

ENCOURAGING THE SAINTS by Geddes W. Hanson

Writing this essay has given me the opportunity to think about relationships I have had with Seminary graduates and their families. The theme of this issue describes such relationships as mentoring. Actually, I see the original Mentor—the friend to whom Odysseus left the care of his household—as an ineffectual Polonius-type, hardly an attractive subject for emulation. I am more comfortable with St. Barnabas, to whom popular hagiography assigns the sobriquet “son of encouragement.”

My wife, Carye, and I moved into the CRW apartments in 1966, the second year after the Seminary acquired them. Only 100 units were occupied by seminarians—most of whom were younger than more recent students. Coming to do Ph.D. study after 10 years in congregational ministry, I found myself cast in an older brother role by many of my neighbors. Carye had made a home of a manse and had navigated the treacherous shoals of clergy-spousedom.

There were students (in those days almost exclusively male) and their spouses in and out of our apartment most evenings and weekends. I assume that I eventually had some in class; what I remember vividly are the conversations into the night with seminarians and seminary couples.

I was also the director of the Office of Professional Studies. I found myself the *de facto* academic advisor to the junior and middler classes—especially to those who felt called to the pastorate, who suspected that merely completing any old twenty-four courses in a distribution requirement would not necessarily prepare them for ministry.

In those days the Seminary did not have the resources available today to students who wish to address emotional issues—no minister, no counselor, nobody except me and my opposite number in the Office of Field Education. Students approached us with matters appropriate to our offices, but as we peeled the onion, it often became obvious that there were more pungent issues at stake. Because I was available to interpret the battery of psychological and vocational tests then required for matriculation, the lion's share of the visits fell to me. In an ordinary week I saw about four or five students a day for an hour each.

From these circumstances were born some of the closest relationships Carye and I have. We have namesakes scattered around the country, and now our namesakes are having children of their own. Our phone rings on Mother's and Father's Days, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter. Our friends treat us (to quote one of my colleagues) “better than most people's children treat them.”

It hasn't all been fun. There are agonizing job searches, and calls that don't work out. There are desperately sick children and chronically sick children. There are marriages that go on the rocks. There are miscarriages and deaths and the lingering illness of parents. And we have the same degree of “dysfunction” as any other family.

At some point, we became aware that we were practicing what President McCord called “the care and feeding of seminarians and young pastors.” I expect we found it easier to see the students as adults than did their parents. We asked a lot of questions and offered relatively few answers. In fact among some graduates Carye is known as “she who asks the mother questions.”

Between us we had only two things to offer: some fairly well-researched questions students might want to ask about their ministry, and the assurance that if they ask those questions with prayer and diligence, acting on the answers with faith and energy, they will be blessings to God's creation.

I don't think we could have the experience now. Students are older. They have other responsibilities—to spouses, children, and aging parents—and they don't have the leisure to develop in-depth relationships with faculty. More important, I think, is that the kind of seminarian we have found most congenial seems in smaller number today. I don't relate as well to students who come primarily for us to *teach* them (thereby making the Seminary inordinately responsible for what they know) as I do to students who primarily want us to help them *learn*. Watching our graduates has persuaded me that assertiveness, self-confidence, intellectual acquisitiveness, and independence are critical characteristics of effective clergy. I am not enthusiastic about the potential for ministry of seminarians who are comfortable in dependency relationships.

By the grace of God Carye and I have been able to encourage some students to take themselves a bit less seriously and to consider the possibility that the church might be as faithful without their leadership as with it. It has been a blessing of another kind to encourage some others to consider the probability that God's strength will be sufficient to their needs.

These graduates are encouragers, not just of us, but of each other. Pastors, academics, and laypeople alike, we open the doors of our homes and hearts to each other, across all lines of diversity. I remember when one former student on another institution's faculty—an Angla from West Virginia—introduced a visiting scholar on that same faculty—a Tamil from Sri Lanka—as her “sister.”

“Our family,” boasts an Asian pastor, “looks like a Benneton ad.” ■



Photo: Michael Bongart

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