Sex and the Seminary:
Preparing Ministers for Sexual Health and Justice

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This portrait of what the seminaries are doing—and are not doing—demonstrates a clear need for improvement on sexuality-related issues across the curriculum, the institutional environment, and seminary faculty and leadership. In analyzing the findings, ten seminaries stood out. While even these institutions can improve in quality and scope, they offer models of seminaries that have made an institutional commitment to curricular offerings, policies, gender parity, and advocacy on sexuality-related issues.

The final step in the analysis of research was the development of an institutional profile for each seminary based on how it met the Criteria for a Sexually Healthy and Responsible Seminary. The categories balance institutionally sustained commitments such as policy or course requirements with institutional factors such as faculty demographics and student involvement in various advocacy groups or events.

The criteria assessed included:

**Curricular Criteria**

- Sexuality-related issues are covered in all relevant introductory courses.
- A full-semester course on sexuality issues for religious professionals and LGBT/queer studies is offered.
- These courses are required for graduation and taught at least once an academic year.
- The three other sexuality-related full-semester courses (women/feminist studies, sexual ethics, and sexual violence/domestic violence) are offered.
- A major, minor, or certificate in LGBT/queer or sexuality studies is offered.
- A learning opportunity on sexual harassment prevention or sexual abuse/domestic violence is offered and required for graduation.
Institutional Commitment Criteria

- The institution has a written policy on sexual harassment for faculty-to-student relationships, intra-faculty/staff, and/or student-to-student relationships.
- The institution has a written policy against discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.
- The institution has a written policy on full inclusion of gay/lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or women.
- Women comprise at least 40% of students, faculty, senior leadership, and/or board of trustees.

Advocacy Criteria

- The institution has held a worship service to address a sexuality-related topic in the past year.
- Faculty members engage in public advocacy through publishing, media appearances, or leadership in sexuality-related organizations.
- The institution has held an event on campus related to sexuality issues.

Leading Institutions

The results of the survey suggest that even the most committed seminaries have room to improve their curricular offerings, policies, and ministerial training requirements. No one institution meets all the criteria, thus each of the seminaries studied showed room for improvement in adequately addressing sexuality-related needs.

Ten seminaries (28%) meet at least two-thirds of the criteria. They are listed in the box (right). Fifteen seminaries (42%) meet less than half of the criteria.

When broken down by type of criteria—curricular, institutional, and advocacy—trends are visible in what seminaries are doing and where improvements could be made. Table 12 on page 28 presents the percentage of seminaries meeting the individual criteria. Overall, policies on sexual harassment, anti-discrimination and offerings for sexual harassment prevention are currently supported by the vast majority of seminaries. Student bodies reflect gender parity, and many seminaries engage in advocacy on sexuality-related issues. Yet, most institutions need to improve in the areas of course offerings, inclusion policies, worship opportunities, and gender parity of faculty, administration, and board composition (Table 12, see page 28).

Centers

In the survey, nine institutions (25%) reported having a free-standing center, program, or institute that deals directly with sexuality-related issues including sexuality issues in ministry, LGBT/queer studies, and women/feminist studies. (While the focus and structure of the centers, programs and institutes varies, for clarity, we refer to them collectively as centers.) Most centers provide training for clergy, students, and faculty; this training is most often for students (6, 66%) and continuing education for alumni (5, 55%). Almost half (4, 45%) focus primarily on academic research initiatives.

Religious Institute staff conducted phone and e-mail interviews with staff at each of the centers. Interviews
with directors or staff of the centers suggest that most centers began out of a realization that particular underrepresented sexuality issues or groups (e.g., women’s and LGBT equality) were not being addressed by the seminary. Most interviewees expressed an institutionally supportive culture as part of their success. Some suggested that this may not have been the case during the initial development and growth of the centers, but it is true now that they are established. Center directors and staff noted that although they focus on sexuality-related issues, they also promote research and programming that is attentive to the intersection of social justice issues such as racism, poverty, globalization, and inter-religious dialogue.

Centers, programs, and institutes have a positive impact on the overall sexual health of the seminary. Six of the nine institutions (66%) which have a center dedicated to sexuality issues meet at least 60% of the criteria for a sexually healthy and responsible seminary. For a brief description of each, see pages 30-31.
The institutional impact of the centers results in increased course offerings, workshops, and learning opportunities in sexuality-related topics; faculty positions with a specialization in sexuality-related research; and often greater advocacy on sexuality-related issues. While most are staffed by full-time faculty (6, 66%) and students (7, 78%), about half have full-time administrative staff (4, 44%). The majority of centers are supported by grant funding or endowed gift (7, 78%).

The major contributions of a center to the sexual health of a seminary include:

1. **Increased curricular offerings on sexuality issues:** Free-standing centers provide additional programming and staff that increase the variety of educational opportunities a seminary has the capacity to provide. Curricular offerings may include hosting workshops for credit or non-credit, bringing visiting faculty, and/or creating a new position for faculty with specialization in sexuality-related areas. In four of the eight programs, a certificate in a sexuality-related area is offered by the center, which supports the certificate requirements with faculty to teach courses and serve as advisors.

2. **Demonstrated public commitment to sexuality issues:** Center staff serve as advocates for the importance of sexuality issues in the seminary context. A number of interviewees remarked that the centers were a safe space for students looking to organize around important sexuality-related issues. This public commitment also generally extends beyond the institutional walls to public witness to religious congregations and denominations or society at large through educational training, media appearances, or hosting of events.

3. **Improved sexuality-related resources:** Many of the centers produce and collect resources regarding their particular sexuality-related focus. For example, some of the centers have syllabus collections or bibliographies for research and teaching use. Others record rituals and worship services. Many host colloquia generating new research and providing space for important and innovative conversations. These resources are available to alumni, area clergy, and students.

**Faculty and Courses**

There are a variety of sexuality courses being taught in the institutions surveyed. However, as discussed on page 19, only one in ten institutions requires students to take such courses. Institutional commitment to offering sexuality-related courses is influenced by course requirements for graduation or concentration, and the presence of faculty with a specialization in sexuality-related fields. In addition to the data collected from the original survey, the Religious Institute conducted a follow-up faculty survey as well as a review of sexuality-related course syllabi.

The follow-up survey was completed by faculty who were identified by the seminary as teaching a full-semester course on sexuality issues for religious professionals or LGBT/queer studies. Only faculty members who had volunteered to share their contact information in the first phase of the survey were contacted. The syllabi collection and review included contacting faculty teaching any of the sexuality-related full-semester courses. Some faculty provided more than one syllabus.

**Faculty Survey**

The Religious Institute staff also conducted a follow-up written survey with 14 faculty members. Fourteen of eighteen (78%) invited faculty completed the survey. Eight of the courses reported focus on sexuality issues for religious professionals and seven on LGBT/queer studies. One faculty member taught both courses. The courses are primarily taught once every two to three years (73%) with an average student enrollment of 10–20 students (79%). None of the courses were required for graduation.

These two types of courses tend to be interdisciplinary and cover a range of topics. When comparing the courses, the most likely area to be addressed is Scripture (100%).