

Cultivating Scholar-Activism in Missiological Education

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Introduction

“The Challenge of the Social in Missiological Education”—if I’ve understood this year’s theme correctly, then I have a potentially helpful story to tell. It’s a story that illustrates the way in which social engagement has been incorporated into a seminary’s approach to theological education.

More specifically, it’s the story of how Palmer (formerly Eastern Baptist) Theological Seminary of Eastern University near Philadelphia has envisioned, designed and implemented a program that reflects an equal commitment to both scholarship/teaching and social engagement/mission.

This program was and is patterned after the seminary’s most celebrated professors, Dr. Ronald J. Sider, who has championed holistic mission and gospel-informed, progressive politics for over four decades, pricking and developing the social conscience of the church, particularly in North America, and doing his part in restoring compassion and justice on the global evangelical missionary agenda; this, while preparing seminarians for greater and more effective ministry as a faculty member of Palmer Seminary.

Inspired by the fruit of Sider’s scholarship and activism, the seminary began to ask itself in so many words the following question: How can we cultivate scholar-activism in our approach to theological education?

The first part of this paper describes the way in which Palmer has answered that question through the creation of the Sider Center for Ministry and Public Policy and the implementation of the Sider Scholarship Program, in which select seminarians give ten hours a week to engage in work that is related to the Sider Center in exchange for a 50% discount on tuition. The vision and structure of the Sider Center and the implementation of the Sider scholarship program constitute the first part of this paper.

The second part describes how the seminary saw the need to create a special faculty position in order for this scholar-activist oriented program to work. It needed to find a faculty person who was willing to forge the integration of teaching, researching and writing, as well as directing the on-the-ground, holistic ministry efforts of

the Sider Center. The position was called the joint appointment, and eventually the seminary found a guinea pig to fill it. Since that guinea pig was me, it seems fitting to be somewhat autobiographical in this section, reflecting upon how the position has worked out these last several years as Palmer Seminary's first official joint appointment.

And lastly, the paper concludes with the newest component of the Sider Center's desire to cultivate scholar-activism—namely, an experiment in an intentional Christian community of students to live out and model the very life that Christian scholar-activism envisions for all, a just and peaceful community enjoying the fruit of life together under the reign of God in Jesus Christ.

The Sider Center: Institutionally Grounding Scholar-Activism

The Sider Center was established in 2005,¹ not only to honor Ron Sider, but to make the organization he founded—Evangelicals for Social Action—an official part of the seminary. Before that, ESA was its own 501c3, its lone institutional connection being that it rented Palmer's basement. The establishment of the center institutionally grounded a basic commitment of Sider and ESA for the last 40 years, namely, scholar-activism.

Scholar-activism can be defined as an approach to theological education that is in the service of practical, grassroots ministry. As such, this approach necessitates remaining directly involved with pastors, missionaries, community organizers, evangelists, lobbyists, and so on; for in this sort of education, the scholarly research, writing and teaching are primarily for their benefit. Another word that describes this kind of theological education is "orthopraxy"—the pursuit of right doing—which I personally like (and still use) but has unfortunately waned in its use as the language of liberation theology in general has waned.

No theological institution would overtly glory in education that is not orthopraxiological, i.e., that is not concerned about the real world. *I'm* not aware of any school that would bear the motto, "We exist strictly for the ivory tower" or "If you're tired of the real, we're the school for you" or some such thing. However, in a culture

that thinks dichotomously about theory and practice, theological institutions tend, when they err, to err on the side of theory at the expense of practice. Whether practice is done and done well may or may not be included in the criteria of success for theological education. The establishment of the Sider Center was Palmer Seminary's attempt to cultivate theological education that is in the service of right action in the world.

Furthermore, scholar-activism necessitates popularization; for the picture of effective activism is not simply a seminary graduate who is ready to change the world; it also includes the mobilization of the laity, the grassroots, all God's people, and indeed, all people. Popularized scholarship is education for "ordinary people," for grassroots mobilization. It is education for transformation on the personal, congregational and social levels, and it is key to understanding the vision of scholar-activism.

Kristyn Komarnicki, editor of *ESA's Prism* magazine explains that, "the art of popularizing—distilling complex issues such as global poverty or the social cost of pornography into clear and persuasive stories that the average person can absorb and ultimately act upon—is essential not only to building an informed citizenry but also to transforming individual hearts and minds for Christ."² Adding a sense of responsibility to this, Sider argues for popularized scholarship by saying,

Evangelicalism, especially with its strong anti-intellectual strain, has often . . . been badly served by popularizers and activists with simplistic ideas and superficial solutions. [This will not] change unless more people with good scholarly training become effective popularizers and successful activists.³

This is in fact how Sider describes himself. "During my career," he writes, "I have tried to combine the roles of scholar, popularizer and activist."⁴ The center at Palmer Seminary, named after scholar-activist-popularizer Ron Sider, seeks to cultivate the same in the lives of seminarians directly, but ultimately for the church and general populace in the service of the gospel.

The Sider Scholars

As a center of a seminary, the Sider Center's direct beneficiaries are its students, especially those who apply for and are awarded the Sider scholarship.⁵ Precisely to cultivate scholar-activism, the seminary career of Sider scholars includes social engagement with Sider Center related activities. As Palmer's website describes it, "These scholars will gain valuable experience in research, writing and networking in holistic ministry and/or public policy, as well as a greater understanding of how to merge scholarship with popular writing and organizing for social action."⁶

As stated earlier, Sider scholars give 10 hours a week toward the work of the center in exchange for a 50% discount on tuition. But beyond a mere business transaction, Sider scholars work into their seminary experience an opportunity to be involved in activities, which have included doing research for a book, writing a popular piece for the center's blog or magazine, engaging in rallies against gun violence, helping to organize workshops and conferences, helping a church develop its missional outreach, and so on—this, while fully immersed in classes, working toward the completion of their degrees along with the rest of the student body.

I have managed the Sider scholars under my charge as one of the Sider Center faculty members (more on this shortly) in a particular way; I divide each of their 10 hours in half—five hours toward the efficient operation of the center's holistic ministry efforts, and five hours assigned to one of the center's holistic ministry partners. At different points, Sider scholars under my supervision have served as 5-hours-a-week interns in ministries that include Heeding God's Call, an interfaith organization addressing Philadelphia's gun violence problem; Epiphany House, a ministry of care and adoption services for children with special needs; the ministerium of a nearby first-ring suburb working on ecumenical efforts for community transformation; INFEMIT, an international network of theologians working on issues of holistic mission and contextualization; and Healing Communities, a ministry to prisoners and their families. It may be too early to do this, but in time a study needs to be conducted of how the Sider scholarship has impacted the lives of Sider Center alums.

My preliminary hypothesis for such a study would be that theological education, which involves hands-on activist work alongside a commitment to scholarly growth, will result in graduates who are better equipped to make the transition from seminary to ministry, and thus make a real difference in their communities and beyond for the sake of the gospel.

Gospel for Non-Seminarians

Beyond training seminarians to be world-changers via a commitment to scholar-activism, however, the Sider Center is also committed to educating the populace, or at least non-seminarians, in and through popularized writing and speaking. Books such as Sider's celebrated *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, *Living Like Jesus* and *Completely Pro-Life*, attest to the center's commitment to providing prophetic, solidly-biblical and well-researched material for seminarians and non-seminarians alike. Resources for churches in holistic ministry and specific social issues are also in production. Moreover, the center has taken advantage of social media and has established its interactive presence in the culture of the Internet. Sider and the other faculty members of the center also maintain a steady speaking schedule in local churches, mission agencies, colleges, universities and seminaries throughout the country and world.

Perhaps the center's best example of popularization is the center's award-winning *Prism* magazine, which features human interest stories and articles that inspire action, undergirded by critical thinking and solid research. *Prism* attests to the Sider Center's desire to popularize "America's alternative evangelical voice," *Prism's* tagline for many years. *Prism* has fearlessly tackled "hot potato" issues, such as nuclear disarmament, abortion, pornography, racism, gun violence, and environmental abuse to name a few. And despite its small circulation, it has had a remarkable impact. For example, Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney from New York had a life-size poster made of the first page of an article on prostitution from the September/October 2007 issue and had it displayed while Congress deliberated on the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Through this particular issue of *Prism*, Sider Center/ESA did its part to help pass the Act, which, among other things, has enhanced federal efforts to crack down on prostitution and human trafficking that are happening on America's home front.

The Joint Appointment: Personal Reflections

The Sider scholarship and the popularizing of the gospel attest to the vision and implementation of the Sider Center's commitment to scholar-activism. But in order for the center's ideals to work, a specific kind of faculty had to be recruited; the seminary had to find "Ron Sider types," who were willing to forge an integration of scholarship, activism and popularization. Architects of the position called it boringly "the joint appointment," which indicated the split of duties between teaching, directing a program of the Sider Center, and writing.⁷ I was the center's first joint appointment, which in my case combined teaching missional church and holistic ministry and directing the Sider Center's church holistic ministry initiatives. Then three years later, the seminary recruited a second joint appointment, Dr. Paul Alexander, to teach ethics and public policy and to direct the center's public policy initiatives.

A glowing, bright, yellow advertisement appeared in the March/April 2005 issue of *Prism* magazine. Its header read, "Job Opening for Scholar Activist," and the description read as follows:

Eastern Seminary [the name change hadn't happened yet] and ESA [the Sider Center was not quite established yet] announce a joint position for a tenure-track faculty person who would teach half-time . . . and serve half-time working with Ron Sider . . . and directing ESA's [holistic ministry] program, [which] offers tools, coaching, and programs to local churches seeking to combine evangelism and social ministry.⁸

The requirements of the position included, ". . . passion for holistic ministry; desire to combine academic activities (teaching, research and writing) with activist and popularizing work mobilizing the church for holistic ministry and the society toward justice."⁹ I quote this job announcement almost in its entirety because it best describes the nature and intent of the joint appointment—namely, for a faculty person to practically work out scholar-activism in theological education.

The question for the seminary at that point was, "Is this something that only Ron Sider can do because of who he is, or is it replicable with the right person? From a personal standpoint, I

certainly didn't know the answer to that at first. But I did write in part in my application, "To teach theology and holistic ministry at Eastern alongside directing holistic ministry is what makes this position unique and personally appealing to me."

And at the seven-year mark of working out the position, I can say that my forecast of the fit between me and the joint appointment has proven true. It has been personally life-giving to occupy a position that has provided the professional space to grow as a scholar, teacher, writer, director and activist.

Beyond a sense of personal fulfillment, however, I would also advocate for scholar/activist-type positions of this sort in all seminaries, though to be a scholar-activist-popularizer is certainly not the call of every faculty member. As Sider has qualified, "I do not mean for a moment to urge most scholars to abandon a life of extended, focused scholarly research in their specific area of expertise. What I have tried is not for everyone."¹⁰ And yet, I'm convinced that scholar-activism should be developed in every institution of higher theological learning in and through those who feel called to this integration.

Based upon my own experience as Palmer's first joint appointment, as well as my own developing thinking about mission and theology, I would like to offer albeit briefly the following reasons why I feel scholar-activism is crucial for theological education in the 21st century.

First, it reinforces the missiological maxim that mission is the mother of theology.¹¹ When students are missiologically engaged, they have something to theologize about! In other words, the content with which they are interacting comes from both texts and context, from both research and ministry experience. As Gustavo Gutierrez asserted, "Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology follows; it is the second step. . . . Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it."¹² Scholar-activism reinforces this notion, that theological education is a response to mission; or if we wish, theological education is ultimately missiological education.

Second, related to the first, scholar-activism invigorates theology. Theology devoid of social engagement/mission ultimately loses its way. It fosters a dry intellectualism that risks becoming un compelling for students, and worse, irrelevant for both church and

society. Today more than ever, students of all disciplines—of which theology is no exception—go to school, yes, to gain new knowledge, which is measured by their report cards, but more importantly to become competent, which is measured by effective and sustained ministry in their neighborhoods and beyond. Scholar-activism puts equal weight on both theological knowledge and competence in ministries of evangelism, compassion, justice and reconciliation.

Third, the world becomes the classroom. For example, I teach a course called, “Current Issues in Urban Mission,” which has thus far been the most conducive course to work out scholar-activism. True to its title, the course grapples with issues that are relevant to doing mission in the urban context; but the grappling has not been limited to classroom discussions, as more than half of the sessions are on-location at ministry sites in urban contexts. The classroom is not just a room number on a door, but it is Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship at Temple University and Urban Promise in Camden, and the Mayor’s Office of Faith-Based Initiatives in Philadelphia, and so on. This course is but an example of what I strive to implement—scholar-activism—in all of my courses in one degree or another.

And fourth, scholar-activism deepens the student-teacher relationship in that it involves both thinking and doing together, as opposed to just thinking together. If Yoda’s mentoring of Luke Skywalker has any merit at all, then let us remember that the environment, in which the raw Jedi knight learned to use the Force, was a swamp, not a sterile classroom. The result of the training was not just Luke finding himself; it was also a bond that formed between him and his teacher. The value of relational-based ministry has always been important, but I believe ministry grounded in relationship in these postmodern times, where a leader’s authority can no longer be assumed, is of paramount importance. And scholar-activism creates situations where the student-teacher relationship can flourish.

Praxis House: Toward a Community of Scholar-Activists

To have spoken of deep relationships segues nicely to the conclusion of this presentation, as I briefly describe the newest piece to the puzzle of Sider Center's quest to grow in scholar-activism—namely, a foray into intentional Christian community.

Even though it is in its embryonic stage, the effort has a tentative name: the Praxis House. "Praxis," which conveys a process of "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it,"¹³ embodies the scholar-activism that the center seeks to cultivate in the lives of students (primarily but not exclusively Sider scholars) by virtue of living together.

Living in community—talking and listening to each other, eating together, studying together, and working together while living under the same roof—can facilitate deeper discipleship; not in an idyllic, problem-free way, as Bonhoeffer reminded us, but as iron sharpens iron.¹⁴ Models of community abound from classic monastic orders such as the Benedictines to new monastic orders among evangelicals such as the Simple Way in Philadelphia and the Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina. Other notable communities that have stood the test of time include the missional community of Jesus People USA in Chicago and the learning community of L'Abri in Switzerland.

Inspired by such models and in light of the ideals of the Sider Center, we asked ourselves, what if we offered a chance for a number of interested and qualified students to live together under the same roof? Having lived in various forms of intentional Christian community through the years, my wife and I decided to make our home the laboratory for this experiment. At the two year mark, there are four students, two who are married with their toddler son, who occupy the house with me, my wife and our high school senior daughter—so eight people in all. Word has gotten out in the Palmer/Eastern University community that such a place exists, and as a result, we receive regular inquiries and requests from students to join us. Clearly, the Praxis House can grow, but because of the size of our house, we cannot take in anymore students. So we are on the market now for a bigger house to accommodate the community of students outgrowing the present house.

I asked David Fuller, a Sider scholar who lives in the Praxis House, to share briefly what his experience has been like. This is in part, what he wrote in response:

When Al and his wife, Janice, approached my wife and I a year and a half ago about the idea of living in the same house, my ears pricked up immediately. But the reason had nothing to do with cultivating scholar-activism—I just wanted cheap rent. I never once thought about how committing to life-together with other Christians could so profoundly impact my seminary education. Living in a diverse house—in terms of gender, ethnicity and stage-of-life—has proven to be almost like a seminary lab course.

As many of you know, seminary is a profound phase of life. New ideas are being incessantly bounced around and old ideas are continually questioned. It is an exciting and stimulating environment to be immersed in. I would not change it for the world. But I've found that in seminary it is easy to lift theologizing out of a concrete context and become lost in a world of abstract ideas and thesis statements that you yourself can form any way you want to. It becomes a place where as long as you can describe an idea in semi-comprehensible English words, it has seemingly unquestioned merit.

My experience in Praxis House has been to ground my theological exploration. Two theologian-types in one house can get carried away, but the beautiful thing about Praxis House is that we have “regular folk,” who are really theologians in their own right (they don't hide behind the fancy language of the academy or the thin veil of “proper theological method”). These “theologians” keep us grounded in the reality of changing diapers, walking the dog, doing the dishes, singing, praying, watching TV, and just celebrating the constantly changing phases of life.

For example, I can talk in the classroom about biblical and theological support (or not) for nonviolent direct action, and then go home to interact with a seasoned

gun law activist and gun shop protestor. I can debate the question of original sin and the age of accountability with my unmarried, childless seminary professor, and then go home to discuss the idea with a middle-aged mother of four as she cooks supper for me...and my two-year-old. The ethical issues surrounding sex, contraception, sexually transmitted infections take on a whole new level of urgency and pragmatism in a house with a nurse practitioner working in clinic in one of Philly's most troubled neighborhoods and a high school senior at one of Pennsylvania's largest high schools.

Something I appreciate about Praxis House is that all of these interactions occur organically. We don't hold special theological discussion times or let's-see-if-the-seminarian-can-apply-the-mystery-of-the-Trinity-to-this-real-life-situation quizzes. It is simply the result of doing life-together.

The most profound effect Praxis House has had on my seminary education has been the chance to live with one of my professors. A single course provides very little opportunity to really get to know your professors. But messy-haired, pre-coffee (think drunken stupor) encounters immediately peel away false pretense or rigid formality. Such a close relationship allows deep theological conversation to take place without the need to use all the right language or all the right "paradigmatic lenses." Living with Al gives me the chance to go deeper into subjects that were only briefly touched upon in class. Whenever I feel confused or am unsure how to reconcile idea A with idea B, Al becomes a wise sounding board; not to tell me what to think or to prove to me his opinion is the best, but to responsibly navigate the complexities of these issues.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I moved my family into the Praxis House a little over a year ago. There is no denying that it has difficulties; community never claims to be anything but. More than once I've daydreamed about what it would be like to

have my own apartment with just my own family. But it never seems to last long, as I remind myself of why I love the Praxis House and the value it brings to my life and my education.

I consider it a great privilege to be a part of this small experiment and hope that what we have attempted to pioneer at Palmer will be able to be tried, and improved upon in other places across the globe.

Experiences like David Fuller's attest to the fruit of scholar-activism being cultivated in the rich soil of Christian community. Earlier I stated that although I would advocate for scholar-activism to be a part of all institutions of higher theological learning, it is not the calling of all theological educators. But it certainly is for some. Something similar should be said about living in intentional Christian community: it is not for everyone, but it certainly is for some.

This intent of this paper/presentation was simply to affirm the scholar-activist approach to theological education by sharing how it has, and is being, worked out in the Sider Center for Ministry and Public Policy at Palmer Theological Seminary. If it generates any thinking among us around possibilities of cultivating such an approach in other institutions, then to have told this story will have been worth it.

Notes

- 1 2005 was the year that it was officially and legally established, as ESA merged with Palmer Seminary of Eastern University. But it was already functioning several years before.
- 2 Kristyn Komarnicki, “Popularizing a Call to Sexual Justice,” in *Following Jesus: Journeys in Radical Discipleship* (Oxford et al.: Regnum, 2013), 111.
- 3 Ronald J. Sider, “Needed: A Few More Scholars/Popularizers/Activists: Personal Reflections on my Journey,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* XXXVI (2): 159.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 5 The Sider Center also oversees other scholarships such as the scholarship, named after another scholar-activist and friend of Sider, Jim Wallis. The Wallis scholarship functions in the exact same way as the Sider scholarship.
- 6 “Sider Scholarship,” *Evangelicals for Social Action* <http://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/about/who-we-are/sider-center/> (accessed 10 June 2013).
- 7 The joint appointment also indicated shared responsibility of financing the position—60% funded by the seminary and 40% by the Sider Center.
- 8 “Job Opening for Scholar Activist,” *Prism* March/April 2005, 12(3), 39.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 10 Sider, “Needed: A Few More Scholars/Popularizers/Activists,” 166.
- 11 David Bosch credits theologian Martin Kahler for this in *Transforming Mission*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 15-16.
- 12 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 9.
- 13 Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1970), 36.

- 14 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York et al.: Harper & Row, 1954), 26-30.