

MORE THAN BRILLIANT THEOLOGICIANS FACULTY INFLUENCE ON FORMATION

Everyone readily sees the central role that the faculty plays in formation. What might not be so obvious, at least to those who haven't studied at the seminary, is exactly how that influence works.

By Kristine S. Bruss

Ask a few students, and you'll start to get the picture. "What's always struck me about the professors here is that they all seem to truly delight in spending time with the students," says fourth-year seminarian Noah Dunsmore. "They're more than just brilliant theologians. They're excellent pastors and superb mentors."

Dunsmore notes that it's not easy to single out professors. "If I think hard enough, I can imagine particular moments and conversations with every professor I've had that have shaped me as a man, theologian, student, and future pastor."

Joshua Gerken, another fourth-year seminarian and former director of Christian education (DCE), echoes Dunsmore's observation. "I was asked by a district president who my favorite professor was, and I really couldn't answer. In every class I've taken, I've learned a lot from my professor."

The classroom, of course, is just one of the places where students learn from faculty.

Learning to Go Deeper

Fourth-year seminarian Jesse O'Shell, a second-career student from Colorado, recalls a memorable final exam question in Liturgics I, taught by Dr. Paul Grime. Students were given pastoral situations and asked to use the liturgy to provide pastoral care. The question, about a fictional man named Arnold whose wife had passed away, brought to mind someone in O'Shell's own life, a man whose wife had Lou Gehrig's disease.

"I basically answered the question thinking of them, writing it to them, kind of in tears the whole time," O'Shell recalls. "Later, Dr. Grime helped me pull that up so that I could send it to him after his wife had passed away. When I looked at it again, I thought, 'Dr. Grime must have done a good job in the class,' because it was very comforting. I sent it pretty much just as I had written it for the exam."

O'Shell also talks about "the bottom being pierced through" in certain courses—a realization that there's more to learn about the subject, whether dogmatics or early church history or pastoral ministry.

Gerken agrees, noting that he studied theology as a DCE but has gone much deeper in his pastoral studies. “I had Confessions courses, yet the depth now has made me appreciate them more. The depth of the languages has made me appreciate Scripture even more. Here at the seminary, you’re digging deep, because you need that solid foundation when you get out to serve the people.”

These students are digging deep, and they can see the growth, whether through a professor’s affirmation (“NOW you’re a dogmatician!”) or through their own examination. David Gray, a fourth-year student and former communication instructor, says he thinks he’s now better at properly dividing Law and Gospel (though he expects to continue to grow in this area).

“The academic world is very much a law world. You’re judged by your works, and you earn your ‘salvation’ in school by your works, and yet the faculty have done an excellent job of still showing grace and mercy to us as students—not condemning us where we were at in year one, but showing us grace and mercy and teaching us and leading us along with them.”

That, Gray says, is a good example for the parish. “We don’t judge people on where they’re at right now, but we teach them and lead them, and we guide them in the grace and mercy that was shown to us by our faculty here, but also by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Learning by Example

Faculty may exert an even greater influence on formation through their actions—the way they interact with students, live their lives, preach, and show pastoral concern and care.

“In my Greek class, we had a student who was really struggling,” says Gerken. “Dr. [John] Nordling came up to him and put an arm around him, and he said, ‘This is going to be okay.’” Dr. [Jon] Bruss made bread for me and my wife when we had our child. We all have friends who have struggled, and we see how faculty helped them and were understanding and supported them. So when you go out into the ministry, you’ve had these great examples of pastoral care that you can’t get anywhere else, because it’s here and in person.

Gray recalls receiving such care after he and his wife experienced several miscarriages. “Professor [John] Pless sent me some of Luther’s writings to help us get through that. All the faculty have been just fantastic at those times.”

Faculty examples are helpful in other ways, too, says Gray, the father of eight children. “Dr. [Gifford] Grobien has a large family and a very active family. Just watching him navigate life, raising children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, but also serving a church and faithfully serving here on campus—he’s been an

PROFESSORS ON TEACHING

Dr. Roland Ziegler

The Robert D. Preus Professor of Systematic and Confessional Lutheran Studies

What’s been the biggest influence on your approach to teaching?

The example of good professors I had who combined knowledge with patience and willingness to engage students.

What’s important to prioritize in teaching and mentoring seminary students?

To inculcate a love and zeal for pure doctrine that is revealed in God’s Word and a love and zeal to communicate it for the salvation of men.



Ziegler



MacKenzie

Dr. Cameron MacKenzie

The Forrest E. and Frances H. Ellis Professor of German Reformation Studies

What’s been the biggest influence on your approach to teaching?

I have had some outstanding teachers, and I have used them as models for the way I carry out my own vocation as a teacher.

What’s important to prioritize in teaching and mentoring seminary students?

Good pastors need to know and love God’s Word and to know and love God’s people. We can teach them what they need to know, but love is a gift of God’s Spirit. At best, professors can try to model both.



Dr. Carl Beckwith

Professor of Historical Theology

What's been the biggest influence on your approach to teaching?

That's an easy question. I have had exceptional teachers who have stirred within me a love of learning and of asking serious theological questions. It's a cliché to say you are a lifelong learner, but that's exactly what I am. I always want to know more about God's Word and His church and to share that with my students.

What's important to prioritize in teaching and mentoring seminary students?

That's a harder question. There are so many important things that we do but it all starts with our purpose for being a seminary. Students and faculty alike are here because of what Christ has done for us, our love for Him and His church, and our desire to share His gifts with his people. It's that joy that motivates what I do and what I hope to convey to my students as their teacher, mentor, and friend.



inspiration." He offers a few other examples: Dr. Carl Fickenschier living a joy-filled life, Dr. Benjamin Mayes' devotional practices, Dr. Peter Scaer's willingness to speak boldly and not shy away from proclaiming God's truth into the world.

"I love the conversations with them, and watching them and how they operate, what they devote their time and energy to, as well," says Gray. "It's not just what they say but watching what they do."

Gerken adds, "What they say is so often reinforced during coffee hours and all those times in between classes."

Those times in between classes include daily chapel, where students have an opportunity to hear their professors and other pastors preach the Word, presenting them with a wide variety of models for their own preaching. Students listen to these sermons a bit differently from the average person in the pew, studying the models and applying what they're learning in their classes, including Homiletics.

"We sit there having taken Homiletics I with Dr. Fickenschier and say, 'Okay, where's the matrix?'" says Gerken. "And if you have Homiletics II with Dr. [Todd] Peperkorn, you say, 'Oh, he's storyboarding right now.' You see how they take what they teach and put it into practice."

Formed to Serve

What the faculty really want, say these students, is for them to be faithful to the Scriptures and the Confessions and to love people, which they report hearing from their professors repeatedly. They've seen that principle embodied in the faculty in countless ways and are now looking forward to doing the same in their first calls.

"I loved vicarage and just being with God's people and living out the Christian life with them and among them," says Gray.

Gerken adds: "The call committee of the congregation that will be calling you has prayed that God would send them someone to serve them. Suddenly you're that person now. It's going to be a huge honor to have this opportunity to serve them and point them to Christ."

As Dunsmore prepares to walk that path, he reports getting a little misty-eyed as he reflects on the pastoral wisdom, encouragement, and fraternal support from the CTSFW faculty that have prepared him for the next step.

"The experiences I've had at CTSFW with my professors are experiences I wouldn't trade for the world," says Dunsmore. "I pray that many more students get to receive the same wonderful pastoral formation that I've had."



Dr. Kristine S. Bruss serves as Chief Communications Officer at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.