

Academic Framework

As noted in the centennial history of Eastern Mennonite University, Eastern Mennonite Seminary began, early in the twentieth century, with the development of “an academy that would provide Bible training and high school courses to prepare young people for church-related activities.”^[1] Early in EMU’s second century, the seminary, like most North American institutions of graduate theological education, carries out its mission in a “world . . . changing at a rapid rate.”^[2] As the seminary prepares for the decennial reaccreditation process with the Association of Theological Schools, ATS itself is undergoing a major revision of its standards, recognizing vast economic and ecclesial challenges facing theological higher education. These revisions note diversifying models of schools (beyond the traditional “free-standing institution”), and accounts of “quality” less tied to “residential education and background preparation of theological students.”^[3]

Historians of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement underline its deep engagement with Scripture, while noting that many of its early leaders were not well educated theologically in keeping with the standards of that time. Commitment to biblical study and a deepening appreciation for both historical and theological biblical scholarship have shaped Mennonite theological education in recent decades. The number and kinds of courses offered at EMS reflect these historic values and are seem to be reflected in the seminary curriculum’s first guiding principle, throughout its several iterations.

While graduate theological education is the broad title for the kind of work in which students, faculty and staff engage at EMS, the discipline(s) of theology per se have not been simply sketched out in our curriculum. Practical theology and missiology are represented. Systematic theology is visible although not central. As the seminary attracts students from a broader range of theological and ecclesial settings we must consider the theological foundations, and the forms of practical settings, our curriculum should engage, whether in rural or urban settings, in multi-cultural and multi-religious communities, and among youth, the elderly, and the otherly abled.

Anabaptist commitments to economic sharing and pacifism have flowered into contemporary emphases on Christian ministry as oriented toward the work of peace and justice in contexts of political, economic, racial, ethnic, and gender oppression. Energetic outreach was characteristic of 16th-century Anabaptist and 18th-century Methodist forebears. While earlier leaders at EMS had strong personal ties to traditional Mennonite mission endeavors, we have less actively engaged new understandings of Christian mission within our curriculum.

As ATS leaders have proclaimed for over a decade, and is re-stated in the revised standards, “A student’s intellectual, spiritual, human, and/or vocational formation is what theological schools do best.”^[4] Mennonite theological educators, along with ecumenical colleagues, have focused more and more attention on ancient Christian practices and current spiritual expressions that can sustain both the life of the mind and the activism of faithful bodies. Along with many others in this work, EMS faculty are giving renewed attention, built on such vocational formation, to developing an awareness of the formation of ministerial identities. The EMS Formation curriculum has, over the past decade, been perhaps the most frequently considered and renewed of all the aspects of the EMS curriculum and continues to be underlined as one of four guiding principles of the curriculum.

CURRICULUM APPROACH

The Association of Theological Schools standard on curriculum (current in 2020, not revised) states: “In a theological school, the overarching goal is the development of theological understanding, that is, aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to a responsible life in faith. Comprehended in this overarching goal are others such as deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of a faith community, and acquiring the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry in that community. These goals, and the processes and practices leading to their attainment, are normally intimately interwoven and should not be separated from one another.”

A curriculum is a structured plan designed to lead to the desired outcomes. As those called to ministry enter theological education with goals and responsibilities whose shape is very different from a traditional full-time sequenced curriculum plan, EMS emphasizes that students in all degree programs begin their work with the required first-year Formation in God’s Story class. This class encourages deeper awareness of God’s presence and action in relationship to the personal histories that have led students to seminary, and prepares them with beginning knowledge and skills that will enhance their academic and spiritual progress.

The particulars of each program offered (see MDiv, MACL, and MAR catalog descriptions) assume different possible paths toward completion of a degree. However, the seminary curriculum requires that all students engage with biblical reading and interpretation, fundamental Christian theological understandings and questions, a broad sense of the history of the Christian movement (as well as specific knowledge about the history of their own faith community), exposure to particular ministry settings, and practice in ministering skills. To provide the framework for our curriculum, we design and assess our work around these guiding principles:

1. Wise Interpreters: We become wise as we faithfully interpret biblical texts in conversation with theological, historical, practical, and ‘life’ texts-- within and on behalf of the church and the world.
2. Mature Practitioners: We mature as we covenant within communities of faith to be formed in Christ-likeness by engaging in personal and communal practices of prayer, discernment, worship and service. Mature practitioners conduct and identify themselves as ministering persons in both their doing and their being.
3. Discerning Communicators: We grow as discerning communicators as we appropriately contextualize the Gospel, engaging persons of diverse cultures and faiths winsomely, and yet without uncritical accommodation.
4. Transformational Leaders: We practice ministerial and public leadership that is transformative when we integrate wise interpretation, mature practice, and discerning communication to engage God’s saving mission in the world, embodied in Jesus Christ.

Within this curricular matrix, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, identify performance goals, seek constructive feedback, and grow competent in their chosen ministry vocation(s).

[1] Krabill 2017, x. See also “History,” seminary catalog <https://resources.emu.edu/confluence/display/SemCat/History>

[2] Yong, *Beyond the Evangelical-Ecumenical Divide* (2014), 87.

[3] Yamada, *Colloquy Online* (2019), 1-2

[4] Yamada, 2.