OPEN YOUR MOUTH, STICK OUT YOUR TONGUE, AND SAY AHHH!

By Jay Marshall, Dean of Earlham School of Religion

For the last two years, ESR has worked diligently on a self-study in preparation for its periodic comprehensive evaluation by its accrediting agency, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). It is in some ways similar to a routine medical exam, peppered with a variety of questions, pokes, and inspections, concluding with recommendations or requirements for improved institutional health. Ten years earlier at the conclusion of the previous comprehensive evaluation, I joked that if I were smart, I would leave before the next visit! That did not happen, and the visiting team from ATS came to campus September 19-22.

Preparation for these visits demands much of an institution’s energy. Honestly, over time the process wears on an institution and it can be difficult to maintain a positive attitude. Even so, the self-study is a valuable opportunity to assess how the school is doing and identify present and future challenges to mission and operations.

As I reflect on this recently completed accreditation cycle, a few issues merit our acknowledgement and consideration.

First, this process reinforced my perception of how theological education is changing. When I accepted the position of dean several years ago, the main attraction was the opportunity to be involved in an educational program that supported ministry to and among the Religious Society of Friends. I understood the theological suspicion that existed with regard to ESR’s education—too liberal for some and...
"I relished the idea of helping form and nurture individuals who would serve, minister, and strengthen the meetings and communities where they served. That is still true, but much is changing. In particular, where students come from, what they are interested in, and where they serve is being reshaped."
"As cultural shifts and battles work their way into the collective social conscience, the issues they represent will often work their way into discussions about emphases in educational programs and even the standards to which schools are held accountable."

I initially underestimated the incessant lapping of the waves of culture on our seminary shoreline. ESR is less of an ivory tower and more like a beach coping with the effects of weather and erosion to its well-kept beaches. The eternal hope may be that theology reforms or transforms culture, but clearly the reverse is frequently true. As the U.S. Quaker culture reconfigures and, in many places, shrinks, faring well in the larger religious and social environment becomes even more essential for the seminary. In many ways, that is appropriate for a model of Christianity that chooses to be as inclusive as possible without sacrificing its identity and integrity, but the change ripples throughout the institution. Identity will be affected; integrity may, at times, feel compromised.

One place where the larger forces behind these changes are most evident is in the role that religion and religious institutions play in North America. Some fret that the Church is in decline. Others claim the culture is becoming less religious. Others employ the term “spirituality” as distinct from “religious” to rethink the church and the practice of ministry.

However one slices and serves the data, it leads to challenging conclusions concerning recruitment of new students, cultivation of new donors, and placement of graduates. These changes are apparent in the conversations with prospective students. Prior religious experience, current affiliation, articulation of belief and calling, and aspirations for ministry are a few of the areas where this is evident. One impact to the accreditation process is that schools such as ESR are now asked to report on “student placement” upon graduation. There is growing pressure for graduate schools to develop a comprehensive student enrollment plan that extends from admission to graduation. Schools are expected to play a more active role in student placement, which of course is not easy with a decentralized group like Quakers or, even more, with other denominations in which the school has fewer connections and influence.

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directed toward the founding denomination? If this initiative succeeds, could the result mean that all seminaries represent a liberal Protestant perspective, stripped clean of theological diversity that gives breadth, character, and options within U. S. theological education? These issues are a reminder that eventually government initiatives that channel through the Department of Education find their way into the theological arena via the long arm of accrediting agencies. We can only hope the powers that be do not overextend their reach! Many will ferociously defend a professor’s right to academic freedom in the classroom; in a similar fashion, consideration of theological freedom and mission of the institution merits attention as well. None of that is to suggest that schools should not wrestle with these issues, but it is to name a complexity that needs to be factored into the conversation.

Every school must be attentive to navigating these tidal forces. Successful navigation involves determining when to be prophetic and when to be repentant; when to cling to tradition and when to recognize that new insights merit change; how to best prepare students for the world in which they will serve, while also respecting the tradition we claim to support.

A second change—speaking of the long arm of the law—is the preoccupation (perhaps obsession) with the assessment of learning and programming that has been imposed upon higher education by the federal government. Seminaries are not exempt from this trend, nor should they be. I liken it to quality control efforts in the manufacturing world. The ultimate goal is to ensure that schools deliver quality instruction and that students receive the education for which they have paid. ESR approached the process as an opportunity to become better teachers and to improve our program. Each of these has occurred. However, like so many worthy initiatives where zeal outpaces common sense, over time it feels as though the school is here for the process rather than the mission.

Many institutions opt to hire a director of assessment to design and implement this process. For a new hire saddled with this objective, soliciting faculty interest or engagement is often their greatest challenge. ESR chose to work as a faculty of the whole in designing an assessment model as a means of cultivating participation, understanding, and buy-in. Near the end of that process, a committee was formed to oversee and implement the model. It is a model that is working for us. Many times the temptation is to collect reams of data only to be overwhelmed by figures and the task of interpreting them. ESR is attempting to hold true to the adage, “In all things, moderation” without compromising the quality of the assessment. Our goal has been a straightforward and sustainable model of assessment. Already we have gained useful insights from these efforts, but it is clearly a long term, if not never-ending, project.

A third shift ESR observes is in the arena of finances and the seminary with at least two dimensions. The first is the financial viability of the school itself. Accreditors have been vigilant in their investigation of schools’ fiscal strength, particularly since the market meltdown of 2008. The last several months have produced numerous headlines of seminary mergers, closures, or redefined missions and programs. Operational costs often exceed funds garnered from tuition. Many of the usual pipelines for new students have dried up, putting pressure on tuition revenue. Contributions from denominational bodies are often in decline. Discovering new models for generating necessary funds is on the minds of most of our peers. The success of student recruitment plays an enormous role in any school’s future, as will finding new friends with the vision and means to support the school financially. Fortunately, ESR is on solid ground financially, but the challenge of recruiting future students and donors looms large.

The second dimension of the finance theme considers the question from a justice perspective. Given the potential earnings of persons in ministry, how much can a school charge for its educational program? Can a school reasonably ask persons to commit between thirty and forty thousand dollars to a program for which little monetary reward may be the outcome? How aggressively does a school discourage educational loans, even if a student qualifies for them? Questions such as these raise important questions about new models for seminary education, and equally important, new models for funding ministry.

An official response from ATS will not be available until late February. For now, suffice it to say that the visit went well. As I said before, I will say again: “If I am smart, I will leave before the next visit!”
The 7th Annual ESR Leadership Conference attracted an audience from across the U.S. and around the globe to immerse themselves in conversation and learning around the theme of entrepreneurial leadership. The Quaker vision of universal ministry within and beyond the boundaries of the “Church” unfolds naturally to support the calls and leadings for those whose vision of ministry beckons to unusual places and unconventional methods.

Storytelling alum Pete Sebert (M. Min. '73) helped establish the tone of the conference with a terrific tale of his own journey developed around the theme of “whispers on the wind.” His authentic candor and humility created space for others to give voice to the whispers in their own life and the work to which they sense God is calling them. Samir Selmanović, known to ESR through his non-profit Faith House Manhattan, captivated the audience with stories about his own work to minister and innovate in a multicultural/multifaith world. In the process, he convincingly stressed the joys of risk along with the importance of clarifying and committing to the next small step in one’s vision.

A day of richly informative workshops stretched and renewed attendees. Innovators, pastors, seasoned Friends of various ages shared their expertise and experience in service to those interested in developing their skills. From web design to microbusiness models, opportunities for learning were abundant. The day ended with a gift of music from Paulette Meier, whose use of Quaker plainsong refreshed and inspired the group. Christina Repoley spoke to the group on Sunday, describing the long journey from seed to flourishing organization, providing a clear, recent example of how an entrepreneurial model can succeed when the timing is right.

The energy experienced during this weekend in the conversational buzz and the enthusiasm of networking suggests that this year’s event tapped into a live concern for many people. The entrepreneurial theme may well rise in importance for those answering a call to minister and serve.

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Jay Marshall preached at West River Friends (IYM) and Greensboro First Friends (NCYM-FUM) in April. In May, he offered a new course at ESR, Leadership with a Biblical Influence. He attended Friends General Conference in July, offering a 5-day workshop titled “Reading the Bible as Critic, Devotee, and Friend.” He attended a portion of the Quaker Men Triennial in Cedar Rapids, IA. In August, he presented the Bible study at the New Association of Friends Annual Fall Gathering. He spoke at Pittsburgh Monthly Meeting in October as they celebrated 50 years in their current meetinghouse.

Stephanie Crumley-Effinger’s travels in the spring of 2016 for internship site visits with students in the Supervised Ministry program included going to Florida to see Gail Atchison (serving in ministry in a Metropolitan Community Church congregation), to Chicago to be with Marcia Nelson (organizing winter farmers markets with diverse congregations), Michigan with Kristin Bowen (assisting the priest at an Episcopal church), Indianapolis to experience Sue Flynn (ministry with a Unitarian Universalist congregation), central Pennsylvania to observe Martin Melville (making podcasts of interviews with people in the forest industry), and Virginia to be with Rita Willett (chaplaincy at a women’s prison). Stephanie always finds it rewarding to witness the student interns in their contexts of ministry, meet with their supervisors and site liaisons, and, where possible, get acquainted with members of their families.

This fall, in September Stephanie led a day of renewal for Community Friends Meeting, Cincinnati, on “Understanding and Applying the Quaker Understanding of Gospel Order.” In October she is serving on the Pastoral Care Team for the Quaker Women in Public Ministry Conference. In November she will be part of the MCC ordination service for recent alumna Gail Atchison.

In June, Grace Ji-Sun Kim was a plenary speaker at the Christian Feminism Today Conference, Indianapolis, and also at the Assembly of the Council for World Mission (CWM), Jeju, South Korea. She was a plenary closing speaker at Duke Divinity School’s Summer Institute for Reconciliation. She was a Cohort Leader for Postdoctoral Fellows at the Louisville Institute in June and also in October.

In July, she did a book talk on “Embracing the Other” at the Presbyterian Ministry at the UN and participated in “Feminist Studies in Religion” Leadership Meeting in Connecticut. She preached at various churches like Ninth Hour Covenant Church, Chicago; Shawnee Presbyterian Church; and First Presbyterian Church, Stroudsburg.

In September, Grace attended the World Council of Churches Working Group Meeting on Climate Change and participated in a book launch of her latest book, Making Peace with the Earth, in Geneva, Switzerland. She participated in the American Academy of Religion’s Board Meeting and Program Committee meeting in San Antonio. Grace was also the Plenary Speaker at The Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU) held at Nyack College in New York. She did a book talk on “Embracing the Other” and preached at First Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, Indiana. She was also the Plenary Speaker, Christian Community Development Association’s Women of Color Post Conference Retreat in LA.

In October, Grace was the Oen Lecturer at Concordia University and lectured on her book, Embracing the Other. In November, she was a World Council of Churches delegate to COP22 in Morocco. She also gave three papers at the Annual American Academy of Religion in San Antonio. She also delivered a paper “Korean American Women and the Church” at Queens College, NYC. She gave a paper, “Making Peace with the Earth” at the PTCA International Conference, Seoul, Korea. Grace also wrote a TIME article, “Motherhood Shouldn’t Be a Competitive Sport” and cowrote “God is a Neoliberal Centrist” for TIME. She wrote three book chapters, “Engaging Race” in Engage: A Theological Field Education Toolkit edited by Matthew Floding; “Land, Exile and the Spirit of God,” in Always Being Reformed edited by David Jensen; and “Ecclesiology and Ecology” in The Church in God’s Household edited by Clive W. Ayre & Ernst M. Conradie. She also wrote two articles, “Hope for Peace in a Broken World” Religion Journal, Fall 9 (2016): 136-146, and “Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Asian American Women’ Feminist Theology, 24(3): 260-274.
Steve Angell has just been offered a contract by Brill Publishing in Leiden to co-edit a 20 strong online and print book series in Quaker studies, with four titles appearing in each of the next five years. Brill is one of the very top theological publishers in the world (they have been publishing since 1683). These volumes will be part of their Brill Research Perspectives series, offering cutting edge scholarship and in-depth literature reviews in chosen topics. Along with his co-editor Ben Pink Dandelion of Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Steve will act as editor-in-chief working with three sub-editors, one each in the field of theology and philosophy/history/social sciences. The first titles should appear in 2018.

Michael Birkel was invited to attend a conference on the Turkish Muslim thinker and activist Bediüzzaman Said Nursi at Virginia Theological Seminary in the spring, where he offered a paper “Allowing the Mystics to Initiate Interfaith Dialogue: Said Nursi and Rufus Jones.” He led a workshop on interreligious understanding with roughly 300 attendants at the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. At the annual Gathering of Friends General Conference he led a weeklong workshop on early Quaker theology. He was a member of a panel reflecting on the future of Quaker publishing at the annual conference of Quakers Uniting in Publishing. Michael was a plenary speaker and workshop leader at Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting. He recently attended a gathering in Chicago of scholars who are producing chapters for a new book on interfaith studies. Michael’s recent publications include a Pendle Hill Pamphlet, A Seal upon the Heart: Quakers and the Song of Songs, and an article “Robert Barclay and Kabbalah,” in Quaker Studies.

Jim Higginbotham received a grant from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to participate in a Science for Seminaries conference in June. This retreat in Maine, a part of the Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion program of AAAS, consisted of seminary faculty from across the country and several scientists discussing how to better incorporate scientific concepts and issues in seminary classrooms and curriculum. As a part of the grant, Jim is refining two of his advanced classes in pastoral care to increase the use of contemporary scientific understanding of sexuality and the death and dying process.

Jim was quoted in the news release about the event: “Science raises so many important questions for all types of theology and the religious communities that profess them. It is clear that for theology or the church to be relevant, the cosmological issues and debates about the nature of humanity and life that the natural sciences engender must be considered more thoroughly,” said Mainline attendee Jim Higginbotham, associate professor of pastoral care and counseling at Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. “The journey ahead for incorporating more natural science in my classes will be stimulating.” https://www.aaas.org/news/aaas-retreats-help-seminarians-leverage-science.

As a part of ESR’s Traveling Ministries, Jim led a weekend retreat in October for Whittier First Friends Meeting in CA on “Compassionate Communication.”

ESR ALUMNI/AE UPDATES

Frances Forster Stacey (2000): I’ve just moved back to England, to a small village near Oxford. My husband David has family in the area, and my children, who live on the US west coast, will now visit more often as we will be living in a more “interesting” place than Orlando! Once we’re settled I hope to get back into healing work of some kind. We welcome visitors from ESR!

Jeff P. Crim (M.Div Class of 2004): After four and a half years serving as Personnel Coordinator for Christian Peacemaker Teams (www.cpt.org), Adriana has made a career move. She now incorporates her BA formation in Literary Studies, her ESR Master of Divinity degree, her ability with English and Spanish languages, and her experience in community organizing and peace & justice work, into freelance literary translation. Adriana prefers translation of Christian devotional texts, spiritual autobiography, Christian Theology, Quaker literature, creative non-fiction, and other related topics. If you or anyone you know is interested in getting their book translated into Spanish, do not hesitate to contact Adriana at cabreacv@gmail.com Adriana continues to live in rural Paipa, Boyacá, Colombia, with her wife, four dogs, and a cat. Dawn wakes her four times a week to meet the local mountains with her mountain bike cycling group.

Martha Sheldon (1988): Since graduating in 1988 my ministry has taken the form of youth ministry in Western Yearly Meeting, chaplaincy in a Dayton hospital, interim ministry, and campus ministry at Wilmington college. My formal ministry ended when my husband became ill and died from cancer. Much of my energy at that time was focused on my two children in their mid-teens and rejuvenating my sense of self. Also in this interim time I returned to my first love of working with children as a public school sub and now as a special ed. tech in Ohio and now Maine. Both have been enriching but I feel a yearning to return to ministry and/or to be a practitioner in the realm of peace building. Presently I work with students with Autism and use what is called Applied Behavior Analysis. Fascinating helpful guiding principles. Looking forward to seeing what the future becomes: change? shifts? or more depth in present circumstances? Blessings!
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ACTING DEAN’S WORD

By Tim Seid

By the time you are reading this I will be acting dean while the dean, Jay Marshall, is on a six-month sabbatical. From reading the main article of this issue of ESR Reports you will agree this is a much-deserved (and much-needed) rest. To what degree the rest of us at ESR take a break while the dean is away will be our little secret.

As the director of ESR’s recent accreditation self-study for the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), I can attest not only to the dean’s hard work over the last ten years since our last accreditation visit, but also to the work the dean has led the faculty through during these years. Some of the work was done during the monthly faculty meetings. There were many extra meetings, but those at least came with lunch. It is fair to say that over the past years the faculty has worked together to analyze every aspect of our work from the kinds of programs we offer, the courses that are needed for those programs, the objectives we desire for the students who enroll in those programs, the way in which each class is designed to meet those objectives, how we assess those objectives, and how we then evaluate the way in which we are doing that assessment.

In typical Quaker fashion, the entire faculty worked on that together and together developed the self-study to report to ATS. A faculty member was responsible for each section. The faculty met over lunch to discuss the section of the self-study.

The dean and I read through the self-study countless times to edit and format the document to meet the standards of ATS. The school lived with this document for nearly a year. This doesn’t even include the amount of time the dean and the dean’s assistant, Miriam Bunner, spent putting together the supporting documents both physical and electronic for the visit.

Together we shared in the work of developing our programs and going through the self-study process and together we share in celebrating a positive outcome. We know the work has not ended. The cycle of evaluation continues. The work of preparing ministers for service to the world continues to change. We have challenges ahead of us. We are in a good place to be able to do that. But you don’t just have to take our word for it.