

The theologically trained organizer

The most exciting horizons in theological education lie at its intersection with community organizing.

by [Aaron Stauffer](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

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In *The End of Theological Education*, Ted Smith starts by telling the story of a group of Lane Seminary students who came to be known as the Lane Rebels. In 1834, the students at the Cincinnati school met for nine straight nights and debated whether they should support the immediate emancipation of enslaved Black people. They also debated the question of “colonization,” the movement to deport free Black

Americans to Africa. The students sided with immediate abolitionism and against colonization—and they took multiple actions to pressure prominent minister Lyman Beecher, Lane’s president at the time, and the school’s board to do the same. The Lane Rebels’ actions are a testament to the deep connection between the classroom and power.

In short, Smith begins his book on theological education with a story about community organizing.

This should not surprise us. Theological education as a process of formation and transformation has never been restricted to the brick-and-mortar version of what many understand now as educational training for the ministerial profession, even though this is the predominant model found in today’s seminaries and divinity schools. Smith acknowledges this, while also helping readers recognize the powerful influence this professional model has on what we imagine ministry to look like for the congregation, the judicatory, right on up to the denomination. Getting an MDiv has long signaled gaining competence as a professional minister.

That is, until recently. For myriad social, political, and economic reasons, congregations and seminaries are realizing that systemic change is necessary. In the last decade or so, many schools have engaged the topic of community organizing, either in their curriculum or in their lifelong learning programs. Union Theological Seminary, Drew Theological School, Boston College, Union Presbyterian Seminary, Duke Divinity School, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Eden Theological Seminary, Saint Paul School of Theology, Phillips Theological Seminary, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, and the Graduate Theological Union—among others—all offer either courses, certificates, or five-day training programs in community organizing. This shift suggests a recognition that the dominant model of theological education is ill-suited for our time.

It’s significant that Smith begins his story of theological education with an example of student organizing—in part because Smith has a notably influential position in the conversation on theological education. His book is part of a series that caps a multimillion-dollar project funded by the Lilly Endowment: Theological Education between the Times. The work of this project—and the stellar authors who produced books through this series—will continue to shape the conversation on viable models of theological education for years to come.

Looking outside the dominant model of theological education, however, shows how well matched theological education and community organizing have been and still are. Indeed, the most exciting horizons in theological education lie at its intersection with community organizing.

Some of these frontiers are being explored from within the dominant model, but not without their complications. Several years ago in front of a packed room at the American Academy of Religion, the late organizer and Catholic sister Christine Stephens, then national codirector of the Industrial Areas Foundation, opened a session focused on community organizing by saying something along the lines of “You know, if seminaries did their jobs, we wouldn’t have to be training community organizers.” Organizers often say things to provoke a response, and this certainly stirred the room, but there is a degree of truth to her statement.

Stephens’s comment came from decades of organizing experience in Texas, where the IAF is well known for its seminars—weekend gatherings of its organizers with local leaders of its affiliates from across the state. The seminars typically engage a guest author or speaker, and while the guest is given time for a lecture, the overall approach is deeply dialogical: organizers and local leaders do as much of the teaching as the ostensibly expert guest does. I was trained as an IAF organizer in Texas, and I remember clearly the importance of these seminars—and how crucial the clergy caucus was in constructing our affiliates’ local strategy. We met regularly with clergy to study the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Gustavo Gutiérrez or the latest papal encyclical.

The IAF is one of four national networks that practice broad-based community organizing; the others are the Gamaliel Foundation, Faith in Action, and the Direct Action and Research Training Center. These networks have captured the public’s imagination as to what organizing is ever since Barack Obama told his organizing story in *Dreams from My Father*. But communities were organizing themselves long before Saul Alinsky founded the IAF in Chicago in 1940. The specific tradition of broad-based community organizing works by creating community-based alliances to advocate for social, political, racial, and economic justice. “Broad-based” means that these groups are organizations of organizations: schools, houses of worship, labor unions, and others join the affiliate organization in order to build political and economic power for working people’s communities.

For years it seemed that Alinsky and his protégés were the only ones interested in writing about organizing. Now, things have changed: an interdisciplinary field has emerged that spans religious studies, theology, sociology, and politics. Community organizing certificates, training, and programs exist in a whole host of seminaries and divinity schools. Especially since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, schools are attempting to create spaces where racial and economic justice and power building are bound up with theological learning and practice.

Some of these are efforts to meet the shifting needs of students and congregations through lifelong learning and continuing education efforts—not new academic master’s or doctoral degrees. The best histories of lifelong and continuing education efforts in seminaries and divinity schools point to the 1960s as the origin, with the founding of the Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry (now the Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry) and the National Organization for Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy. Of course, individual pastors and leaders have long exercised their own initiative in continuing their education on their own.

The current rise in lifelong learning and continuing education programs was made possible by the adult education movement institutionalized in the YMCA and the Chautauqua assemblies. Done well and in communities of praxis, lifelong learning and continuing education programs can be countercultural to the dominant model of theological education: they displace the “sage on the stage” and help seminaries reconsider their understanding of mastery and expertise. Smith’s Lane Rebels exemplify this: here is a group of novices willing to undergo intense debate and reasoning that culminate in a clear action of protest and coordinated pressure on their school’s administration.

Adopting a community organizing model brings some challenging shifts. One is the shift in pedagogy. Traditional classrooms are laden with often unarticulated power dynamics through the expert-apprentice model. The student-teacher relationship in the traditional classroom is democratic only insofar as students have a say regarding grades, discussion, or the everyday happenings in this relationship. That’s why it’s important to have formal or informal avenues for student voices to be heard, in and outside the classroom. Students who have no say find themselves in dominating relationships. Expertise is not a collectively crafted enterprise.

This is the opposite of what community organizing strives for. Theological education in community organizing strives to be democratic: ordinary people are participants in whatever expertise amounts to, and they come together to solve their problems together. With this shift in pedagogy comes a shift in conceptions of expertise and mastery. Gone is the sage on the stage, and in its place is a community journeying together to solve its own problems.

This leads to a second shift, which has to do with the location of the classroom. One way to express the dominant model's mindset of location is "If you build it, they will come." The idea is that participants will come to wherever the right program or offering is; the key is simply effective communications. There is a certain logic here. Some learning and community work clearly are more effective in centralized, in-person gatherings.

Community organizing models take instead an accompaniment mindset, one of journeying to and with communities. (Some cocurricular centers, such as St. Mellitus College in the UK and the Center for Asian American Christianity at Princeton Theological Seminary, have adopted such an approach.) This sort of accompaniment can be physical, where the classroom literally migrates to the students, but it is often virtual, as communities are formed through digital organizing strategies. Here, schools can play the role of a networker, reweaving the fabric between religious and community organizations by intentionally connecting individuals around topics of common concern. The benefit is that this model assumes shifts in pedagogy and expertise that fit well with the content.

One such example of this alternative model is Solidarity Circles, a program that I developed at the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Three years ago I facilitated focus groups with roughly 100 pastors, faith leaders, and community organizers from across the country. During these conversations, I asked them what sort of learning opportunities they were hungry for, in what delivery method, and on what topics. What I discovered through these conversations was that these leaders are generally over-resourced when it comes to Bible studies but under-connected in terms of peer networks that can serve as laboratories for social change.

The people I talked to felt isolated and were hungry for big ideas. But more than that, they wanted to be placed in specific relationships, and for more than just a book group: they wanted to engage in specific forms of discussion around key ideas

that mattered to them and their vocation, such as how community organizing strategies help them faithfully embrace new economic frameworks like the solidarity economy and how this changes the very idea of church. They wanted to engage in deep discussion and power analysis with peers who could help them develop and sustain the competencies they needed for social change in their context.

We deploy a case study method generated by participants to help them identify the operating concepts and assumptions that guide their efforts for change. Together with their peers they test out new concepts, new frameworks, and new practices for building political and economic power in their communities. Now in its third year, Solidarity Circles is a leadership training program that equips participants with competencies in social, political, and economic change grounded in theology.

The theological education landscape has always been more diverse than its curricular options. But the rise in programs and learning opportunities to explore one's deep calling to community organizing presents challenges to the dominant model. Students have long found ways—inside and outside the academy—to explore the relationship between theology and power building. Perhaps the most important challenge is how programs and certificates can be built by seminaries and divinity schools so as to establish trust with communities organizing for their collective liberation. There is no single solution here, but issues of democratic voice, pedagogy, and location are key. We need a diverse institutional ecology that can support a broad range of communities of praxis, exercising their own power in their theological education journey while solving concrete problems.