The Congregational Priority: The VTS Niche

From time to time, it is important to pause and reiterate our primary purpose and identity. For both recruitment and development, we need the entire community (from students to the Board) “on message”.

We are a seminary founded in a congregation in 1823. We were born at a time when the primary concern was effective congregational leadership in the Episcopal Church. The theme of “formation in residence” is grounded in a conviction that a “class, chapel, and lunch” culture creates the disciplines that enable effective congregational leaders to emerge. This place strives to ensure that we have good models of congregational leadership on this campus (the PHD clergy practitioners); every professor wants to bring out the implications for the congregational leadership in his or her classes. Congregations matter at Virginia Theological Seminary.

Recent developments over the last ten years have stressed this emphasis. Our Faculty now has professors in “Evangelism and Congregational Leadership”, “Pastoral Theology”, “Religion and Culture”, “Theology and the Practice of Ministry”, “Christian Formation and Congregational Leadership,” and “Christian Education”. On a regular basis we are now providing courses in “Stewardship”, “The Habit of Priesthood”, and “The Emerging Church”. Field Education remains a central part of our curriculum. In addition our M.Div. students now start their journey with TPM 501 Introduction to the Theology and Practice of Ministry. And all our M.Div. and Anglican Studies students graduate into the “Second Three Years” – a mentoring program that ensures effective leadership in congregations. This is a Seminary that believes that congregational vitality is important.

It is good that this is the case. The Episcopal Church faces many challenges. And perhaps the hardest and most important challenge is congregational vitality. Under the providence of God, we trust that our tradition will survive. And this will depend on God raising up people who continue to gather. If the people stop gathering in parishes around the country, then the Episcopal Church will disappear. What we are offering the Episcopal Church is high quality, academically rigorous training and formation with a strong emphasis on the importance of congregational leadership.

We are using the term “congregational leadership” because it includes both the lay and the ordained. It continues to be a service primarily to the Episcopal Church, while welcoming the voices of applicants from other traditions into our M.Div. and M.A. programs. We recognize congregations are found in schools, hospitals, and beyond; in these settings the leadership takes a chaplaincy form.

As Anglicans, we strive to create leaders of congregations who are thoughtful and intellectually committed. As a result there will be the occasional person who will go from the Seminary to a doctoral program. This is good. Our goal is to continue what we have always done – produce the Rectors, the Bishops, the faithful pastor of a small town church, and the leaders in theological education and beyond in other provinces around the Anglican Communion.
This is important and hard work. This is an invitation to find ways to integrate the traditional disciplines with congregational studies. We need to see ourselves as partners across the various disciplines working together to produce effective leaders of congregations.

The ultimate goal is to be judged by “history”. This Seminary has done good work in its 187-year history in keeping the Episcopal Church strong, active, and faithful. As we move through this difficult season, the hope is that with this congregational emphasis, this work will continue.

The Very Rev Ian Markham
Dean and President

Thursday, August 12, 2010 (Revised in a faculty discussion in October 2010)