

Our Mission of Spiritual Formation

Reflections on the AU School of Theology Mission Statement

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Anderson University School of Theology

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During my interview as a candidate for a faculty position at Anderson School of Theology, a search committee member asked, “Are you someone who teaches a subject or someone who teaches people?” My answer was, and is, “both.” Even more, a dual emphasis in teaching theological subjects (academic excellence) and developing people (spiritual formation) lies at the heart of the mission of School of Theology. Hence, the SOT mission statement uses the word “form” to capture what we do. **“The mission of the School of Theology is to form women and men at the graduate level for the ministry of biblical reconciliation.”**

Form is a good word that has become a four-letter word in common parlance. We speak of forms in connection with filing our taxes with the Internal Revenue Service. Tiger Woods has perfect form on the golf course at the same time he struggles with deformative patterns in his personal life. We form a consensus in Congress that proceeds to argue about everything.

Even as popular language has taken over the word, “form,” it is neglected in education. Educators speak of training, informing, enriching, and yes, educating students. Rarely do we speak of forming students. To claim that one’s goal is to form men and women is a bold statement because it goes beyond the ordinary claims of education. Dating back to Socrates, the focal point of education is the development of the mind. In the classic Greek model, education develops powers of thought and critical reflection, enabling one to use the mind more intentionally in the pursuit of excellence.

To engage in formation of persons honors the importance of developing the mind. The Great Command includes, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Certainly, one must develop and nurture powers of critical thinking and reflection in order to be effective in ministry. And yet, formation of women and men for ministry entails more than cognitive functioning. Formation is a holistic enterprise in keeping with a Biblical model of training. Here the focus is the heart. Hebrew worldview envisioned the heart as the core being, the innermost part of a person out of which all human activity proceeds. I have coined the term, *METAMORPH*, to characterize formative education that seeks to address the whole person. *METAMORPH* is an acronym that points to nine domains of functioning that comprise a holistic model of human development:

- *M*ind
- *E*motions
- *T*ransformative Processes
- *A*ctions
- *M*otivation
- *O*rganic Factors
- *R*elational Life
- *P*neumatic Factors
- *H*istory

All of the foregoing is much more than arguing about the meaning of words. To speak of theological education as formative is to point to what distinguishes SOT from a graduate school of religion. These distinguishing characteristics can be summed in terms of both the means and the ends of seminary education.

For one to describe the mission of SOT as formation of women and men is to say that developmental relationships are the means of our work. From a Biblical view point, no one is self made. Each person is formed in and through a community of relationships. This formation process began in God's creation of human beings. It continues in our "one anothering," that is, our developmental relationships. Of course, SOT is not claiming that we have the power to form people or to make anyone do anything. And yet, the faith community, the Body of Christ, is God's chosen way of continuing to mature individual members. SOT is a specialized body with the mission of intentionally forming those who might lead and form other bodies.

One additional word about the means of theological education is needed here. Our work of formation is specifically "spiritual formation." This language emphasizes the Holy Spirit as the principal guide, teacher, and agent of change. The complexity and intricacy of ministry exceed our grasp and ability. In many ways we proceed in our ministry of education as those who go by faith, not by sight. To engage in a mission of formation is to commend this pattern of spiritual leadership to others by teaching and by example.

The formation work we do with students is not an end in itself, but rather is part of the journey toward the overarching end, formation into the image of Christ. The SOT mission statement embodies the conviction that effective ministry flows out of the hearts of persons who exhibit both wholehearted commitment to Christ and spiritual health to live out that commitment.

As it turns out, that little four letter word, "form," is saying a lot. By the grace of God, may we fulfill the vision of forming women and men for the ministry of Biblical reconciliation.