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A Thirty-Year Experiment in Teaching Spiritual Formation: Twelve Lessons We Learned

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Abstract

Spiritual formation requires intentionality, especially at the programmatic level. This article explores insights gained from a novel experiment in theological education where spiritual formation played a central role in shaping all aspects of a seminary's structures and curriculum. Seminary of the East offered a unique glimpse into how an institution's vision for spiritual formation can determine all dynamics including campus infrastructure, enrollment goals, faculty rank, in order to better support spiritual formation. Practitioners and administrators can gain insights from the lessons learned by a small seminary's continually improving efforts at modeling and teaching spiritual formation.

Keywords: spiritual formation, teaching graduate level, creative approach

Another Kind of Seminary

When Seminary of the East (SOE) first began offering courses in 1985, concepts like *spiritual formation* and *mentoring* were not on anyone's radar in Protestant theological circles—including ours. SOE was driven by the nagging feeling that there had to be a better way to do theological education. What we had experienced ourselves in our own days as seminary students in the 1960s and 1970s was good and helpful academically, but we were looking for something that better met our needs as whole people, especially in the areas of promoting our own spiritual growth and the development of practical ministry skills. Gradually a new kind of seminary began

to take shape in our minds. The thirty-year history of SOE represented an ongoing attempt to dream and experiment with new and creative approaches to theological education.

SOE never held a corner on such distinctives as spiritual formation and mentoring. Other schools have emphasized many of these same values. What set SOE apart from other institutions was that SOE held these distinctives earlier than many, was freer institutionally to experiment with new approaches, and allowed them to permeate its program more completely.

Some Background History

The original vision for SOE began to take shape in the minds of a number of local church pastors as early as the 1960s and 1970s. Part of the driving force was denominational; they wanted to strengthen Conservative Baptist Association (CBA) churches in the Northeast. But they also saw the need for a different kind of seminary from the ones where they had been trained. In 1982, representatives from forty-four CBA churches met in Nanuet, NY and gave birth to their vision. The Conservative Baptist Seminary of the East (CBSE) was legally incorporated in 1983, and began offering classes in September 1985 at Chelton Baptist Church in Dresher, PA.

Key individuals that shaped this new seminary were Ted Ward (a consultant and innovator in theological education), founding CBSE president Glenn Blossom (then also pastor of Chelton Baptist Church), and Mark Shaw (a missionary educator teaching at Scott Theological College in Kenya and later a faculty member at CBSE before returning to teach at Africa International University in Nairobi, Kenya). They were joined in 1985 by the first Dean, Jim Mignard, who brought a strong emphasis on adult education, and by the first Dean of Ministry (later Associate Dean, and then Dean), David Spruance (a longtime missionary educator who had served in theological education in Argentina) who was the driving force behind the seminary's distinctive approach to mentoring. Each of the succeeding faculty and staff at the Seminary helped shape and fine-tune the model.

By 1990 the Seminary, now known simply as "Seminary of the East," had grown well beyond Conservative Baptist circles, as more and more people in the Northeast wanted a theologically conservative preparation for ministry built around such distinctives as spiritual formation and mentoring. The seminary gradually expanded its teaching centers from its original

location in Philadelphia (Dresher, PA) to include strategically located centers in New England (Worcester, later Auburn, MA), New York City (eventually settling in Queens), and Maryland (first in Baltimore, then 126 Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care 11(2) later the Metro-DC center in Glenarden, MD). Rather than trying to bring students to seminary, we sought to bring seminary to our students. This strategy of offering classes in small local teaching centers enabled students to continue to live and minister in their home areas and commute in, often only an hour or two, for classes held one day a week.

In the late 1990s, in an effort to gain greater institutional stability, SOE entered into a formal management agreement with Bethel College and Seminary (now Bethel University) in St. Paul, MN, that culminated in a complete merger in 2002. The Seminary then took on the name Bethel Seminary of the East (BSOE) and served as the east coast division of Bethel Seminary until 2014, when, for financial reasons, Bethel closed its entire east coast operation.

The name “Seminary of the East” (SOE) will be used throughout this article instead of its more recent name, Bethel Seminary of the East, to emphasize the continuity of its program over the years. During its affiliation with Bethel, the shorter name “Seminary of the East” was often popularly used, even in Bethel circles, to describe this east coast division of Bethel Seminary.

Now we are able to look back at thirty years of experiments in innovative theological education.¹ When SOE began offering classes in 1985, the language of *spiritual formation* was for all practical purposes limited to certain areas within Roman Catholicism. But from the start, SOE was committed to a holistic approach to theological education captured both in our earlier slogan of “*head, heart, hands*” and in our later modification of “*thinking, being, doing*.” We were persuaded that while the seminaries we had attended ourselves in our own student days had done satisfactory jobs in the *head* or *thinking* area of academic content, they had done a weaker job in the area of the *hands* or *doing* component of ministerial skills, and they were weakest of all in the area of the *heart* or *being*. We initially called this *heart* or *being* component of our curriculum *character development* before switching over in 1990 to the language of *spiritual formation*. So spiritual formation was part of our corporate DNA even before we recognized it as

¹ The Seminary is one of eight schools (two from the United States) described in Robert W. Ferris’s case study, *Renewal in Theological Education: Strategies for Change* (Billy Graham Center Monograph, 1990).

such. In many ways SOE came into existence because of a perceived need in this area of character and spiritual formation, and this emphasis helped make SOE what it was. Our efforts in spiritual formation are probably our greatest legacy.

What Did We Learn?

The following are a list of 12 lessons we learned along the way in our development of our model of theological education at SOE. This list is based on our combined perspectives as father and son, professor and student, and then for SOE's final five years, as full colleagues in theological education at SOE.

Lesson 1: Spiritual formation requires a readiness to experiment and try new things

One of the great advantages of a new startup institution is that it is not saddled with the weight of traditional ways of doing things. Any church planter knows that it is often easier to create a sense of excitement and new life in a new church plant as opposed to trying to resurrect a dead or dying church. At SOE, we were free to experiment with all kinds of new strategies for everything we did: mentoring, using learning contracts for individualized learning, focusing on character development, exploring the then emerging discipline of spiritual formation, to name only a few. Much to the consternation of those serving as our registrars, the SOE curriculum was often a moving target as we almost annually introduced changes into our curriculum as we sought to fine-tune and improve our program.

For years we also resisted the pressure to give student grades for both individual assignments and final grades for courses. Instead, we assigned students either "S" for "Satisfactory" (which meant essentially "A" or "B" work in more traditional categories) or "I" for "Incomplete" (which meant that the student still had not reached a "satisfactory" level of performance for that assignment or course and needed to keep working on it). A grade of "Incomplete" also meant that as faculty we were committed to working with our students for as long it took to help them reach a reasonable level of proficiency. (The only students who ever failed to receive a "Satisfactory" grade were those who gave up and stopped trying.) We also supplemented the final course grades of "S" and "I" with a personalized narrative evaluation up to a page in length summarizing the student's strengths and weaknesses in that particular assignment or course. Our registrars soon had to invest in large fireproof file cabinets to hold our

constantly growing collection of narrative evaluations. But this is only one illustration of the fresh kinds of thinking we tried to do.

Renewal in any area of life is rarely easy. One reason why SOE got as far as we did is that we worked at it. At the faculty level, we chose to focus our time and attention almost exclusively on teaching our students, and not on other traditional scholarly pursuits. The net result is that we developed strong personal relationships with our students, with the downside that none of us ever had much time for academic writing or other scholarly pursuits. We concentrated our attention on serving our students. Faculty retreats and all-day faculty meetings often had as a sole agenda item a single question such as, What do we want our graduates to look like? Or, How can we improve what we are doing in the area of spiritual formation? Sometimes we simply brainstormed; other times different ones of us prepared presentations to share. We did not necessarily always agree with each other, but we were always thinking and talking together about how we could best minister to our students.

Lesson 2: Spiritual formation requires humility and a willingness to learn

We knew only too clearly that we had not arrived, but we were always in pursuit of new and better ways of doing things. The idea of being life-long learners resonated with many of us, both in our own lives and in how we sought to impact our students. One key influence that helped shape our entire educational program was self-consciously building our program around adult education principles, especially those originally associated originally with Malcolm Knowles.² If we were in the profession of teaching, we felt we needed to put into practice the best principles we could find on how adult students actually learned. We soon discovered that the responsibility for learning rested with our student, and that our job was to assist them in whatever ways we could. Our students could never be simply spectators or consumers. Learning always required work and personal involvement on their part.

Another key distinctive was our mentoring program. While this was integral to the original values of SOE, our language and approach changed over the years. We soon moved

² See especially the classic text by Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, originally published in 1973 and now in its 6th edition (2005). Our founding dean, James Mignard, had done parts of his own doctoral work in adult education with Malcolm Knowles. This focus on adult education and the usage of learning contracts was very influential in the development of our program at SOE.

from our older language of “supervisor,” based on an apprenticeship model (where the “master” teaches his or her apprentices) to a model of fellow learners informed by the insights of the more recent mentoring movement.³ In the later 1980s and early 1990s, we were greatly helped in this area by consulting with the Philadelphia-based Uncommon Individual Foundation (which still exists now many decades later; see www.uif.org).⁴ Their classic definition of mentoring was “Mentoring involves a brain to pick, a shoulder to cry on, and a kick in the pants.” The final expression was later modified to “a push in the right direction.” Gradually we developed a threefold system of providing mentors for our students, built around the faculty as *faculty mentors*, one’s fellow students as *peer mentors*, and two mentors chosen from a student’s own church or ministry context serving as *local ministry mentors*.

Another early influence on our approach to mentoring was a personal meeting with Howard Hendricks from Dallas Theological Seminary who came and visited us in a faculty workshop on January 29, 1992. He encouraged us to think in terms of how we all need three different kinds of mentoring relationships throughout our lives: we need to seek out and learn from those further ahead of us, we need the benefits of iron-sharpening-iron peer mentoring of those more or less our equals, and we need to invest ourselves in those who are not so far along as we often learn best only when we help others grow.

Still another shaping influence was what has come to be known as spiritual formation. In our earlier years we called it simply character development, as the heart or being component of a “*head, heart, hands*” or “*thinking, being, doing*” model of holistic education. As time went by, we were able to tap into more and more of the then still emerging insights of spiritual formation, especially as this discipline developed in Protestant circles. We wanted to explore new directions in theological education, and we knew we needed all the help we could find.

Lesson 3: Spiritual formation requires a team approach

SOE was never a place for lone rangers or solo scholars. We sought to build and nurture a team approach to decision-making that was characterized by the active pooling of ideas and

³ We were influenced in our earlier years by Doran McCarty, who was known personally by some of the early SOE staff. See, for example, his book, *Supervising Ministry Students* (Atlanta: SBC, 1978).

⁴ Richard Tyre of the Uncommon Individual Foundation was hired as a consultant for SOE for the year 1990–1991 and met personally with us in faculty meetings throughout the year. He was instrumental in helping us develop a mentoring program designed specifically for the seminary and local church context.

insights. The original vision for SOE emerged from a group of likeminded pastors and church leaders, and this vision developed and matured as faculty and staff were added who were committed to this model of desiring something new and better in the area of theological education. At the faculty level, we deliberately chose not to institute faculty tenure or assign faculty rank, since we felt this would undermine our sense of collegiality and team spirit. Thus, SOE was built around a shared vision that was jointly owned by virtually everyone involved: board members, administration, faculty, staff, students, local church mentors, financial supporters, alumni, and friends of the Seminary. Accreditors and other outside observers were always surprised at how this vision permeated every level of our entire constituency.

In the early years of SOE, our mentoring program was strengthened and improved by all the comments from our original local church mentors who, amazingly enough, were willing to meet with us for an entire Saturday morning once a month for the first several years of our existence to help us think through and fine-tune our approach to theological education. Our local church mentors were clearly seen as part of the team, and they actively contributed to the development of our model. At one time we even called these local ministry mentors part of our teaching team to emphasize how integral they were to our program. Eventually we got into trouble with our accreditors for using non-credentialed mentors in our instructional program, and we had to rethink how we described them and exactly what we were asking them to do. But we never wavered in our commitment to the importance of using ministry-based leaders in the training and equipping of our students.

We were able to do what we did because we were all on the same page trying to head in the same direction. Certainly, God is ultimately the one who brings people together. But what seemed to characterize SOE was an openness to the contributions of everyone on the team. Faculty and staff meetings usually made decisions on a consensus basis, and we rarely, if ever, made formal motions or took actual votes. Every institution knows the sad reality of heavy-handed, top-down decisions that often do not make sense to those down in the trenches of real life, but at SOE these were usually the exception, and not the rule. We actively sought a better way through teamwork.

I (Brian) will always remember with gratitude how Jim Mignard, the founding dean of the Seminary, went out of his way to make it possible for me to attend their annual SOE faculty

retreat at a time when I was still only an adjunct teaching a single course a year. Yet, team building, shared vision, and common values were important to him, and he wanted to do everything possible to make sure that the entire team was on board with everything that took place—even very part-time adjuncts. And as an adjunct I also found myself invited to at least some of the faculty meetings and other faculty development experiences. This was the kind of heritage we enjoyed at SOE. There is a price in time and finances in building a team, but SOE historically was willing to pay that price.

Lesson 4: Spiritual formation requires a strong sense of vision

As faculty we carefully nurtured a distinctive vision for how we were trying to serve and minister to our target audience. We sought to discern what ministerial skills, values, character development issues, spiritual formation goals, and areas of academic knowledge are needed for effective ministry in the geographical areas we served. We were in essence practicing outcome-based education long before we ever heard of that concept. Over the years we developed a series of different charts outlining both spiritual formation goals and values as well as the specific ministry skills we felt were necessary for a readiness for ministry. Students and their local ministry mentors were challenged time and again to use these charts as self-assessment tools to assess their own progress in ministry preparation (and then to share their results with their others: spouses, mentors, and friends, for additional feedback). Again, the precise form of these assessment grids was a moving target throughout SOE's history. But thinking about our students and wrestling with how best we could serve them was never far below the surface of our thinking.

SOE was a vision-driven institution with more than its share of vision-minded individuals. What joined us together was the common conviction that there has to be a better way to equip leaders for ministry. The sense of need was only too apparent. As SOE was taking shape in the minds of our founders in the late 1970s and early 1980s, more than one high-profile Christian leader had experienced moral or spiritual failure in their lives. We wanted to do a better job. There was a clear conviction that the whole character or spiritual formation dimension needed considerably more attention than it had often received in many traditional seminaries up until that time. There was also a clear recognition that all too many seminary graduates were unprepared for the actual challenges of ministry in terms of specific ministerial skills, and again

there was a clear sense that this component of character or spiritual formation also required additional attention. SOE administration, faculty, and staff were united in wanting to do something that would make a difference.

It is no secret that vision is a commodity not found universally in everyone. We were blessed at SOE with a number of visionary thinkers. But visionary thinkers often attract others who resonate with that vision, and this was our experience at SOE. Even those who are not visionary thinkers themselves can catch the excitement of a good vision when it is deliberately nurtured and maintained by the administrative staff and faculty.

Lesson 5: Spiritual formation requires a relational approach to learning

Certainly, God's hand is not short, and he can use any means he chooses to help his people learn and grow. Presently he is using dreams of Christ to awaken people to spiritual realities in the Muslim world, but his normal means has always been using other people. For this reason, SOE was strongly committed to a relational model of theological education where learning takes place best through life-on-life contact.

The key question for us was: how can we maximize these life-on-life contacts with appropriate others in the learning process? This goal shaped our classroom teaching style. Adult education learning principles provided a theoretical foundation for much of what we tried to do in this area. Class time was focused primarily on discussion and interaction, rather than formal lecture-style presentations. We were persuaded that content can be satisfactorily communicated through the selection of proper texts and other learning resources. Instead, classroom time should focus on helping students process and think through the implications and applications of what they are learning. As professors, we sought to develop and model such qualities as flexibility, transparency, and learning to listen to the students' questions and agendas. If God calls his people to love one another as a general principle, then surely, he wants us to love our students and spend time with them listening to them and knowing their concerns. If ministry is all about relationships, then preparation for ministry needs to take place through relationships and focus on relationship-building skills.

We sought to incorporate multiple relationships in the learning process. Our goal was to develop practical ways of implementing Howard Hendricks's classic approach to three different

kinds of mentoring relationships we all need that he shared with us personally so long ago. Thus, we sought to develop specific strategies for helping our students learn from those further ahead of them (faculty and local ministry mentors), from their peers (fellow students through class discussion and interaction), and from their efforts in investing in the lives of others in real-life ministry situations (through practical ministry projects, especially those associated with ministry skills learning contracts we called Guided Learning Experiences).

We came to see our role as faculty primarily in terms of being faculty mentors and investing ourselves in the lives of our students. Then we deliberately sought to incorporate relational experiences into our classrooms through active discussion times and other joint learning activities which would allow our students to learn from each other in “peer mentoring.” Especially in our spiritual formation courses, we set aside time specifically for “Discipleship Groups” or “D-groups” which were times for prayer, sharing, and group learning under the leadership of the course professor. Many of the insights of what later came to be called small-group theory found their ways into our classrooms.

SOE’s emphasis on mentoring also greatly strengthened our relational approach to learning. From day one, our students were required to establish and maintain regular mentoring relationships with two appropriate individuals of their own choosing from their local community of faith, usually the pastor of the student’s local church and a key lay person who would agree to meet together with the student each week or every other week. This mentoring program was also tied in with specific adult education learning contracts we called Guided Learning Experiences (GLEs) to help guide and direct these mentoring relationships. These GLEs had a prominent place in virtually all our spiritual formation and ministry skills courses. Over the years, mentoring skills were nurtured and strengthened through a variety of different approaches, including regular workshops for our students and local church mentors. We soon discovered that both students and mentors needed to be challenged with a vision of the importance of mentoring and then taught specific mentoring skills. Originally these mentoring workshops were held once a month during the school year; later they were reduced to a single workshop at the beginning of each term.

SOE entered somewhat slowly, and perhaps even grudgingly, into the whole area of distance or online education. Certainly, there are tremendous advantages in being able to offer

training to people who otherwise would be unable to be present physically in our classrooms. We believed that distance programs work better with some kind of courses and with some kind of student learning styles. But our goal remained the same: How can we use whatever opportunities we have to maximize life-on-life learning experiences as the best means of training and equipping our students? We discovered that requiring local onsite church mentors may make up for some of the other limitations for relational learning inherent in distance learning.

Lesson 6: Spiritual formation requires a God-centered or biblical-theological vision

Our goal in spiritual formation, as in other areas of our program, was that we wanted to be thoroughly God-centered and operate on the basis of a clear biblical-theological foundation. Our founding dean and the majority of the earlier faculty had been trained specifically in the disciplines of biblical and theological studies, and consequently, most of us naturally thought in terms of these categories. Thus, when the question arose in the early years about what kinds of qualities and skills we should seek to nurture in our students, the immediate response was to follow the lead of our original dean and get out our Greek New Testaments and start looking for the kinds of qualities that characterize spiritual maturity, especially as they were taught and exemplified by Christ himself (see Ephesians 4:11–16). Here we spent time surveying such passages as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–10), the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), and the list of qualifications for church leadership in 1 Timothy 3 for guidance on the proper goals for spiritual formation and ministry preparation.

Pulling out our Greek New Testaments was not an isolated occurrence. We were committed to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture as God's inspired and inerrant Word to his people. We believed that disciplines such as spiritual formation should be taught from a distinctly biblical-theological perspective where the language and categories of spiritual formation are clearly informed and shaped by the disciplines of biblical studies and theology. This is in contrast to some other schools where the orientation to spiritual formation is more heavily informed by the social sciences and taught by people who are primarily trained in these social science disciplines. If ministry preparation is a part of God's plan, then we need to listen long and hard to his Word for his guidance and direction.

But there is still more to this goal of being God-centered. We never saw ourselves as simply being in the education business. Our focus was always something bigger. Our goal was to nurture renewal to the churches in our region and ultimately to bring glory to God himself. This broader sense of vision reached perhaps its clearest statement during an SOE strategic planning process in 1993–1994 when our vision was summed up as follows: “to glorify God by advancing the cause of Christ through the development of Christian leaders.”⁵ Then when SOE merged with Bethel, we came under Bethel Seminary’s vision statement: “to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ among all people in culturally sensitive ways . . . [by] develop[ing] and equip[ing] whole and holy persons to serve and lead so that churches and ministry agencies can become all they are called to be and do all they are called to do in the world for the glory of God.”⁶ The real test of success for us as an educational institution was not how many students we graduated or how well they did academically; the key question was always whether leaders were being trained and equipped and healthy, vibrant local churches were being nurtured and built up. From the very beginning, there was a broader concern for the glory of God and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom.

Lesson 7: Spiritual formation requires equipping the whole person for ministry

SOE consistently emphasized the importance of a proper balance of (1) biblical and theological foundations, with (2) character and spiritual formation growth, and (3) the development of ministerial skills. Our slogans of “*head, heart, hands*” or “*thinking, being, doing*” were always key shaping ingredients in our program. For many years all of our course syllabi included a list of specific course objectives for that course grouped under three separate headings: “*head, heart, hands,*” or later “*thinking, being, doing.*” We knew we needed to pursue a deliberate balance of academics, spiritual formation, and ministry skills.

We tried to never take the biblical and theological foundations in seminary education for granted, as schools have sometimes lost their way theologically through a lack of attention to these areas. We can never spend too much time building a firm foundation for what we believe about God and his ways. So we tried to make sure that we were always doing a solid job in

⁵ Seminary of the East, *Catalog 1995–1996* (Dresher, PA: Seminary of the East, 1996), 3.

⁶ Bethel Seminary, *2004–2005 Bethel Seminary: Saint Paul, San Diego, Seminary of the East* (St. Paul, MN: Bethel University, 2004), 9.

teaching hermeneutics, the original languages, biblical studies, systematic theology, and church history.

At the same time, we invested most of our creative time and energy into the second area of the *heart* or *being*. In our earlier years, we called this area *character development* and focused on strategies for developing and nurturing all of the various character qualities described in Scripture (the Beatitudes, Fruit of the Spirit, and so on). Then our vocabulary and orientation shifted toward the language and insights of spiritual formation in 1990. But still our perspective was one based on the Bible (what does God actually say about personhood and personal maturity?), theological studies (what is our theological understanding of how people change and grow toward maturity?), and church history (what lessons can we learn from our fathers and mothers in the faith who have gone before us in these areas of spiritual growth?). When we first began offering courses in these areas of character development and spiritual formation, we were not aware of other schools with this same emphasis in their curriculum.

An adult education strategy of learning contracts, or Guided Learning Experiences, provided an ideal strategy for encouraging students to personalize and apply what they were learning in spiritual formation to concrete areas of personal need in their own lives. The number of courses in spiritual formation we required varied over the years, as did the number and exact nature of the related GLEs. The one thing that stayed the same was our firm commitment to giving academic credit to these spiritual formation GLEs. At one point, during the high-water mark of this priority, we required nine 1.5 credit courses in spiritual formation for a total of 13.5 credits out of a required 94 semester hour program—or over 14% of the entire curriculum specifically in the area of spiritual formation.

We sensed a similar need for giving academic credit for personalized GLEs in the third area of our curriculum, the *hands* or *doing* component. So we adopted a similar structure of pairing a ministerial skills GLE with each of our required courses in pastoral theology.

Lesson 8: Spiritual formation requires an integrated curriculum

SOE was strongly committed to the importance of an integrated curriculum. We consistently pursued a three-prong approach to integration. The first prong was that each of the courses in our curriculum was designed to fit primarily within one of the three areas of “*head*,

heart, hands” or “*thinking, being, doing.*” In many ways, this was similar to what we found after our merger with Bethel Seminary with their three-center model that gave structure to their entire curriculum at that time: (1) the Center for Biblical and Theological Foundations, (2) the Center for Spiritual and Personal Formation, and (3) the Center for Transformational Leadership.

But what set SOE apart from most other schools (even the other divisions of Bethel Seminary, after our merger) was the second prong of our approach to integration, namely, that each and every course in the curriculum needed to be taught in such a way that it reflected all three priorities of our “*head, heart, hand*” model. We knew that simply having three separate (and unrelated) “silos” in theological education wasn’t enough; each and every course needed to be organically related to every other part of the curriculum. In some of our early faculty meetings each of us as teaching faculty shared with the other faculty the specific emphases we planned to pursue in each of our upcoming courses that next term so the other faculty could be aware of what we were trying to do and that together we could see if there were any ways that students likely to take both our courses could benefit from a possible cross-fertilization of content.

An example from the early history of the SOE is informative of our efforts at integration. During the first year of course offerings, every course in the curriculum, take Gospels for example, needed to have not only all the normal course content from the appropriate academic discipline—in this case New Testament, but also a learning contract that applied the content of the Gospels course to an area of personal character formation in each student’s own life and a second learning contract that applied material in the Gospels course to an appropriate area of need in the development of specific ministerial skills meaningful to that particular student. That plan was abandoned at the end of the first year as too unwieldy and cumbersome, but the underlying goal of helping our students see how different areas of study all were related to each other continued throughout our history.

A more recent example is when I (Brian) taught New Testament Greek. Like in every other course taught at that time, I deliberately tried to connect what I was teaching about the Greek language to issues in spiritual formation and ministerial skills—and these spiritual formation and ministerial skills learning objectives needed to be clearly indicated as specific course learning objectives on the course syllabus. Integration takes place only when students are

challenged to see how what they are learning connects with other areas of learning, and, even more importantly, with their own walk with God and their own personal preparation for ministry.

There are also other aspects to integration. A third prong in our approach was our emphasis that integration takes place best through faculty who themselves are growing in personal integration. One requirement for teaching at SOE, especially in its earlier days, was that every potential faculty member needed to have had a minimum of 5 years of experience in pastoral ministry or on the mission field. I (Brian) remember one conversation years ago with 4 or 5 other SOE faculty when we were comparing our years of ministry experience, and I discovered that my 14 years of pastoring was the least of anyone in the group. Faculty who themselves have been involved in actual ministry are able to teach their disciplines in such a way that students will be able to see the connections between that discipline and their own real-life spiritual growth and growth in ministry skills.

Another early requirement for teaching at SOE was that every faculty member was required to teach one course in spiritual formation each and every term regardless of our own academic specialization. This requirement of each of us teaching courses in spiritual formation spilled over into faculty meetings where we discussed together how best to teach spiritual formation and which resources and learning activities we would use. The net effect of this requirement is that all faculty were regularly exposed to spiritual formation issues and could more easily integrate spiritual formation questions and topics into everything else we were teaching. We soon discovered that the only way to teach spiritual formation was if we were growing alongside our students. It was only as we were growing ourselves that we began to see fresh ways in which biblical studies, theology, church history, pastoral care, spiritual formation, and ministerial skills are all organically related to each other.

Lesson 9: Spiritual formation requires a commitment to local churches

SOE was created by a group of forty-four pastors meeting together with the specific purpose of establishing and strengthening healthy, vibrant local churches in the Northeast. For that reason, SOE deliberately sought to reach out and establish vital relationships with local churches. SOE made it a policy not to invest in real estate and buildings, but to partner with local churches (and occasionally other Christian ministries) and to share their facilities for classroom

and library space. The net result is that our students were trained for ministry in facilities that were also currently being used for local church ministry. The students in the New England center saw firsthand what it was like for a church that hosted our teaching center to go through the challenges of a building program.

Our mentoring program created still other links with local ministry leaders. Every SOE student normally had both a pastoral mentor and lay mentor with whom they met on a regular weekly or every other week schedule throughout each term. This mentoring team assisted the student with required GLEs in spiritual formation and ministerial skills. The faculty supervising these GLEs received two forms for each GLE from each student's local ministry mentors (one form toward the beginning of the term giving the mentors' approval, and the other form evaluating the GLE at the end of the term). In addition, faculty and local ministry mentors often were in contact at least occasionally throughout the term by phone or email. At one time, faculty even traveled once a term to sit in on one of these local mentoring sessions with our students and their local church mentors to become better acquainted with our students and their mentors. In our later years, these same ministry leaders were also invited to join our students once a term for a dinner and special mentoring workshop at our local teaching center. So each term we normally had two mentors from each area church (or other Christian ministry) representing our students physically on site at each of our teaching centers. Given such a structure, it was relatively easy to build relationships between the SOE and ministry leaders serving geographically around each of our teaching centers.

Lesson 10: Spiritual formation requires an individualized or customized approach

Each student is different and has different learning needs. These differences show up especially in spiritual formation and ministerial skills. In spiritual formation, God seems to have a different agenda and curriculum of lessons for each of us, and the challenge is always to discern what lessons he is trying to teach any of us at a given moment. Personalized GLEs in spiritual formation gave us the flexibility we needed to help students cooperate with what God was doing at that time in their lives. Students learned to set realistic learning objectives for the next stage of learning and gather together appropriate learning activities to assist them in learning the specific lessons that would be most beneficial to them over that term. The pairing of these GLEs with specific courses in our curriculum allowed our students to gain academic input

through the regular classroom portion of a given course at the same time they were pursuing their personalized GLE learning projects.

Individual differences among our students were also apparent in the area of ministerial skills. Here one student in a homiletics course may be preaching his or her first sermon, while another student may have already been preaching regularly in a church for 10 or 12 years prior to seminary. Again, GLEs provided the ideal format where each student could explore his or her own unique learning needs in consultation with their mentors and course professor.

We also developed what we called “model ministry libraries” for our students to see and use in each of our local teaching centers to assist them not only in academic skills, but also to showcase spiritual formation resources and tools for ministerial skills. Our goal was serving our students, and they discovered such unheard-of policies as six-month checkout periods, no fines, and even the delivery of interlibrary loan books by priority-mail to their home mailboxes.

Lesson 11: Spiritual formation requires a model for lifelong learning

Theological education that ceases the moment a student gets a degree is going to be limited in long-range usefulness. Everyone acknowledges the need for continuing education. SOE designed two strategies for lifelong learning. Both of these grew out of our seminary model. One was our mentoring program. Mentoring at SOE was designed not as an arbitrary program requirement that students forgot the moment they graduated. Rather, our mentoring program was designed to offer students a new way of life and ministry, where regardless of the specific situation they might find themselves in, they would spontaneously know how to seek out appropriate mentors to assist them in whatever situation they would face in the future. Mentoring at SOE admittedly had at times a certain artificialness about it in terms of various required forms and due dates made necessary in a formal academic setting, but our hope was that our students would come to see and value the importance of adopting a mentoring lifestyle to their own personal lives and future ministries. The ultimate vision of our mentoring program was always the development of mentoring-based local churches.

The other strategy for lifelong learning was to develop in our students the ability to use the GLE process. GLEs were a very specific tool designed to help our students accurately learn how to diagnose their own learning needs, how to set reasonable and objective learning goals,

how to gather together specific learning activities and resources, and finally how to evaluate the overall success and shortcomings of the entire process. If needed, students should be able to set new goals for unmet learning needs and continue this process of personal growth both in their own spiritual formation and in the development of new ministries skills for the rest of their lives. We have heard testimonies of our graduates finding themselves in a challenging situation and immediately reaching for a sheet of paper to begin sketching out a GLE plan as a practical problem-solving technique to assist them in learning the next lessons they need for ministry. Ultimately, our goal was the transferability of this learning process.

Lesson 12: Spiritual formation requires an active dependence upon God

Hopefully, we have all learned that the key to success in any area of life involves God's blessing on that project or activity. Ultimately, our battles are not with flesh and blood as the Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:12. It goes without saying that prayer is a key part of virtually any successful ministry, and at SOE we were blessed, especially in our earlier years, with men and women of prayer. At the end of the day, the key question is always whether God is pleased with our efforts.

The Ongoing Legacy of Spiritual Formation at SOE

Bethel University decided to close its east coast division, Bethel Seminary of the East, for financial reasons, effective May 2014. But the legacy of the SOE model continues. All that we learned about God, spiritual formation, and mentoring continues to influence the training of ministry leaders through the ongoing ministries of our graduates as well as our faculty and staff who have transitioned on to other ministries.

As we look back at our thirty-some year history, it seems that the brightest times were when we were focused most clearly upon the Lord, and those times when our institution seemed to go astray in one way or another were times of depending more on human wisdom and human solutions. As is so often true, our history was a mixture of joys and disappointments.

At the same time, we know we are better persons through our association with SOE and all of the values and sense of vision that were a part of it. There was something good and wholesome in the midst of all of the weaknesses and imperfections we also experienced. Truly

we are at best “earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7, KJV) in order “that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”

Some Concluding Thoughts

If we had to distill everything down we have learned along the way at SOE, here is a brief summary:

1. God is the ultimate resource in the training and equipping of his people for life and ministry, and his written Word is our ultimate guide.
2. Improvement is always possible. None of us have arrived. We can and need to do better.
3. Organizational freedom to dream and experiment allows for the implementation of new ideas.
4. Teamwork of administration, faculty, and staff is essential for institutional advance, both in education in general and spiritual formation in particular.
5. People are complex and easy solutions rarely work. Rather, each person is unique and we need to allow for individual differences in theological education.
6. People are eternal souls and the training and equipping of God’s people is always worth all our efforts.
7. Ultimately the goal of spiritual formation is always the glory of God, the building up of his people, and the spread of his kingdom throughout the world.

May God continue to use these seeds that were planted over the years in one small seminary for his honor and glory.