

“Global Covenant Groups for Seminary Presidents: An Exploration of an Idea”

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Introduction

My presentation is not a research paper. It is an exploration of two ideas in preparation for a practice. I would appreciate your feedback that would make this practice stronger, based on your experiences and thinking.

One idea that I am working with came from my experience as a president of a United Methodist seminary in a Central Conference context. The other idea is from introducing covenant groups as a form of spiritual formation and discipleship at the Moscow Theological Seminary of the United Methodist Church. The practice I seek to develop is to introduce covenant groups for professional and spiritual growth and mutual accountability for seminary presidents in the United Methodist and Methodist-related schools around the globe.

I am developing this practice as part of the work of the Committee on Theological Schools of the International Association of Methodist-related Schools, Colleges, and Universities. This practice would be a variation of Wesleyan covenant groups-bands model and would belong to the informal peer learning rather than a formal way of educating seminary presidents.

I. Some Experiences of One Seminary President in a Central Conference Context

There might be some seminary presidents who in graduate schools studied how to be a president. I do not know any. Most of the seminary presidents I know

studied in graduate school to be a seminary professor. This was also the case with me.

I became a seminary president of the Moscow Seminary in 2008. The seminary was organized thirteen years earlier by the global United Methodist connection (GBHEM, GBGM, the Council of Bishops and the AUMTS). Six months into my presidency the economy of that missionary institution was so weak that I had no money to pay full salary to my staff and to pay taxes to the state. I was glad that the seminary had partnership with GBHEM and GBGM. We applied for emergency grants to these church agencies and were able to recover from this shortage of funds eventually. This made my life as a seminary president a little bit more bearable. Still, for the first couple of months, every other week I was contemplating resining from my new position as I discovered new unpleasant surprises about the state the Moscow Seminary was in.

Another great resource that made my first years as a seminary president easier was a mentor that GBHEM aligned me with. Doug Lewis, former president of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC became a good friend and a mentor. He helped my professional development and development of our seminary board. Doug also helped us to design a new model of delivering theological education across the eleven time zones in Russia in a much more effective way than before.

Still another resource that became an on-going support for me was Presidential Intensive Leadership Conference of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. When I walked into the room with seventy

seminary presidents and heard their stories about how some of them had unpleasant discoveries about the state of their seminaries, similar to my experiences, tears came to my eyes. It was powerful, therapeutic, and freeing. Even though I was from Russia, and most of them were from the US and Canada, many elements of what I was dealing with as a seminary president were corresponding with what they were dealing with. Besides, the picture of theological education in the US and Canada and trajectories that the seminaries there are going through help me to understand better in what place the Moscow Seminary is located on the general map of theological education, what might be expecting it in the future, and what should be prioritized in order to move to the desirable place for it as an institution.

In other words, without partnership with GBHEM, that provided me with the means to address the initial crisis in my seminary presidency, aligned me with the mentor, and encouraged me to identify an on-going support, I would not have been able to stay in seminary presidency as long as I have.

II. Covenant Groups at the Moscow Seminary

The Covenant Groups at the Moscow Seminary are used as a way of engaging students and staff in an intentional way of spiritual formation and discipleship. Students divide in groups of three to seven people and make an agreement or covenant for a certain lifestyle one year at a time. They agree to meet weekly on Skype between 60 and 90 minutes, read the Bible every day, lead a personal worship daily accountability journal, pray daily for themselves and their life affairs, as well as for each other's needs.

Typically, 20% of the meeting time is given to Bible Study, 60% to learning new instruments for ministry and life, holding each other accountable for spiritual growth, sharing testimonies about serving in the church and community where they live, and 20% to praying for each other. Often covenant groups would use 22 questions for self-examination and accountability that John Wesley wrote in 1729 for “The Holy Club.”

1. Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
2. Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
3. Do I confidentially pass on to another what was told to me in confidence?
4. Can I be trusted?
5. Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?
6. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying or self-justifying?
7. Did the Bible live in me today?
8. Do I give it time to speak to me every day?
9. Am I enjoying prayer?
10. When did I last speak to someone else about my faith?
11. Do I pray about the money I spend?
12. Do I go to bed on time and get up on time?
13. Do I disobey God in anything?
14. Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
15. Am I defeated in any part of my life?
16. Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?

17. How do I spend my spare time?

18. Am I proud?

19. Do I thank God that I am not like other people?

20. Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard?

21. Do I grumble or complain constantly?

22. Is Christ real to me?

Essential part of the Covenant Group is that they keep everything confidential. Nobody is to speak of the issues discussed in the Covenant Group outside of that group. All of that, in time, builds trust among the members of the Covenant Group to the point that very deep personal faith issues are discussed and addressed.

Covenant Groups at the Moscow Seminary are proving not only to affect spiritual formation, but also character formation that influences how students study, relate to each other and outside the circle of their fellowship, as well as how their faith is practiced daily.

III. Case for Global Covenant Groups for Seminary Presidents

It seems that in the last four years, the number of Methodist-related theological seminaries is growing around the world every year. However, it appears, that the support systems for professional growth of the seminary presidents, if in existence, operate primarily within geographical regions. This, of course, makes a lot of sense because different regions have different challenges, different opportunities, and different accrediting standards, after all.

Yet, I would argue that many theological schools around the globe have enough in common in the way of how they operate for the seminary presidents to be meaningfully engaged in a covenant group relationship for mutual learning and support, accountability in love and understanding, and professional growth.

One of the things important to recognize in this respect is that seminary presidencies are not static jobs. Naturally, seminary presidents go from beginners-presidents in the first few years, to mid-career, to final period in their tenure. Every beginning president would benefit from being in a covenant group with an experienced fellow president. Conversely, an experienced seminary president could find it quite meaningful, as well as would do a great service to the Methodist-related theological education community and to the global Methodist Connection by joining a covenant group and partnering with the beginning presidential colleague. Additionally, even within one president's tenure, presidents could have different objectives in different periods, gain experience in different fields and fruitfully share their expertise in the covenant groups. Presidents of American seminaries would be able to gain a first hand deep understanding of the lives, struggles, and victories of their colleagues outside of the US.

I would take this even further and ask: "What kind of sensibilities do we want to shape in our seminary presidents?" My hunch would be, if we are serious about being a global church, we need seminary presidents with global sensibilities. Global covenant groups could serve an effective vehicle for moving towards this objective.

Conclusion

So much at the seminary depends on the president. Presidents need special attention and support. Here is one possible design to pilot a global covenant group for seminary presidents. Identify three to five seminary presidents from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the US and make a covenant for one year to meet monthly on Skype between 60 and 90 minutes, read the Bible every day, pray daily for each other and for each other's schools. Identify professional material (a book chapter, an article or a book) that would be read and discussed at each meeting. At the end of the year evaluate the experience.