

Impressions of the Free Methodist Graduate Student Seminar
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This account of my first impressions of the Free Methodist Graduate Student Seminar is colored by several powerful conditions. I wish to identify these in order to provide a reference point from which the relevance and importance my observations can be weighed. Without unnecessary description of these phenomena, that quite possibly are familiar to many graduate students, I list them in recognition of their influence.

In order to attend graduate school, I left a productive career in parish ministry, a lifestyle and task to which I had been committed for over fifteen years. I was not prepared to face the depth of grief that would be precipitated by that loss. The change impacted both my own and my family's identity. The family exchanged a life of economic upward mobility for dependence upon government loans, while I searched for anything other than a professional position from which to derive self esteem. My children were not sure who or what I was either in the community or in the family. The fact that, in the more than three years that I have been on leave from the Pacific Northwest Conference, no personal contact with me has been initiated by that conference says more about the nature of ministry in the Free Methodist Church than it does about me. Unappointed ministers are ghosts. While the impact of losing power, place, and identity was very significant, it paled in comparison to the impact of entering a completely foreign world. The Catholic and the academic worlds offered me few, if any, points of familiarity. Without these, I often found myself wandering spiritually, socially, and even physically on the sidewalks of the campus. The FM

graduate conference offered one of the first instances of relief from that wandering. Finally, I must point out that the above are now subjects of my memory more than experience. Three years in the university, first as merely a student, then a graduate assistant, and now lecturer have provided me with a broader world view, a wider set of friends, a deeper experience of faith, and a greater competency in the field of religion. It is out of all of the above that I recall and present my impressions and observations of the FM graduate student seminars of 1991 with some reference to the seminar of 1992.

The physical setting of the 1991 seminar was overwhelming. It was my first trip to New England and I drank in the sights of the city of New York as we approached the airport in New Jersey. We, Frank Thompson, Craig Boyd, and I gathered our luggage and headed for the curb where we were to look for our shuttle service to the hotel. The functional but very worn van and its talkative, confident, young, and friendly driver were harbingers of what would await us at the YWAM hotel in Elizabeth. For me, the hotel became symbolic of the entire experience. I remember it as a ten or twelve story building of which only about six floors were functional, placed in the middle of a crowded, dangerous, and multi-faceted community. We were told not to venture on to the streets alone and we were warned of the danger inside due to the partly completed renovation of the building. The rooms in which we stayed had incomplete wiring and inadequate rest rooms, by motel standards, but the atmosphere breathed the same friendliness, youth, and confidence of our van driver. A rapport with the YWAM staff quickly and easily developed, making the

setting as inviting as any first class hotel. The spirit of the ministry which the building housed became most evident on Sunday morning when the members of a burgeoning church plant packed the lobby level with sounds of singing, worship, and fellowship. I believe the seminar will grieve the loss of this host and remember it with nostalgic fondness.

The stark contrast between the seminar and a minister's conference almost startled me. I noticed that academicians are not nearly as sensitive to making newcomers feel welcome, nor do they share the appreciation for non-threatening small talk that makes ministers so effective at some things and so inept in others. Tables of students and professional faculty seemed to engage each other with an intensity which I then found stifling, but have come to take for granted when among religious scholars. My family assures me that I am now a certain member of that intense and somewhat stifling community. In addition to this general observation, I saw three things at the graduate seminar which I found rare, if existent at all, in minister's conferences. The first was the careful articulation of points of view. It was refreshing to hear carefully researched and written opinions in addition to rhetoric and anecdotes. In 1991, Frank Thompson, Karen Winslow, Carl Thorsen, and Brian Hartley presented papers which covered a wide variety of topics. This second element of variety contrasted with my experience of ministers' conferences which tend to focus everything only on the perpetual goal of more effective evangelism. Starting with the a chronicle of the Graduate Student Seminar and moving to C. S. Lewis' view of women in the priesthood, then to Northrup Frye on the importance of the Bible to

English literature, and finally to the impact of scientific knowledge on John Wesley, we were challenged to be flexible and to stretch to include input from various fields into our personal and scholarly horizons. This seminar was pleasurable, but it was also work.

My third impression was that this was a fellowship of sufferers. The pain in the atmosphere was palpable. Some were hurting in their own lives and some bore the pain of others. The pain was generated by alienation, failure, crises of faith, loss of the sort I earlier testified to, overload, and fear. That this pain was present did not surprise me, it was the willingness to share it that I found unique. Accompanying the pain was a deep spirit of health and healing. No one moved to solve another's problem, but the empathy that I both observed and experienced was real. It was in that empathy that I most clearly observed the work of the Holy Spirit. Out of the pain and empathy arose genuine fellowship. It appeared to work in reverse, the deep sharing leading to a lighter fellowship, but there was a rightness about it. Pain was what the group brought with it, fellowship was what we left with. This fellowship was the central characteristic of the event. Judging from the comments and actions of those who had long been participants, this fellowship had always been the center. It was symbolized in the sacrament of pizza. I think that if there were only one element of the seminar that could be retained it would be this. Of course we need a respectable reason to fly thousands of miles to have pizza, so we also present papers and discuss issues.

One may think, from these glowing descriptions, that I encountered a sort of

utopian society, but I did not. There was a class distinction that was very evident. Professors were viewed as evaluators and students as observers or performers. A mix-up in room assignments jolted me into the realization that there was in place a hierarchy that I had not expected. Several students, myself included, were mistakenly placed on the eighth floor by the YWAM hosts who could not tell the difference between us and real professors. It was an embarrassing situation particularly to the young man that had to ask us to move from a completely refurbished suite to the cramped quarters and bunk beds of a lower level. I was reminded that I was student and not a professor. For just a moment I longed to be the guest speaker at a church or a seminar leader at a conference. Social stratification is inherent in the academy and though this seminar provides a great deal of relief from it does not transcend it. I seek no indictment nor even a change for there is a sense of awe that a student brings to rigorous scholarship and to the professional setting that serves to motivate as well as to help one realize that there is a measurable difference in the competency that one attains with every rung of the academic ladder that is negotiated. By agreeing to present a paper the following year, I willingly embraced my status and role of student.

In conclusion, I offer a short contrast of the seminar of 1991 with that of 1992. The former was a graduate seminar of Free Methodist scholars while the latter was a Free Methodist Seminar for graduate students. In 1992, there was an emphasis on scholarship and the its ramifications for the church. Present at the seminar were a bishop, a bishop emeritus, two college presidents, a denominational

executive, and the church publisher. Our keynote speaker, Frank Spina, vividly and powerfully articulated some of the key issues facing higher education in the church. He asked us to consider our Wesleyan heritage and its power to inform the direction of higher education. The informal discussion this setting generated was of a much less personal nature, but nonetheless, dynamic and significant. We discussed our own futures in the church and the future of the church's colleges as well as the importance of leadership in that arena. This was not the same type of gathering that occurred in 1991. Though we demanded pizza, the high point of that event was the communion, led by Bishop Parsons, on Sunday morning.

This contrast does not seek to assign relative value to the individual seminars, but to illustrate the fluid nature of the organization and its yearly event. The body governs itself, pays its own way, if necessary, dictates its agenda, and responds to the needs of its participants in a timely and flexible manner. Most significantly, it brings together and recognizes persons who are integral members of the church, but have chosen a road less traveled.

THIRTIETH ANNUAL
GRADUATE STUDENT THEOLOGICAL SEMINAR

THE CHURCH AND THE ACADEMY
Impressions from My First Experience
at the Graduate Student Theological Seminar

by

Rev. Don Thorsen, Ph.D.

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