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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Using Time

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“Using Time.” What a curious phrase. At best, it is aspirational. At worst, it is a wee bit oxymoric. Through ticking clocks and rotating calendars we all bear witness to time’s constant motion.^[1] Whether we use time well or not it keeps on moving. So that means the moment I began my work at as tenure track professor, my tenure clock started ticking. It is up to me to either use time to my advantage or allow my goals and aspirations to be consumed by it. My biggest challenge as one fresh out of Ph.D. school is that I was not trained to do most of the things I now have to do as a professor. My alma mater did a wonderful job preparing me to teach, research and write. They prepared me to teach by requiring me to take relevant courses, read all relevant materials, and pass comprehensive exams. I was mandated to develop syllabi, work as a TA at least one semester and provided an opportunity to develop and teach my own course. They prepared me to research and write by requiring me to take a course in research and writing, write a ton of research papers (including the dissertation) and providing excellent feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of my work. So when I graduated, I thought I was ready. But I wasn’t.

Nobody told me that teaching, researching, and writing are only a fraction of what a professor is called to do. Nobody told me I would spend so much of my time in committee meetings, experiencing and discovering institutional politics, advising students, attending faculty

meetings, making public presentations, actively participating in academic guilds and struggling to find time to do much of what I was trained to do – research and write. How on earth was I supposed to serve in all these capacities and do what I was actually trained to do? I had to make time my friend by using it to do everything I needed to do.

My best hope of figuring out how best to do my job was to tap into the wisdom of those who had already been doing it successfully. I asked one of my colleagues, who is also an excellent and productive scholar, how she finds time to write. She told me that she schedules time to write like she schedules every other task or duty. Once she puts writing on her schedule, she schedules everything else around it (even time with family and friends). Over lunch in my first semester, another one of my colleagues told me that though I would be asked to do a lot of work on various committees, there are certain tasks that are required and others that are optional. She made sure I knew the difference between the two. If she had not given me that advice, I would not have known that there are committee invitations to which I can say no. A third colleague, at the Academy of Homiletics, gave me yet one more piece of good advice. He told me that though I would be tempted to continually update my syllabi with new readings to demonstrate that I am on top of the latest scholarship in my field, I should resist. Rather than continually updating my syllabi, my time is better spent writing and doing research. And whenever I can make a new course out of my current research, I should. Armed with these sage pieces of advice, I began to routinely put time for research and writing on my schedule. I treat time I schedule for writing like I treat time I schedule for meetings and classes. Once it is on my calendar, I schedule everything else around it. When invitations to serve on various committees that are not required for me to serve on for tenure (even those that sound interesting), I often (though not always) say no. Though I love preaching and lecturing in the community, I try to balance those outside engagements with my institutional work so that I still have time to write. I have only done one update of my syllabi in the five years I have been teaching.

Because of this advice, I have been able to publish a book (a revision of my dissertation). I have also written two peer reviewed articles, more than a dozen lectionary articles, five book reviews, and four articles for Presbyterian lay publications. In another year and a half I will be going up for tenure (our tenure process is a wee bit long). If I make it, I will give credit where credit is due. It takes a village to raise a tenured scholar. My village taught me how “using time” effectively can help me reach my goals.

[1] Simo Salmela, “What is Time? *Science Daily*, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2005/04/050415115227.htm> (accessed December 30, 2012).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2013/02/using-time/>

