

Focus on becoming the authentic people of God, not just institutional success

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IRVING—Theological education should help “the whole people of God” move toward maturity as the body of Christ, educational specialist Linda Cannell told participants at the [B.H. Carroll Theological Institute’s](#) fall colloquy.

Churches need to recognize the difference between institutional success and helping members live authentically as the people of God, said Cannell of [North Park Theological Seminary](#) in Chicago.



“There is a difference between the church as institution and the church as the mystery of God—the people of God,” she said. “We need solid organizational structures, but

that is not all the church is.”

If the church fails to “deal with mystery,” it becomes subject to the same vulnerabilities common to all institutions, she noted. But by opening itself to the mystery of God, churches gain access to grace, redemption, hope and the gifts of the Spirit, she insisted.

“If we lose the mystery, we’ve lost everything,” Cannell said.

Becoming the people of God

When churches focus on becoming the people of God, they are free to ask about organizational processes that help the congregation foster awareness of identity, encourage reflection and provide opportunities for members to embody God's character—not just focus on content delivery.

"We have accepted as normative models of organization that often do little to help congregations become the people who demonstrate the character and behavior God expects," she asserted.

"The notion that we have to ask different questions, allow time for character to develop and give priority to spiritual over institutional goals seems idealistic in the extreme. Yet understanding their identity and purpose as the people of God—and learning to live authentically in relation to that understanding—are non-negotiable outcomes for the people of God."

Theological education needs to change

Churches need people with different competencies, including organizational skills, but those people do not necessarily need to be ministerial staff. That means theological education needs to change, she insisted.

"The conventional theological curriculum—now generally considered to be hopelessly overcrowded with courses and programs—and an instructional design that is held captive by schedules and the pressures to get courses done are just not adequate for the sort of formation that is required of pastoral leadership," Cannell said.

"The theological curriculum, then, must accomplish more than to teach leaders how to build competency in organizational management applied to churches."

Both formal education and informal learning initiatives can flourish around

a vision of theological education for the whole people of God, she said.

Developing nations

Stable and structured systems of theological education established more than 100 years ago in the West do not fit developing nations, Cannell observed.

“In much of the majority world, instability is a persisting reality,” she said. Persistently unstable environments call for flexible structures, she added.

“International partnerships fuel innovation,” Cannell said.