Renewing Teaching and Learning
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I want to tell you about one of the joys I had never foreseen when I became President. I had been a Professor of Systematic Theology and then a Dean—Dean of the Chapel at Calvin College. In those roles I didn’t have very much to do with business leaders. In particular, I didn’t take the opportunity to learn from them.

Lately, I have. And I want to testify that the Christian business leaders whom I approach for advice and for philanthropic support have impressed me deeply. They have a Christian philosophy of business. They take their employees’ job security to bed with them. They dignify employees by listening to them respectfully and learning all they can from them. Some live on a really small portion of what they make. All practice the truth of the proverb, “We flourish only by causing others to flourish.” One leader told me that during his whole career, he kept asking, “How can my business be better? It’s a good business, but how can it be better?”

It’s a Reformed type of question—vernacular for “How can a Reformed Church always reform?”

It’s a Calvin Seminary question, too. Because we’ve been asking it, we’re renewing our curriculum, our faculty organization, our calendar, and our seminary culture. In other words, the whole works. Centrally, we’ve been renewing our teaching and learning, and in this issue of Forum good colleagues explore ways in which the renewal can become contagious and benefit you too.

Of course, when an institution goes through changes this big there are real trade-offs—things you give up and things you gain. There are also perceived trade-offs. Passions over gains and losses—real or perceived—reveal how much we care about them. And we have some smart and passionate professors.

I assure you that we have spoken earnestly with each other about trade-offs. But the Holy Spirit has been in the whole process. I can’t think of a time when I was more conscious of the movement of the Spirit. Our disagreements remained respectful and our unity remarkable. Some of the unity was owed to proceeding one secure step at a time. Some was owed to the good character of the participants. Some was owed to listening to readers like you. Some was owed to the stellar contributions of our students. But mainly, our unity in the process of renewal came from the fact that every one of us has been asking the same question: “How can Calvin Theological Seminary be better? It’s a good seminary, but how can it be better?”

We believe it’s a pretty good question for the church, too.
What are the marks of a good pastor? A good sermon? A good education class? A good teacher? These questions are asked not only at your church, but also at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS). How does CTS know whether it’s doing a good job of preparing pastors for the church? What assessment model would help the seminary evaluate whether its education is working?

CTS has developed a four-point model to organize and assess its new Master of Divinity (M.Div.) curriculum. The model has been in use for several years in the seminary’s evaluation of sermons—some of you may have noticed it when you filled out sermon evaluation forms. Seeing how it works with sermons makes it easy to see how it works with the seminary’s new curriculum, as well as with your own church’s ministry.

Four Marks of a Good Sermon

Whenever I ask church members what makes a sermon a good sermon, their answers always come down to the same four things: First, the sermon is biblical. The sermon’s message is rooted in the text of Scripture. Second, the sermon is authentic. Here the person of the preacher is in view. The preacher is sincere, passionate, and humble. She clearly believes what she’s saying. Third, the sermon is contextual. The preacher knows his audience and the overall context in which he’s preaching, and can design clear, compelling sermons appropriate to that context. The preacher knows the difference between preaching in a high school chapel or a jail, and designs and delivers the sermon accordingly. Fourth, the sermon is life-changing. The sermon challenges people to a better way and calls them to Christ and to be transformed by the Spirit.

These four marks of a good sermon can be arranged visually with a circle that captures the movement from the Bible as the source of the message, through the person who preaches, to a particular audience and ministry context, all with the goal of gospel transformation.

This circle is helpful for evaluating preaching in general and sermons in particular. Sometimes pastors preach biblically-based sermons with loads of personal sincerity, but the sermon doesn’t connect with the audience—it’s dull or unclear or disorganized, and consequently not very life-changing. At other times preachers are authentic and their sermons sizzle communicationally and even move the heart to change! But the sermon has nothing to do with the Bible. And still other times, a sermon may be biblical, contextually and communicationally right on the mark, and may call the listener to change, but the preacher is arrogant or condescending. A sermon is only good if it touches all four points on the circle. The same is true of a good seminary education.
The Circle of Ministry

Four Marks of a Good Seminary Education

CTS is using essentially this same circle to design its new curriculum for training pastors. Graduates must be adept at all four points on this circle.

In the new M.Div. curriculum, the message represents a thorough grounding in Scripture, including its original languages, as well as learning how to interpret Scripture from a Reformed perspective and design sermons that mine the rich treasures of Scripture. The person represents the ongoing spiritual and personal formation of the student, growth in prayer and the spiritual disciplines, and the development of pastoral intelligence, empathy, humility, and honesty. Mentoring groups, vocational mentors, and congregational internships are some of the components that aid in this formation. The audience represents a capacity for discerning what is contextually fitting in ministry. Courses in missions, world religions, and church history, as well as cross-cultural internships, will help students discern and engage various ministry contexts to function effectively in an increasingly cross-cultural world. Finally, the goal of all ministry is to form communities of disciples, to lead in ways that build up the church and accomplish the mission of God. To this end, students develop competence in many ministry practice areas such as the following: discipleship, evangelism, apologetics, leadership, worship preparation, preaching, pastoral care, and ethics.

Just as the preaching model helps to evaluate a sermon, this circle of ministry lends itself well to the assessment of the seminary education that pastors receive. Few individual pastors are equally gifted on all four points of this circle. For example, some pastors are biblically grounded (message) and spiritually mature (person), but have difficulty understanding their church and its community (audience), and aren’t sure how to help the church figure out its ministry direction (goal). Other pastors struggle with personal spiritual maturity; they are self-absorbed, or lack charity or self-control (person). Still other pastors fall for self-help preaching that is not grounded in the gospel (message).

So, what if the seminary surveyed pastors three years out of seminary as well as the congregations they serve, and the surveys consistently revealed weakness in one of these four areas of ministry? The seminary then has important information that can lead to program changes, with the goal that as a group pastors graduating from Calvin Seminary will be strong at all four points on this circle of ministry.

Four Marks of a Healthy Congregation

This four-point circle is also helpful for evaluating your own congregation’s ministry. Congregations must be biblically grounded, healthy in their fellowship and life together, connected to their community, and forming disciples. Perhaps the following questions can help your congregation use this model to assess its ministry.

Message
1. Is it clear to virtually any church member that the Bible is the vital source of our church’s faith and life?
2. Does our church’s use of Scripture—in worship, prayer, discipleship, small groups, and evangelism—nurture our congregation’s faith and deepen its spiritual life?
3. Is it clear to an engaged church member that our church is Reformed? Asked another way: As our church engages the riches of God’s Word in ministry, do accents such as the sovereignty of God, unconditional grace, creation, covenant, the seriousness of sin, the cosmic scope of redemption, and the Holy Spirit’s renewing work pervade our church’s understanding of Scripture and of God’s work in the world today? Do they animate our ministry?

Person
1. How can we assess the spiritual maturity of our congregation? Do we pray regularly? Are we able to personally testify to God’s work in our lives?
2. Do our church members love one another? Do we love to be together? Are our relationships with one another strong enough that we can be truthful with one another?
3. Do our church members love the outsider? Does our church’s fellowship pull people in or push people away? What kind of people does it pull in? What kind does it push away?

Audience
1. What are the spiritual needs of our particular congregation? How do we assess whether we’re effectively ministering to children, young adults, middle-aged and older members?
2. What are the needs of our surrounding community? What ministry opportunities does God have for us because of the specific context of our church? How do we connect with our community?
3. How do world events and broad cultural trends—from Facebook to religious pluralism to the explosive growth of Christianity in the southern hemisphere—impact our church and its ministry?

Goal
1. How is God using our congregation...
to transform lives and communities locally and around the world?
2. Does our church have a clear sense of mission and purpose that helps us keep focused on transforming lives in our congregation, community, and world?
3. Are the ministries of our church aligned with that purpose? For example, if our church’s central purpose is to develop fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ, how do our ministries—from worship and church school to Bible studies and the benevolence fund—feed into that purpose?

By now you have a deeper sense of these four points on the circle and how far-reaching they can be, not only for the seminary but also for your church as it assesses its ministry.

Finally, you may have also noted that this circle of ministry, like the gospel itself, is deeply incarnational. In The Message, Eugene Peterson translates John 1:14 this way: “And the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” The points of this circle make it clear that Christianity is not an abstract set of propositions that floats in the clouds above, but rather a living Word that comes to us in Jesus Christ; that moves through us to others, and through others to us; that is radically local in particular congregations and places; that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is making all things new.

We at Calvin Seminary are excited to be partners with the church in this great mission of God.

Formation for Ministry Isn’t Just for Seminarians

The New CTS Curriculum and Making Communities of Disciples

by David Rylaarsdam
Professor of Historical Theology

How is God using our congregation to transform lives and communities locally and around the world?

Teach from who you are, not simply what you know.

A seminary student once told a professor, “I can’t learn from you until I know that you love me.” While we can learn a lot from teachers who don’t appear to care for us personally, learning is immeasurably enriched when teachers let their lives speak. It should be obvious that a professor—or youth pastor or Sunday School teacher—loves God deeply and loves her students as herself.

The content of a Reformed theological education is profoundly important, but how the content is delivered also forms students for ministry. CTS recognizes that pastors who have problems in ministry suffer less often from heresy than from burn-out or from character deficits. So CTS is increasingly attentive to forming healthy rhythms, habits, and characters in our community. In fact, since studies show that the culture of a seminary teaches as much as its curriculum, CTS is seeking to renew not only its curriculum and pedagogy but also how we live and worship together, our internal organization, and the structure of our daily schedule and yearly calendar.

With one ear to our graduates and the other ear to the Christian tradition, we are renewing our emphasis on spiritual formation. Augustine, for example, trained preachers to be persons of prayer before they spoke, to memorize the Bible as the first step of interpretation, and to embody Scripture in their way of life. Such training is not anti-intellectual sentiment, inappropriate for solid theological education. Augustine said it. Better yet, it’s biblical.

How is the culture of your congregation forming disciples for good or ill? The “curriculum” of excellent worship services on Sunday morning can form disciples; but a process of planning services and discussions about worship that are
Formation for Ministry

filled with anger and self-righteousness can undermine the Sunday morning formation. The “curriculum” of a sermon might proclaim the importance of seeking justice and loving mercy, but is this embodied in the community? Curriculum and culture are formative. The radar of young people and seekers is exceedingly quick to pick up on who we are. One of the most persuasive apologetics for the gospel is a way of life that radiates the character of Christ. Let your life speak!

Teach as you learn, learn as you teach.

Do you picture Augustine and Calvin as Ivy League scholars, hunkered down in their studies all week reading books and emerging only to preach sermons? If so, someone sold you a bogus picture. Augustine recommended learning by doing. He argued that it’s natural to learn through practice, whether we are learning to speak as toddlers or learning theology. As he taught and counseled and wrote and advised, Augustine found that his understanding of theology grew and his positions sometimes changed significantly. He confided in a letter to a friend: “I strive to be one of those who write as they learn and learn as they write.” This quote is found at the beginning of John Calvin’s Institutes, because Calvin also learned by doing. As he taught and ministered to others, he continued to learn; and as he learned, he repeatedly revised and improved his teaching in the Institutes.

At CTS, we want faculty and students to practice this rhythm. When students pass on what they learn, their learning is sticky—it stays with them longer because it is being reinforced. In addition, when students are pushed to theologically reflect on their teaching and other ministry practices, they develop the habit of engaging in thoughtful ministry which is rooted in good theology.

So in the new curriculum, learning to interpret the Bible will be more snuggly integrated with teaching it. Bible courses will require students to interpret texts, preach one of these in a real ministry setting, and learn from the experience with the help of a faculty mentor. In other words, students will teach as they learn and learn as they teach. Similarly, a Service Learning course, which stretches over students’ entire programs, will require them to serve the unchurched or oppressed and to integrate these experiences into assignments in courses such as ethics, evangelism, and apologetics. Students will serve as they learn and learn as they serve.

What is the rhythm like in your congregation? Learning from a sermon is good, but it can be passive learning. How can we creatively shape our worship services or Sunday adult education or small groups so that we actively discuss with others what we are learning and how we plan to apply it? Having children and teens attend Sunday school is good, but inviting them to lead parts of the worship service, to assist in the food pantry, and to serve on various ministry teams reinforces their classroom learning and produces further learning. Some of our twenty-somethings keenly desire a faith community where they can serve while they learn. Picture Augustine and Calvin nodding in agreement.

Train Leaders.

In the process of steering a child away from pre-marital sex, parents might unwittingly communicate that all sex is shameful. Similarly, a seminary might over-steer when it comes to talking about leadership. Bad models of leadership do exist in the church, and students should be warned about them! But leadership is not a dirty word. It’s a classical concern. Many church fathers wrote substantial theological essays on pastoral leadership. Since unbiblical forms of leadership were too prevalent, they taught healthy alternatives. When they read Paul’s letters, for example, they read them not as systematic theology first of all, but as videos of pastoral leadership in action. Their color commentary on Paul’s leadership moves produced some vivid sermons. Listeners could see Paul’s grace and truth as he handled the sex scandal in Corinth or addressed the works-righteousness teachers in Galatia.

Like the early church, CTS trains pastoral leaders. A new “Reading Congregations” course will help students to understand congregational systems so that they can provide effective leadership in different ministry contexts. The new curriculum also has a “Pastoral Identity” retreat and a capstone course in “Pastoral Leadership.” Students learn how God can use their personal strengths and weaknesses and their various ministry skills (preaching, pastoral care, etc.) to help a community of disciples work through conflict, learn from challenges, and mature in Christ. Throughout their entire seminary program, each student is also mentored by a pastor, because every Timothy needs a Paul.

When each Timothy is ordained, we expect that they will develop and promote the leadership abilities of others. Who is your pastor mentoring and equipping? Are elders, deacons, worship leaders, small group leaders, and others being equipped for ministry? And who are these people training? Leadership training should be reproductive. As disciples mature in the use of their gifts, they should become community catalysts, mobilizing others to participate in ministry, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Always assess, always reform.

The work of seminary professors would be much easier if we could simply assume that all students pray to God, received solid Bible training in the church of their youth, are free of narcissism, and are electrifying communicators. But that’s not reality. Students vary widely. Some are recent converts to Christianity, others have cross-cultural ministry experiences, and still others are theologically astute but wonder what possessed God to lead them toward...
ministry. CTS will more thoroughly assess entering students so that their programs will meet their real educational needs. Programs can be customized in a variety of ways, such as with advanced standing in courses, optional skills development seminars, flexibility in course assignments, and M.Div. specializations.

In addition to assessing individual student needs, CTS is also developing a concrete process of assessing its programs and culture more consistently. Since our assessment has shown that graduates often are not able to use their languages regularly in ministry, we have added a course in learning to use Bible software and have integrated that software through all Bible courses so that learning biblical languages is easier and more effective. In order to increase student knowledge of global Christianity and world religions, we have reshaped a history and a philosophy course. Since students need more evangelism experience, we have transferred much of a missions course to the streets, pushing students into more regular contact with the unchurched.

The “new” curriculum will never completely arrive. It will always be a work in progress, adapted in response to weaknesses revealed through assessment. Similarly, the ministries of congregations must also be always reforming. The assessment questions found in Duane Kelderman’s article (pp. 3–5) can be used to improve the teaching and learning processes in our congregations.

One of the great models of constant assessing and reforming is John Calvin. When he led a massive effort to re-educate the church in the sixteenth century, Calvin kept stressing that all Christians must have a spirit of teachableness [docilitas]. This humble, eager desire to grow and improve, he insisted, was not just a virtue for students. Teachers must be teachable too. Whether seminary profs or congregational leaders, we should be eager to learn from the Word and Spirit and each other how to best form people for ministry. We’re in this church-wide education project together.

On October 16, 2008, Forum talked to seminary students Sarah Steen Schreiber and Phillip Westra and recent graduate John Lee about the new M.Div. curriculum introduced in this issue. The conversation was moderated by Kathy Smith, Director of Continuing Education and Forum committee member, who began by asking the students about their relationship to the new curriculum.

John: As Student Senate President last year, I served on the committee that developed the new curriculum—CTS’s Culture, Pedagogy and Curriculum Committee, which included a variety of staff from the registrar to the president,
Exciting Changes at CTS

and faculty from across the curriculum.

**Phillip:** I’m a brand-new student, but I was looking into seminaries for the past four years, so I’ve seen it from a potential student point of view for a while.

**Sarah:** I am in the third and final year of my M.Div., so these changes won’t directly affect my program. Still, I’m looking forward to the future of our school. This year I’m serving on the seminary’s new Church Relations Committee, and I’ve enjoyed learning how our new curriculum will serve the needs of our church.

**Kathy:** When you heard about this new curriculum, what was most attractive about it to you?

**John:** The thing that caught my attention was the change from a linear class-by-class education to one that would be developmental and integrated. I found the components of my education at CTS to be solid, but often had to figure out for myself how they would work together and transition me into ministry. This new curriculum will help people do that as they go through the educational journey.

**Phillip:** I’m thrilled to see an educational institution focusing on the whole person of a pastor. When I’m living only in my head, I need to think, “What am I doing with my hands, and how am I treating my family?” There’s a lot more to becoming a pastor than absorbing information. I value the emphasis on formation because it keeps us thinking about how to live what we learn.

**Sarah:** I was delighted to see that our Bible professors will team up with our preaching professors in class. They will lead students through the entire process from working with the text in the original language to discussing how the text applies to the church today.

**John:** I’m also excited about the move to semesters and the attention to a rhythm of worship together as a community, and how the daily and weekly calendar fosters community. Curriculum is much broader than the courses in a catalog—it’s also about how our formation groups and mentored ministries fit into coursework, and what the rhythm of life teaches about ministry patterns and the values we put on relationships.

**Phillip:** I was intrigued by the “Reading Congregations” course that will definitely help people start thinking about a congregation instead of their textbooks before they go off to an internship.

**Kathy:** Yes, that is a one-week course at the beginning of the summer where you will learn tools for reading a congregation and then spend ten weeks in a congregation using those tools. You’ll be practicing exactly what you’re going to do when you get your first call, in terms of reading that congregation.

**Sarah:** I think the course “World Religions and Global Christianity” is a great addition to the curriculum. During my summer internship questions came up, like “Do Muslims pray to the same God we pray to?” or “What’s the difference between Christianity and The Secret [a popular book Oprah endorses]?” In our increasingly pluralistic society, church members are asking questions all the time, and we should know how to think about these issues and where to look for guidance.

**John:** The approach to language learning in the new curriculum is one of the things that’s most beneficial, not only for prospective students, but also for the church. Today computer programs help us study the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek without some of the busy-work and the rote memorization of the past. Including language tools right away helps students be efficient in a way that will pay off in ministry, when there are so many things to do. At the same time it also increases the depth of biblical study, because these search engines are so powerful that digging into the text is like using a backhoe versus a spade shovel.

**Phillip:** Those of us who are second-career persons come with various levels of knowledge of theology. I studied on my own and have some ministry experience, but some of my classmates came straight off a construction job, and haven’t read a book cover to cover in quite a while. This new curriculum is more adaptable for people who are in either place. I think that flexibility is really important.

**Kathy:** Being able to receive advanced standing for college courses in Bible and theology will give some students an opportunity to take more electives or even gain a specialization in worship, or missions, or youth and family ministries.

**John:** There also are classes for those who come in without Bible study or an understanding of the confessions. My friends
who came to know Christ and came to seminary in their twenties didn’t hear about the Heidelberg Catechism until they got here, so they were always on a steep learning curve. Having a Bible Survey class and a Reformed Confessions and Worldview class at the beginning of seminary for students who need those foundations will help the rest of their studies.

**Kathy:** Professors are busy writing syllabi for next year, and having cluster meetings to compare notes and make sure topics are covered but not duplicated. What do you want the faculty to think about as they finalize some of these things?

**Phillip:** I would say a big thank you! I just met with the registrar to plan for the transition, and I see that a lot of thought and work has gone into this. I’m confident that it’s going to work out well.

**John:** It takes a lot of bravery and humility on the part of the faculty to make so many changes, and I’m certainly thankful for that. My suggestion would be a call for balance and wisdom in selecting content. The committee began by asking, “What does a well-formed graduate who is going out into ministry look like?” and they worked backward and asked, “How do we get people there?” We quickly realized that the calling to ministry is so high and the mystery of God and the amount of history and tradition is so broad that in three years you can’t possibly cover everything.

As a student there’s a painful triage: How do you balance reading and writing papers, being a spouse or a parent or a friend, and being involved in a local church? So it’s great to hear the faculty say, “Here are the key things we want students to learn in this limited period of time, and we will also encourage them to be lifelong learners, and to have a rhythm and a balance that allows them to grow as persons, to be faithful spouses and parents, and faithful participants in their local church.”

**Sarah:** It’s great to see the faculty collaborating to improve our education. As we enter ministry we will always have to be team players, so we can learn from our professors’ example. This year we’re getting an inside look at the collaborative process, including the creative ideas, surprises, and challenges that naturally arise when we work together.

**Phillip:** It might be that a few years after graduation, a pastor thinks, “I must have daydreamed through this course” or “I would really like to revisit that topic.” Having continuing education opportunities will help us revisit and reinforce some of these things later.

**Kathy:** Right. We hope that instead of creating learned pastors we’re creating learning pastors. What do you want the church to hear about what’s happening at CTS?

**John:** I would want them to know one thing the seminary is not doing, and one thing it is doing. First, the seminary is not moving away from the Reformed tradition, and it’s not giving up any academic excellence. What we are doing is better integrating thought and study with the formation of the person, and also grappling with how different disciplines like Bible study and theology inform each other and challenge each other, and integrating how ministry and what happens in the classroom fit together. So it’s not in any way cutting what have been the strengths of the seminary, it’s only continuing to reform and to deepen those strengths.

**Phillip:** Pastors need skills and disciplines to keep themselves from getting off-track.

I think churches will be glad to hear that we’re trying to foster in pastors a rhythm to keep on going even when things are difficult.

**Sarah:** I want the churches to know that the seminary is listening to their needs. Our school exists to serve the church, not to promote or maintain a certain image of ourselves. The seminary is equipping leaders for the ministry contexts of today.

**Kathy:** The new curriculum is being described as biblical, authentic, contextual, and life-changing. Can we tell the church, “Calvin Theological Seminary is producing people who are biblical, authentic, contextual, and life-changing—through this curriculum”?

**John:** Yes. One of the joys of seminary is to sit down in the student center and listen to stories of grace—how God has brought second-career, first-career, young, and old to this place with a passion to serve God and to, as Ephesians 4 says, “equip the saints.” We start with Scripture—so everything that follows is biblical. But if you’re biblical, then you need to be a person who not only studies Scripture, but lives by it. That’s being authentic. And then, an authentic person formed by the Bible says, “Where do I minister?” Well, I have to be able to “read” the place where God places me. That’s contextual. And then, of course, the end goal of this is that Christ changes our lives. What is dead becomes alive, and that’s life-changing. I think these four areas working together is the...
heart of the gospel, and to have a seminary education that embodies that is exciting.

Sarah: In the past, a seminary education may have focused on forming people who excel in perhaps one or two of these four areas. So, it's good to continually hold all four of these values before us. This will help us have a rich and balanced ministry.

Phillip: The four all fit into preaching the gospel from a Reformed point of view—taking the word of God, being true to who we are as sinners saved by grace, using the language of today so people know what we're talking about—and when that happens, the Holy Spirit changes lives.

Kathy: Did you expect that going to seminary would change your life?

Phillip: Yes. Actually just thinking about going to seminary has changed my life, so I figured being there for three years would really keep changing things.

John: Before I went to seminary I was told by different people, “Don’t let seminary change you.” I came off the mission field, and had been occasionally preaching in my home church, and people didn’t want the seminary to make me bookish or to lose the spark of faith. Quite the contrary; God used the community of seminary, the wisdom of professors who became friends, peers who challenged me, and engagement with God’s word daily to change me, to grow me, to deepen me. I think this new curriculum creates even more space for those changes to continue.

Phillip: People are concerned that if you're in the books all the time, you'll lose your ability to connect with the person who's just come off the street and walked into church. The focus on contextual addresses some people's concerns about a pastor becoming too abstract or not connecting with people who are going to fill the pews.

John: We certainly welcome the prayers of God’s people—for wisdom for those who implement this curriculum and for students as they go through the transition. We also invite confidence in those prayers, that God is at work at Calvin Seminary, that the church can send their sons and their daughters to this place with full assurance that they will be challenged by God’s word and challenged in community to develop as a person, to develop their awareness of God’s world, and then to hopefully go back into ministry with a heart to see lives changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Self-Reflective Teacher in Christian Ministry
Six Questions to Re-invigorate Our Teaching

It’s true for nurses, plumbers, seminary professors, and workers of all kinds: some of the most promising approaches to our work come to us after a day that didn’t go so well. As we walk or drive home, cook supper, and tuck our children in bed, we ponder how we could have done it better. Some of the best cures for a dry spell in our work often come from a co-worker who arrives at work with the words, “You know, last night I was thinking about our common challenge, and I wonder if we might ….”

For teachers, these reflections are part of an age-old tradition that goes by the formal term “pedagogy.” “Pedagogy” refers to the strategies, approaches, and methods that a teacher uses to form students, convey knowledge, and instill virtues. Pedagogy takes center stage on television sports shows when basketball coaches talk about how they teach zone defense or in-bounds plays. Pedagogy is the life’s work of educational specialists who study how philosophical (and even theological) commitments are both reflected in and shaped by teaching strategies.

For most of us who teach in the church—whether in a church school or catechism class, a marriage preparation seminar, a worship team or choir rehearsal, an orientation session for new office-bearers, an adult class on financial management or approaches to parenting, a correspondence course for prisoners, or a seminary class—“pedagogy” is the name for the searching questions and reflections that arise out of our deep longing to convey the power and beauty of the gospel more convincingly.

Following are six pedagogical questions I’ve overheard from teachers in elementary and high schools, colleges and seminaries, churches and non-profit ministries. Each one is fruitful for anyone eager to teach the gospel of Jesus, especially for those of us who come home from teaching wishing it had gone better.
1. What are the “scales” or “dribbling drills” our students can best work on?

Most teaching time in athletics and music is devoted to working on drills. Young children spend much of their soccer practices working on dribbling and passing drills; young pianists and violinists play scales. These drills work by isolating a particular skill, and then training the body’s muscles to perform that skill without thinking.

The practices of faith are just as embodied as soccer or piano, and thus are perfectly suited to learn by drill. So what drills can you imagine for your teaching?

Here is a good drill for seminary worship students to work on: “Watch the news each night and then prepare one very concrete petition for next Sunday’s intercessory prayer.”

Here is one for Sunday school and Bible study students: “Read a Bible text, and prepare a four-sentence prayer that asks God to help you obey it—with as many tangible examples as possible.”

What about other teaching settings? What are the scales you could practice in an elder’s meeting, in a marriage preparation class, or in a financial management seminar?

After you identify what those drills are, remember this: soccer coaches and piano teachers don’t just talk about these drills, they actually do them. It’s the repetition that makes them effective.

2. How can our students see the big picture?

The focused skills we learn through drills are crucial, but they are not enough. I met with church school curriculum writers who were rightly worried that while we do well at teaching our kids individual Bible stories, we don’t do as well at showing them the big picture of God’s plan of salvation. Kids often remember the details of David and Goliath, but don’t have a clue about whether Abraham comes before or after Jesus.

Similarly, I recently heard one elder say, “I wish I knew the big picture of what an elder’s job is—even if there’s not time for us to be trained in every aspect of our roles.”

Good teaching is like one of the most useful features of an internet map website—the “zoom” function. It lets us focus on the details when they are helpful, but it also lets us zoom out to get a sense of the larger landscape.

When your Bible study group starts a verse-by-verse study of Matthew or Romans, consider reading the whole book in one sitting at the beginning—and at the end. When you teach a Bible story to third graders, consider working up a chart of the whole timeline of the Bible’s narrative, and remind them where the story of the day fits in.

At Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS), we’re working hard at new integrative courses which help faculty and students see how all the parts of the seminary curriculum come together. Seminary offers rich experiences in learning the Bible, theology, church history, ethics, missions, pastoral care, worship, preaching, education, leadership, and more. Our new integrative courses will offer students the opportunity to explore how all the parts fit together, with each type of course offering wisdom that is desperately needed in addressing challenging ministry situations.

3. How can we give our students multiple exposures to the same material, with each one going a bit deeper?

One elementary student recently observed: “When we learn at school, it gets harder and more interesting every year. When we learn at church, we hear the same basics repeated over and over again.”

Now there may be good reasons for this: biblical literacy is low, children spend a lot less time learning in church than at school, and churches rightly want to teach people with no knowledge of the Christian faith.

Still, the student is on to something. A lot of our learning at church never really gets beyond the basics—even in communities with two Sunday services, regular catechism classes, Christian boys and girls clubs, and Christian day schools.

The problem also challenges us at CTS. The huge list of topics we must cover means that most of them can only be covered in an introductory way. To address this, we’ve constructed our new curriculum on a development model. We’ll begin with literary courses that cover the whole range of ministry topics in a basic way, then move to analytical courses that challenge us to delve more deeply into individual topics, and then conclude with the integrative courses described above.

In churches, this same question could lead to some new approaches
The Self-Reflective Teacher

to learning. For pastors, what about occasionally preaching on the same text two weeks in a row? While the second sermon would need to review the basic themes of the text, it could also probe the text more deeply than the first one. For those who offer pre-marital counseling, what about offering a set of four sessions prior to marriage, and then repeating those sessions a year later—perhaps for all couples in the church? The second time through the material would allow for a richer discussion—particularly after couples have experienced the early months of marriage.

4. How can we help students Eat This Book?

I recently heard a teaching colleague worry that too many university classes simply “give students practice at reading badly.” His point is that professors often assign lots of reading which students skim hastily before class. Students spend so much of their college years skimming that they never really learn to read a text carefully and lovingly.

While some skimming is necessary in any walk of life, this can’t be the only way we read texts, especially the Bible. We need to read the Bible so that it is “hidden in our hearts.” We need to chew on Bible texts like a dog chewing on a bone, says Eugene Peterson, author of Eat This Book. So professors need to also ask students to approach at least some texts in a different way—to read them slowly, to memorize and savor them, to write down which phrases inspire them and which trouble them.

What a useful strategy for teaching in congregations! Don’t just have your Bible study group prepare answers to questions in workbooks; ask them to also truly savor a single verse ahead of their next lesson. And what a useful strategy in seminary! One of our hopes for the new curriculum at CTS is that each student who graduates will have at least one hundred Bible texts that they have truly wrestled with, contemplated, and savored.

5. How can we interweave “principles” and “practices,” “theories” and “applications” throughout our teaching?

One of the most common student complaints in many fields of study is that the instruction is too theoretical. As a professor of practical theology, part of me cheers when I hear that deep concern for vital practices.

Yet merely teaching techniques is also inadequate. All the technology techniques students learned in the 1980s are obsolete. In an ever-changing world, principles and theories can be some of the most practical parts of an education.

However, “can be” is the operative phrase here. It all depends on whether students learn to use those principles and theories in a variety of situations, and learn to perceive and cherish their value. This happens best when they are given many opportunities to practice making “boundary crossings” between theory and application.

The problem is that one of the most common ways of teaching, that of first exploring theories and then learning applications, actually gives students and teachers very few opportunities to explore those boundary crossings. Yet, this has long been a common approach to learning not only in colleges and seminaries, but also in church life. In contrast, many of the best sermons, lectures, and class sessions interweave principles and practices. They begin with a story or case study, then explore a guiding principle, then return to the case, then offer some clarifying definitions or opposing points of view, and then imagine the implications for a totally different situation—the more border crossings between theory and practice, the better.

6. How can our teaching and learning leave room for testimonies and doxologies?

The best television commentators for tennis, hockey, and football games know just when to say, “Isn’t this the greatest game on earth!”

I remember similar testimonies from some of my most memorable teachers: the choir director, biology teacher, and literature professor who interrupted class to exclaim, “Isn’t this remarkably beautiful!”

This sounds a lot like the apostle Paul. In the middle of several complex chapters that work out the implications of sin and grace, the old and new covenants, justification and sanctification, Paul breaks out in a testimony: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom. 11:33a). Similarly, Jonathan Edwards, in the middle of his work on the doctrine of the Trinity, once remarked, “God has appeared glorious to me on account of the Trinity.”

Now here is an approach to teaching that belongs in the church! Whether you are teaching a church membership class, a nursing home enrichment course, a deacon’s training event, your high school youth group, or a seminary-level theology class, you have the opportunity to unfold nothing less than the beauty, power, and glory of the gospel of Jesus. When its grandeur strikes you again, there is no need to contain your joy. Your testimony may end up being contagious.

These six questions are just a sampling of the pedagogical questions we’re asking at Calvin Theological Seminary. We would love to hear questions that you enjoy asking as part of your self-reflection on teaching. We welcome you to send your thoughts to continuingeducation@calvinseminary.edu.
The New Master of Divinity Curriculum at Calvin Theological Seminary

The Master of Divinity curriculum provides the building blocks for every dimension of a biblical, authentic, contextual, and life-changing ministry and is focused on the personal and spiritual formation of every student. CTS’s new Master of Divinity curriculum is built on these four cornerstones — a foundation that connects the best of the Reformed tradition with the contemporary ministry practices essential for tomorrow’s leaders.

The developmental pedagogy of the curriculum begins with basic literacy in Year One, followed by increased in-depth analysis in Year Two, and culminates in multi-disciplinary integration in Year Three.

Below is a sample course sequence in the M.Div. program for those with no prior study in Bible or theology. For more information about the curriculum, please go to http://mdiv.calvinseminary.edu.

### Three-Year Course Sequence (numbers indicate credit hours)

#### Year One: Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FALL</th>
<th>J-TERM</th>
<th>SPRING</th>
<th>SUMMER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Gateway to Seminary: An Introduction to Interpreting and Communicating the Bible (2) <em>Two weeks before the fall semester</em>&lt;br&gt;- Mentor Groups (1)&lt;br&gt;- Hebrew Fundamentals (3)<em>&lt;br&gt;- Theological Education as Formation for Ministry (2)&lt;br&gt;- Bible Survey (3)</em>&lt;br&gt;- Church in Historical Context I (3)<em>&lt;br&gt;- Reformed Confessions and Worldview (3)</em>&lt;br&gt;- Service Learning (3) <em>Spread over three years</em>&lt;br&gt;- Learning to Use Bible Software (1)&lt;br&gt;- Pastoral Identity Retreat (2)&lt;br&gt;- Skill Development Optional Courses (1)&lt;br&gt;- Mentoring Groups (1)&lt;br&gt;- Hebrew Usage and Tools (3)<em>&lt;br&gt;- Church in Historical Context II (3)</em>&lt;br&gt;- Introduction to Ministry: Forming Communities of Disciples (3)&lt;br&gt;- Preaching Theory and Methods (2)&lt;br&gt;- World Religions and Global Christianity (3)*&lt;br&gt;- Discipleship and Teaching: Evangelism and Cross-Cultural Ministry (2)&lt;br&gt;- Cross-Cultural Internship (5 weeks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* courses with possibility for advanced standing

#### Year Two: Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FALL</th>
<th>J-TERM</th>
<th>SPRING</th>
<th>SUMMER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Mentor Groups (1)&lt;br&gt;- Greek Fundamentals I (3)<em>&lt;br&gt;- Systematic Theology I (3)&lt;br&gt;- Old Testament Narrative Literature (3)&lt;br&gt;- Forming Worshipping Communities (2)&lt;br&gt;- Apologetics (2)&lt;br&gt;- Elective: Models of Contextual Ministry (2)&lt;br&gt;- Elective: Models of Contextual Ministry (2)&lt;br&gt;- Mentoring Groups (1)&lt;br&gt;- Greek Fundamentals II (3)</em>&lt;br&gt;- Systematic Theology II (3)&lt;br&gt;- Old Testament Poetic Literature OR Old Testament Prophetic Literature (3)&lt;br&gt;- Ethics and the Christian Life (3)&lt;br&gt;- Discipleship &amp; Teaching in North American Culture (2)&lt;br&gt;- Reading Congregations (1)&lt;br&gt;- Congregational Internship (10 weeks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* courses with possibility for advanced standing

#### Year Three: Integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FALL</th>
<th>J-TERM</th>
<th>SPRING</th>
<th>SUMMER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Mentor Groups (1)&lt;br&gt;- New Testament Narratives (3)&lt;br&gt;- Pastoral Disciplines for Counseling Ministry (3)&lt;br&gt;- Preaching Practicum (3)&lt;br&gt;- Christian Reformed Church: History and Polity (3) <em>only required of students seeking CRC candidacy</em>&lt;br&gt;- Elective: History/Theology/Philosophy (2)&lt;br&gt;- Elective (2)&lt;br&gt;- Elective (2)&lt;br&gt;- Elective: History/Theology/Philosophy (2)&lt;br&gt;- Mentoring Groups (1)&lt;br&gt;- New Testament Letters (3)&lt;br&gt;- Capstone: Pastoral Leadership (3)&lt;br&gt;- Capstone: Integrative Seminar (3)&lt;br&gt;- Elective: Old Testament Exegetical (2)&lt;br&gt;- Elective: New Testament Exegetical (2)&lt;br&gt;- Opportunity for an additional internship, e.g. Clinical Pastoral Education, a summer internship, or a full-year internship.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* courses with possibility for advanced standing
CTS Faculty Listen to Pastors and Church Leaders

For the past six years, Calvin Theological Seminary has been intentionally listening to the church’s advice about the formation and sustaining of pastors and church leaders. One key way the seminary has done this has been by annually gathering a group of pastors for a two-day listening session with the seminary faculty—where the faculty are the listeners, and the guests are the teachers. The purpose is for faculty to learn more of what is going on in the church in various places and types of ministries, to be better able to prepare students for ministry in those settings, and to learn how to provide lifelong learning opportunities for seminary graduates and for other church leaders.

The faculty has listened to groups of rural pastors, urban pastors, church planters, staff ministers, and youth pastors. This year, for the focus on renewing teaching and learning at CTS, a group of alums came to reflect on their past experience at seminary and the plans developing for a new curriculum. Representing five graduating classes from five to twenty-five years ago, and coming from British Columbia, California, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ontario, and Washington, these pastors and church leaders gave many good insights as they answered the faculty’s questions.

Faculty: What are the big questions you’ve faced in ministry?

Pastors:
- What is the church here for? How does the church fit in a postmodern context where the community is largely unchurched? How do we create a sense of community in an individualistic age?
- What is truth? How do we know the Bible is true? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives?
- What does it mean to be distinctively Reformed? How can we talk about covenant theology in a way that will be heard? How do we defend infant baptism?
- Where is God in the midst of sin and suffering? How do we deal with the power and patterns of sin within faith communities? How do we address ethical issues like homosexuality and divorce and remarriage?
- What is the nature of leadership? What does it mean for leaders to equip the saints and form disciples in the context of relationships, and sometimes through conflict? How do we foster ecumenical ministry?

Faculty: What do you wish you would have had more of in seminary?

Pastors:
- Emphasis on leadership and church organization
- Training in forming communities of disciples
- Conflict management
- Personal spiritual formation and formation of pastoral identity
- Theology and practice of prayer
- Logos (Libronix) Bible software training
- Adaptive learning and questioning
- Mentoring
- Presence of practicing pastors
- More passion about Jesus Christ
- How to do evangelism and foster growth in established churches
- Emphasis on relevance of theological issues to ministry

Faculty: What excites you most about what you see in the new curriculum?

Pastors:
- Spiritual disciplines in the forefront
- Integrating New Testament and Old Testament theology
- Not beginning with Hebrew
- Logos (Libronix) Bible software training
- Semesters, not quarters
- “Gateway” course
- Retained emphasis on biblical literacy, theological and doctrinal knowledge
- Emphasis on contextualization
- Emphasis on a community of disciples versus “the church”
- Advanced standing opportunities

Faculty: If the culture of a seminary is as formative as the curriculum of a seminary, what would you suggest for the formation of the seminary community?

Pastors:
- Model balanced life (between work and personal life) in seminary
- Make the community hospitable to families
- Encourage professors to be consistently approachable
- A culture of teachability and humility; “great leaders are curious”
- A pattern of prayer and readings apart from chapel

Faculty: How can CTS work more effectively with the church and pastors and congregations in this whole endeavor of forming people for ministry—from prospective students to continuing education?

Pastors:
- Summer internships are valuable; set
Fall Conferences Become Online Resources for Preachers and Church Leaders

The fall of 2008 included rich learning opportunities at CTS that are now available for your learning as well! Our website has audio and video recordings of speakers like Mark Noll of the University of Notre Dame, Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale University, Thomas G. Long of the Candler School of Theology, Mark De Vries of Youth Ministry Architects, and others from our fall conferences. Also posted are many past lectures and conference speakers, as well as selected CTS chapel messages. Go to www.calvinseminary.edu and click on the Continuing Education link, where you will find future event listings, learning resources for selected events, and an audio/video lecture archive of past events.

For theological reflection, listen to recordings of the major international conference that CTS—along with a number of seminary and college partners—hosted in September 2008 to celebrate the centenary of Herman Bavinck’s 1908 Stone Lectures. Entitled “A Pearl and a Leaven: Herman Bavinck for the 21st Century,” the conference considered Bavinck’s times, his theology, his contribution to the ecclesiastical, social, cultural and political life of his day, and its relevance for Christian vocation in the 21st century. Two hundred attendees from North America and Europe delved deeply into the discussion for three days. Information about conference details and cosponsors can be found on the website.

For preaching resources, watch the videos of Fall Preaching conference presenter Thomas G. Long, speaking on “Preaching the Gospel of Mark to a Restless Culture.” One attendee highly recommended that others watch Long’s presentations, saying, “In five hours today, I gained material for three months’ worth of sermons!”

For youth ministry, watch the video of Mark DeVries, founder of Youth Ministry Architects and author of Family-Based Youth Ministry, speaking on “The Third Pig: Sustainable Youth Ministry”—how churches can create and support a strong youth ministry and encourage their leaders to be “relationship architects.”

Also being added to the website are study resources such as a listening and discussion guide for Thomas G. Long’s presentation on “Accompany Them with Singing: The Recovery of Authentic Christian Funeral Practices,” presented at CTS in 2007. Pastors will learn how funeral practices have changed over the past few decades, and the difference it makes for churches and families today.

An immense treasure trove of resources for preachers can be found on the related website of CTS’s Center for Excellence in Preaching (http://cep.calvinseminary.edu), which is frequented by more than ten thousand different visitors per month!

You are encouraged to go to our website often for lifelong learning resources, and we welcome your suggestions for future events and topics.
At Calvin Theological Seminary we have all of the elements you need to construct a solid foundation for your life and for your ministry. Our new Master of Divinity curriculum provides the building blocks for every dimension of a biblical, authentic, contextual and life-changing ministry and is focused on the personal and spiritual formation of every student.

Learn more about our new Master of Divinity curriculum today!

mdiv.calvinseminary.edu