while to finish if their life or work involves extensive travel. They have begun to offer some distance options, pretty much just using a phone conference call, to help with that difficulty. Half of the grade for each course is the student's practice of ministry. Many courses include opportunities for critical reflection on the intersection of course material and their practice of ministry. The program is able to remain free to students due to using donated space and all instructors volunteering their time.

Students who complete the program receive a diploma entitled Masters in Urban Ministry. Some students have gone from this program into more traditional MDiv programs. The coursework introduces students for the first time to philosophy and other ways of thinking about the world, religious studies, church history, Bible scholarship, ethics, and theology. Lyon, in particular, feels that the program counters the often heard idea that you can't take theological ideas from seminary into the church because it will alienate regular church members, and is trying to make sure theological ideas get into the church and practical ministry.

Teem and Lyon report the following lessons learned: Programs like Urban Seminary need to add online access due to the complex lives of students practicing ministry using Google classroom. They have begun simply allowing students to dial in to a phone call put on speaker in the classroom, but Google classroom has more potential for online access for students whose life and ministry prevents them from

being present at class sessions. Also, the world needs broader access to basic theological education, such as a “Khan Academy” of theology. However, the challenges in developing such a program are identifying funding and staff for development and operations.

Conclusions:

In reviewing these programs, we identified the following priorities for continuing innovation in theological education:

1. There are potential opportunities for partnership between non-church partners and theological education, particularly in social enterprise and innovation.
2. Short term topical intensives are more accessible to those not able to or not interested in participating in a traditional seminary program.
3. There is a need to broaden access to theological knowledge through free and online opportunities for basic theological learning.
4. Open system classrooms increase connections with those outside the seminary context.
5. Gamification increases student engagement and community connections.

Our future work to identify, prototype or support prototypes, and publicize innovative programs will be informed by these insights alongside those identified through our prior years of work on Reimagining Theological Education.