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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Vocation of the Dean

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Blog Series: Theological School Deans

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“When I grow up, I want to be Dean.” Somehow, I doubt that many of us who currently occupy the office of Chief Academic Officer said this when we were kids. I remember thinking about becoming a pastor or teacher, but not that. I certainly felt “called” to the ministry of teaching during college, so

starting down the path of graduate school and a career as a faculty member (teaching Hebrew Bible) became a reality. I felt equally called to become Dean (and still do). But, what about this role or position can I understand as my vocation, and not just my job?

As I imagine the variety of theological schools, I know that there are a variety of constructions of the office of dean, and just as many ways that the position of dean is filled. At a large number of institutions, the role is filled by a faculty member (typically, someone who is tenured and at least at the rank of associate professor) for a period of 3-5 years, with the option of another renewable term. The dean will then “return” to the faculty, and resume full-time teaching. At other schools, an individual may be hired as dean from another school and also have a teaching appointment on the faculty. When the service as dean is complete, the individual will then continue in the teaching position. At still other schools (like mine), the dean was an external hire coming as a faculty member from another seminary, but hired only as dean without a specific spot on the faculty. When I am no longer serving as Academic Dean, there is no guaranteed spot on the teaching faculty. I will almost certainly need to find another institution, if and when that time comes. In addition, I have no limit on my tenure as Dean (there is no term-appointment). I can remain Dean for as long as the institution will have me and I desire to stay. These various ways of becoming dean and the length of time that one

functions as dean all shape our view of what the “time as dean” means to us and how we see ourselves within the long-view of the institution that we serve.

I’ve heard it said (although I’d like to see the data) that about 80% of deans come as faculty from within the same institution. Most of these individuals serve for 3-5 year terms, with a many serving two terms. Coming to the end of my third year as Dean, I am just now beginning to figure things out and fill like I’m making strides at moving the institution forward, having built trust and seeing the fruits of hours invested in relationships with faculty, staff, other administrators, and constituencies. It would be very different for me to think about transitioning out of the role or back to the faculty at this point. Only now, am I deeply aware of what it means to live into “being Dean” as a vocation.

I want to recommend the two pieces in C(h)AOS Theory on the vocation of the Dean: “The Vocation of the Academic Dean,” by Stephen Graham and “The Vocational Call and Multiple Occupations of a CAO,” by Linda Bryan. In these two essays, the authors push CAOs to consider what it means to function in this pivotal position and view it vocationally, especially given its complexity and its typically defined time period. Rather than viewing the time spent as Dean as an interruption, distraction, “necessary evil,” or one’s turn in a thankless job, I have come to believe that this role serves a vital role in the functioning of the institution. My own sense of “call” to this has been just as strong and clear as when I felt called to pursue a PhD and teach.

I have been thankful for the CAOS group through ATS and for the Wabash Center Colloquy for Theological School Deans—I was involved in the first group. These opportunities have been invaluable in my own development as Dean and in owning my sense of vocation for this important work.

I would like Deans to share their stories about how they came to be Deans. This blog could be an excellent place to hear the wisdom and journeys of our colleagues.

We need to think about a variety of questions:

- By what process did that happen?
- What questions did you ask before agreeing to do so?
- Whose counsel did you seek?
- What gifts did you identify or did others identify in you for this role?
- How do you understand this role or position as a call or with a sense of vocation?
- What have you given up? What have you gained?
- In thinking about “professional development,” do you spend time and resources on development as Dean in addition to whatever academic discipline you call your own?

Embracing the Call to Dean: my story, briefly

As a member of the teaching faculty at a seminary, I thought about administrative work, and could see myself becoming a director of one of the graduate programs and even Academic Dean at some point. I had played a role in writing the recent Self-Study report and chaired one

of the subcommittee. I had always been told I was organized, detail-oriented, and able to function well in leadership roles. Then, I was contacted by the seminary for my denomination and asked to consider to apply for the position of Academic Dean. After many conversations with my wife and much prayer, we decided that I would apply. When I was called for an interview, I sat down with someone I trusted—the Director of Graduate Studies where I had completed my PhD—for a long talk. He gave me great advice and encouraged me in the type of questions to ask, things to consider, and really helped me see the “reality” of such positions that are not always clear. I knew that I would need to be intentional about continuing my scholarship, research, and teaching, but I also knew that one did not need to sacrifice it completely. I also wanted to see this as something more than temporary. Especially since I could not easily move back into a faculty position at the same institution, I felt a need to explore what this new position would mean to me as a vocation and as a call. I would be Dean for a long time. I have been intentional about reading about the role of the Dean and to taking opportunities for professional development as Dean. I have not given up my scholarship and teaching. I am still living into this role, but know that this journey is the right one for me. I can’t wait to see how the adventure will unfold in the years to come!

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2012/04/the-vocation-of-the-dean/>