

A HISTORY OF WINEBRENNER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN THREE MOVEMENTS



*If Pastor John [Winebrenner] could return today,...
What would he think of this, our work?
He would marvel at our abundance
And yet see beyond . . . into men's souls
And find there, the same deep hunger
And hear the same insistent call:
Preach Jesus--O the glory of preaching Jesus.
--Rev. Roy Schreiner, D.D., from *Historical Pageant*
(1960)*

Today we are reminded that the motivating principle behind Winebrenner Theological Seminary is the classic Pietist call to proclaim the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. John Winebrenner embodied this passion in his life and ministry and so has the Seminary that bears his name. Like any human organization, the school has experienced its share of highs and lows. It has moved back and forth, literally and figuratively, in its identity and mission. If, indeed, 'Pastor John' came back for periodic visits, he would be amazed and, on occasion, perplexed at the changes that have marked its sixty-one years of history. But he would also recognize today that the cross that stands at the heart of the new Main Street building symbolizes an enduring desire to address the "same deep hunger" of the ages.

There are many ways to tell the story of this dynamic institution, but perhaps the most appropriate theme on the occasion we now celebrate is that of movement. How have the three major relocations of the Seminary reflected new self-understandings and inspired new visions of service to the church and the world? While the school has demonstrated what former President Gale Ritz once called "creative and daring and imaginative faith" in each chapter of its history, how have the moves, in particular, repositioned the institution for effective training and formation of servant leaders in the church? Let us consider the history of Winebrenner as a story in three 'movements' . . .

The first movement, from the Findlay 'College' campus to new educational facilities at College First Church of God, reminds us that history often moves full-circle; the new Main Street building is only a few yards from the birthplace of the Seminary. After its founding on the College's campus as a graduate school of divinity in 1942, Winebrenner struggled to find firm footing amidst the eruptions of a world war, a chronic shortage of students, and the inevitable challenges of piecing together a curriculum with part-time faculty. Dr. Eugene Eakin and his successor, Gale Ritz, worked tirelessly as deans to raise the profile of the school within its sponsoring denomination, the Churches of God (CGGC), but did not succeed in winning full support until 1950. Just as the fledgling Seminary moved to College Church, it became the beneficiary of new educational standards for ordination within the denomination. The move to College Church also

represented a new opportunity to address the urgent needs of post-war America, especially the growing demand for well-equipped ministers within and beyond the Churches of God denomination.

New facilities and a new faculty enabled Winebrenner to implement a full slate of courses designed to equip students with a “keen understanding” of the Christian faith (1955-57 *Catalog*). This included an eclectic assortment of courses like “The Ecumenical Church” and



“Christian Symbolism and Architecture” (benefiting, no doubt, from College Church’s ornate Neo-Gothic design). While the atmosphere of the place was decidedly academic in tone, a “warmly evangelical” spirit prevailed within and beyond the classrooms. Over time, the move offered an opportunity to achieve a distinctive identity and sense of purpose that drew from a variety of ecclesiastical strands and theological traditions. ‘Unity in Diversity’--that popular and overused phrase we hear so often today--accurately applies to Winebrenner during these adolescent years. Its resiliency was soon tested in 1960 as accreditation concerns at Findlay College called for a formal separation and re-incorporation of the Seminary as an autonomous institution. Just as it began to adjust, rather unexpectedly, to this new status, the small but thriving school suddenly faced the prospect of another relocation. In just a few short years, the second movement of Winebrenner Theological Seminary was underway.



An unexpected donation of land on East Melrose made it possible for the Seminary to fully realize its independence in 1962. Harriette Ritz, wife of Winebrenner’s second dean and first president, Gale Ritz (serving 1949-1963), remembers the new location as a rather barren place “in a field,” unremarkable in every way except that it overlooked downtown Findlay. (Anyone from Pennsylvania must surely be amazed that any plot of ground in Hancock County can

overlook anything!) Soon, however, a campus appeared and a vibrant community filled its offices and classrooms. New horizons gave the Seminary an opportunity to “think big”--at least that is how the school’s *Catalog* captured the mood of the place. Innovative programs were launched, especially in the arena of continuing education, and as many as

six new academic committees were formed out of only three full-time and two part-time faculty. Ritz, in particular, was determined to bring the school into direct contact with “the remarkable change and growing complexity of all of life” which the Twentieth Century had witnessed. His successors, Richard Kern (1963-1970), Emil Holzhauser (1970-1972), and William T. Jackson (1972-1977), all worked to expand the program and reach new publics. In 1973, one member of the community described it as “small, vital, and fresh, like a growing plant, . . . ripe for new ideas.” Indeed, the barren field had become fertile ground for “intelligent conversation with the world,” according to Gale Ritz. He and others demonstrated the kind of “consecrated intelligence” that ministers-in-training seemed to require in the increasingly complicated and conflicted decades of the 1960s and 1970s.

All was not well, however, at Winebrenner during the “Melrose Years.” Internally, the school struggled with low enrollments, meager finances, and inadequate library facilities. Not surprisingly, lack of full accreditation was also a major concern. In his Conference Report of 1975, President Jackson clearly recognized how interrelated these issues were: “The logic by which the Seminary can grow is very simple: full accreditation--more students; more students--more income; more income--a stronger academic program; with full accreditation, and a stronger academic program--the easier to attract funds from foundations, and from the business community.” In his final years, Jackson also realized that the Seminary needed to refocus its energies on the needs and expectations of the Churches of God. The theological diversity of Winebrenner faculty did not immediately translate into the kind of “stronger academic program” expected by Jackson or the largely evangelical constituency beyond the institution. At a winter retreat for faculty in 1976, it was generally agreed that the future of the Seminary “in large measure lies with the goals and priorities of the denomination.” As a student, Dr. Leslie Lightner recalls considerable “sifting and sorting” during these years and the slow and sometimes painful adjustment in personnel and program towards the mainstream evangelical current of the day.

The arrival of George Weaver, Winebrenner’s next president (1977-1988), and the provision in 1981 of new facilities, especially a library, at the Center for Christian Ministries were essential ingredients in the evangelical resurgence of the Seminary and the rebuilding of strong relations with the Churches of God. Still lacking full accreditation, efforts were also doubled in addressing the concerns of agencies like the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Meanwhile, the realities of an emerging “market place” in theological education were sinking in. Winebrenner had to learn how to promote itself and this, in turn, required a sharper definition of its mission. New faculty, development initiatives, and revised curricula focused on the training of “servant leaders” for the church. “Historic pietism” provided the formal theological identity of the school-- “that the personal experience of regeneration is a divine act and the sole means by which alienated humankind is reconciled to God in Christ” (1985-1988 *Catalog*). Clearly, the Seminary, under Weaver’s direction, was intent on reviving its evangelical heritage even as it sought to retain a measure of the diversity and “ecumenical atmosphere” of earlier administrations.

Winebrenner's next president, Dave Draper, built on the achievements of George Weaver when the latter retired due to failing health in 1988. Already serving in recruitment and development capacities under his predecessor, Draper was eager to define even more precisely the core values and strategic goals of the Seminary. At a faculty meeting in the fall of 1988, he asked very pointed questions: "(1) How has pastoral ministry changed in the last twenty years? (2) What will ministry look like in the year 2000? (3) What are the characteristics of a spiritually mature and professionally equipped person in the year 2000? (4) What hinders WTS from accomplishing its mission? (5) What can WTS do to fulfill its mission?" New initiatives were launched concerning trustee development, 'practical' instruction, field education, biblical and spiritual formation, and curricular integration. Draper liked to quote from former professor Hillard Camp: "Pray as if everything depended on God. Work as if everything depended on you." At a time of growing concern over accreditation, Draper added, "We need more of both." Prayers were finally answered and years of effort--fifty in all!--were rewarded in 1991 when the Seminary was fully recognized by national and regional accrediting agencies. With new confidence and hope, Draper told Winebrenner trustees that he did not want the Seminary to merely survive but "be responsive to the Spirit's guidance for the remainder of the 90s." The most immediate and tangible sign of this responsiveness came in the form of increased enrollments, which, in turn, prompted new thinking about location and facilities. Soon, another movement was being considered . . .

The "Melrose Years" were noteworthy for giving Winebrenner Theological Seminary a mature sense of identity and mission, but in the late 1990s, it was increasingly evident that a new era was about to begin in the history of the institution. Deep and enduring commitments to address the spiritual needs of the contemporary world, expressed years earlier by Gale Ritz and Richard Kern, combined with the more recent recovery of evangelical activism. Conversations became more animated, visions were articulated, and intense discussion on the future emerged. Dave Draper was convinced that to find a place on the "leading edge" of theological education, the Seminary had to contemplate the possibility of yet another move. From a practical standpoint, more space would be needed, especially if the Seminary enrollment was to surpass a hundred students. After an invigorating conversation with President Ken Zirkle of the University of Findlay in the Spring of 1997, it also became apparent that Winebrenner, from an educational standpoint, needed to reposition itself in a place where the social, cultural, and, most importantly, spiritual realities of a post-Christian world were more readily apparent. While the Seminary would remain instrumental first and foremost to the Churches of God--a relationship most tangibly expressed in its proximity to denominational headquarters on East Melrose--the school must also respond to the sense of call and opportunity at its historic birthplace.



John Winebrenner once observed, “to mix with the people is the way to learn to understand them.” This wisdom underlies the latest move of Winebrenner Theological Seminary to its spacious new facility on the University of Findlay campus. In keeping with its dynamic history--a story that can now be told in terms of *three* movements--may this be a place where “consecrated intelligence” (Ritz), “critical thinking” (Kern), “dialogue across a broad spectrum” (Jackson), “excellence in the training of God’s servants” (Weaver), and the future of a “visionary church” (Draper) are found . . . and all for the sake of the Gospel and the “same deep hunger” it has addressed across the ages.

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