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When being asked my view of the church and theological education upon being interviewed for the presidency of the Iliff School of Theology a year ago, I said that I deeply believe that both institutions have a basic choice to make—go directly to hospice or be transformed!

It was not lost on some of the search committee that I was actually giving contemporary expression to an ancient biblical insight. Having been in office for nine months now, I remain convinced that nearly all of us in theological education are at that crossroad—and that some of the deepest disconnects in the life of the church are directly related to how we equip many of our leaders for their respective roles. Theological education is an accomplice in what some rightly see as the enervation of the church today.

In many developed nations, we are seeing growing anxiety around a variety of issues: security, economic stability, urban—and even rural—unrest, conflicts both large and small that are both subtle and blatant. Where is the church in this setting? All over the map. And that doesn't help us very much. Given the complexity of this matter and the brevity of this statement that I must honor, I will therefore speak from this point specifically to The United Methodist Church as I know it. Those of other traditions will be able to make relevant connections, but for the reasons stated, I will not address them here.

For the most part, it seems as if valiant souls (sometimes clergy, sometimes laity) are laboring for the goals of social holiness that undergird our Wesleyan heritage and provide the core of our future promise. Nonetheless, denominational structures are withering on the vine in terms of their perceived relevance to the actual needs and yearnings of the people of God.

Many of us are wondering today, “Who we are spiritually and ecclesially?” We see warring parties on almost any significant topic of the day and we long for effective leadership to help us engage conflict and uncertainty. The truth is, though, that we don't see much of it; we find it sometimes soul-searing, but increasingly many of us are just checking out of—leaving—the church. Our spiritual journeys are beginning to take place in other venues with increasing frequency and satisfaction.

Theological education, for the most part, seems to be in a similar situation as the communities of faith it is called to serve. Let me say it succinctly: I am convinced that nearly every theological school—of whatever confessional tradition that I know—is seeking a better model of how to provide excellent theological education in the early twenty-first century.

I know that of our thirteen United Methodist schools, some of us are seeing this as more or less urgent; we are not all in the same place in forecasting our individual and collective futures. For my money, though, we need to name up front that our Wesleyan heritage can actually be of service far beyond our own tradition—and that this ought give us key indicators of what can help within our own church.

The notion of uniting head and heart, and not falling prey to one or against the other, is precisely where many of us have struggled long and hard—and must continue to do so. I think we must find a way to help connect what has been vibrant tradition with the emergent needs of our day—something I learned long ago from my teacher, Albert Outler. Many of us are living with operating models of organizations that are not sustainable for much longer (I think that some of us might be in denial about this, though); and it is the challenge facing each of us who is in a position of servant leadership to begin focusing and reframing how we are to be in order to affect constructively the wider world beyond that of higher education and selected ecclesial contexts.

Our school's mission is to equip effective leaders who can be thoughtful and committed to help change the world. The venues we serve are communities of faith, higher education (we have a Ph.D. program), and the wider world of peace and justice (including those in business who are looking to embody afresh social responsibility in the private sector).

What we've done very well for over a century is to help people think critically and at a very high order. Where we must now focus is to also help them find fresh and compelling ways to connect that learning with the sometimes unarticulated hopes and fears of the laity—and not just in church settings! Our biggest task is to form leaders who can themselves instill hope, connect the great story found in the gospel message to the stories of God's people, speak in very clear language, and make a winsome case for the urgency of helping work as stewards of God's whole creation for reconciliation and transformation.

The emergent church is already being born; my task as president and professor of ethics and leadership at one of our thirteen theological schools is to not merely track it from afar, or dissect it in academic settings or form a "strategic plan" to figure out what in the world to do with it, but rather to be out in the field (inviting trustees, faculty, staff, students, alums, ecclesial and community leaders, and still others to join us on the journey as well!) learning from and with those who are experimenting for the life-changing possibility of church rebirth and its impact on the whole world.

I am honored to have the leadership opportunity to work with colleagues to design and deliver modes of learning and formation that can nurture the complex world we are called to serve.