

***An Old Tradition Revived:
Worship in Prayer Hall after a Fire***

On 22 October 2010, tragedy struck Virginia Theological Seminary. At approximately 3:55 p.m., members of the community noticed smoke coming from the chapel. They rushed onto the Grove, an area at the center of the campus, to see yellow-gray tendrils of smoke slithering through the tiles on the roof. Within mere minutes, those tendrils changed to billows. The relatively few minutes it took for emergency-service personnel to arrive seemed like eons to the onlookers. The eerie sound of wood and tiles falling to the floor inside the building filled an otherwise hushed atmosphere. Suddenly, a portion of the roof collapsed into the building, and orange-yellow flames leaped through the rafters. By then, the sound of sirens could be heard in the distance. More members of the seminary and supportive members of the neighboring community filled the Grove. Emergency personnel worked through the night to quench the flames.

Virginia Theological Seminary was founded in 1823. Initially, the seminary made its home in a Sunday School classroom at St. Paul's Church in Alexandria, Virginia. It soon became evident, however, that a larger space would be needed. Therefore, the seminary rented a store front at the corner of King and Washington Streets in Alexandria. Classes met regularly at this location for four years. In June 1827 the Board of Trustees approved the purchase of the property that remains the current home of Virginia Theological Seminary.¹ Construction began in the 1830s. The first building erected was called the "Old Building." The seminary built "north wing" in 1832 and the central building connecting these two wings in 1835. Along with classrooms and a refectory, this

¹ William A. R. Goodwin, *History of the Theological Seminary in Virginia* (New York: Edwin S. Gorham, 1923), 147-155.

central building contained the seminary's first worship space, called Prayer Hall. Until this time, students attended services at local parishes in nearby Alexandria, Virginia.²

With an increase in enrollment and the establishment of the nearby Episcopal High School, the seminary soon needed a larger worship space. In 1839, construction began on a new chapel, which would be ready for use in the 1840-41 school year. Professors from the seminary and the principal of the high school led worship in the chapel, while students from both institutions attended.³ This close relationship between the seminary and the high school regarding the chapel would become very important in the seminary's contemporary crisis.

Despite the construction of a chapel, Prayer Hall (actually a succession of rooms in four different buildings that were given that name) continued to be used for daily morning prayers and a Thursday-evening devotional gathering. The morning practice continued until 1920, when morning worship moved to the chapel. Thursday-evening gatherings continued in Prayer Hall until the 1960s, though by the time of their demise they had become more intellectual than devotional in character. This use of a secondary worship space provided a precedent to which Virginia Theological Seminary could later refer. In the absence of a separate chapel, the seminary chose to designate a specific space as Prayer Hall.

By the spring of 1879, seminary authorities decided that the chapel was no longer safe for public use, and construction began on a new building in 1880 (with students and faculty gathering in the interim in Prayer Hall). While consecrated in June 1881, the new

²Ibid, 165

³Ibid, 165.

chapel provided worship space for students and faculty several months earlier.⁴ This Gothic style chapel with its memorable “Mission Window” proclaiming the Great Commission as found in Chapter 16 of the Gospel according to Mark would house the worship life of the thousands of students who would pass through its doors for the next 129 years, until fire consumed it in October 2010.

As the smoke was still clearing from the devastating fire, the dean gathered a group to discuss where to hold worship services. Members of the seminary’s worship committee also met to discuss options. Many neighboring groups, including ecumenical and interfaith colleagues such as the First Baptist Church of Alexandria and Beth El Hebrew Congregation, offered their buildings as worship space. Reinvigorating an old relationship, the Episcopal High School graciously offered the use of their Callaway Chapel. The dean and faculty in the end decided to move to Zabriskie Chapel at Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill across the street. The devastation that struck the seminary community was equally troubling for this parish because they had shared worship space with the seminary for sixty-six years. Therefore, for the week following the fire, the daily round of services were held in the Zabriskie Chapel, while larger services like those connected with the seminary’s commencement exercises were expected to be held in Callaway Chapel at Episcopal High School.

Ongoing use of Zabriskie Chapel, however, posed logistical problems for the seminary community. Busy traffic on Seminary Road created concerns for the welfare of students having to cross the road several times a day. Therefore, the seminary administration decided to convert Scott Lounge, a spacious anteroom adjacent to the refectory, into a new Prayer Hall. This conversion effort was no small task. Maintenance

⁴Ibid, 256-257

crews would need to remove furniture already occupying the room to other locations and bring in and set up more than 150 chairs. The student sacristans created the altar table used for worship from two sideboard tables, formerly furniture in Scott Lounge, and a funeral pall salvaged from a closet in one of the classrooms. Fortunately, a newly restored Steinway grand piano already occupied the space from the previous year and would provide lovely musical accompaniment.

The student sacristans of the seminary worked hard to collect and organize the many liturgical articles needed for worship. Again neighboring institutions responded with great generosity to the seminary's need. The Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Washington, St. Barnabas' Church in Annandale, Virginia, and St. Pauls' Episcopal Church in Alexandria donated an altar frontal, and the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, gave the seminary a stole. Many other individuals provided cruets, oil, altar books, and all of the many other necessities for worship. Within two weeks, Scott Lounge became the new Prayer Hall.

As the students of Virginia Theological Seminary returned from their autumn break to begin the second quarter of studies, much had changed. The black, charred ruins of the 1881 chapel still stood as a poignant reminder of the recent tragedy. Scott Lounge had become the seminary's Prayer Hall. By graceful coincidence, this first day of the second quarter when the seminary community returned was 1 November, All Saints Day. Since 2006, Virginia Seminary has scheduled noonday celebrations of the eucharist on each weekday when class is in session. Under arrangements adopted in 2010, individual chapel teams composed of a faculty member and a group of students each plan for a week of these noonday eucharists, while other arrangements are made for the planning of

morning and evening services. The associate dean and director of the Institute for Christian Formation and Leadership was the minister of the week and presider for this first Eucharist in the new Prayer Hall, which that week's chapel team planned in consultation with the professor of church music.

The service began with the community gathered in the Grove facing the charred ruins of the 1881 chapel. The presider of the service began with a "Thanksgiving for the Virginia Seminary Chapel", which included a list of names of those alumni and former professors whose memorials lined the walls of the destroyed chapel. After a moment of silence, African drums accompanied the congregation as it marched through the Grove toward the Prayer Hall. The congregation processed across the front lawn of the refectory and then entered through the glass-paneled doors of Scott Lounge, which had become Prayer Hall. As the congregation entered Prayer Hall, they began to sing "For all the saints, who from their labor rest," accompanied on the Steinway grand piano.

As Prayer Hall reverberated with the enthusiastic singing of the congregation, the quality of the acoustics in this space was immediately noticeable. Rectangular in shape, this room runs along a northeast-to-southwest axis. The altar table stood in front of the windows and glass-paneled doors on the southeast long side of the room. The Steinway grand piano filled the southwest end of the room. Chairs surrounded the altar table on three sides, allowing most of the congregation to face each other.

Along with the Steinway grand piano, one other feature of the former Scott Lounge remained unchanged: the portraits. Along all four walls of the room hung portraits of former chairs and members of the Board of Trustees of the seminary. On the southeast wall behind the altar table were the portraits of the Right Reverend Richard

Channing Moore, second bishop of Virginia and first president of the seminary. Then, circling around the room were the portraits of the Right Reverend John Johns, the Right Reverend William Meade, and other bishops of the diocese of Virginia who were founders or presidents of the Board of Trustees for the seminary. One notable exception to this Virginia group is the portrait of the Right Reverend John Thomas Walker, which hangs above the fireplace in the northeast end of the room. Bishop Walker was the first African American student admitted to Virginia Theological Seminary and later served as the sixth bishop of the diocese of Washington.

The service continued with the Collect for the Day and the Old Testament reading from the Book of Daniel (7:1-3, 15-18). As is the current practice at the seminary, the congregation sang the psalm—plainsong Tone I.1 for Psalm 149 with an accompanying antiphon for Sundays and weekdays. A portion of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians served as the New Testament reading (1:11-23), followed by the Gospel according to Luke (6:20-31). The dean and president of the seminary preached the sermon. He reminded the community of the history of the 1881 chapel, giving thanks to the many partners from the surrounding community who offered worship space and provided necessary worship materials. He thanked the sacristans, chapel teams, worship committee, faculty, staff, and students who had all labored to assist the community in a time of transition. He acknowledged the tremendous grief being experienced by the community and affirmed the healthy expression of that grief. Finally, he exhorted the community to place its faith in the God who has stood with the seminary since its founding and would continue to stand with it into the turbulent changes of the future.

After reciting the Nicene Creed, the congregation prayed a Litany of Healing for the prayers of the people. As is the practice during the noonday eucharists on Mondays, members of the community came forward for the laying-on-of-hands and prayers for healing. Finally, a tear-filled and tender exchange of the Peace closed the Liturgy of the Word.

The Holy Communion began with an offertory sentence and then continued using Eucharistic Prayer B. The setting for the *Sanctus* was that of Robert Powell, found in *The Hymnal 1982*. The Eucharistic Prayer continued with the appropriate congregational responses, the Lord's Prayer, and finally the Breaking of the Bread. Eucharistic ministers distributed the elements to the community using stations. The community received the elements in a somewhat orderly manner, given the awkwardness of adjusting to a new space and a new flow for receiving communion. During the administration, the community sang the hymns "Let all mortal flesh keep silence" and "Love divine, all loves excelling." The service concluded with the first of the two post-communion prayers, a blessing, and a dismissal.

Thus, a great tragedy revived an old tradition: worship in Prayer Hall. Daily Morning and Evening Prayer and the Eucharist services would continue in the new Prayer Hall through the remainder of the 2010-11 academic year. The seminary would hold special services, including Lessons and Carols with the Presentation of the Dean's Cross, Service for the Mission of the Church, and Commencement in Callaway Chapel at the Episcopal High School. The administration has already implemented plans for the refitting of the Lettie Pate Auditorium in the Addison Academic Center of the seminary into a "temporary worship space." At the time of this writing, construction renovation is

well underway. The community hopes to begin worshipping in this new space in the fall of 2011. The “Chapel for the Ages Campaign” has begun an effort to raise money for the construction of the third chapel for Virginia Theological Seminary. As from its inception, faithful worship continues at the seminary with many changes in store for the future.

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