

Seminary 2050: Committed to professional excellence

by [Ann Svennungsen](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

Theological schools and church leaders need to accept collective and unambiguous accountability for developing excellent clergy—leaders with the qualifications, capabilities and credentials to shape communities in the life-giving message of God’s grace, justice and reconciliation.

Schools will need to strive for this amidst dramatic cultural change—pluralism, globalization and a society driven by individualism and consumerism—and a culture in which some people switch congregations as nonchalantly as they upgrade cell phones. Future ministers will need even greater skills, integrity and wisdom in their calling to build community.

The potential shortage of ordained clergy and the need for student tuitions to keep seminaries in the black could tempt institutions to reduce standards to fill desks. However, congregations will need outstanding young clergy for ministry. We must continue to make the case that graduate education matters as much in ministry as it does in medicine, law and the academy. We serve a world hungry for trustworthy leaders. Those who lead the church need the professional preparation and credentials to do so effectively and ethically.

In recognition of growing ecumenism—full communion across several denominations—we have a unique opportunity to create a ministerial counterpart to the bar exam or the medical boards, including a general assessment of all candidates coupled with specific denominational standards. It is also time to establish ecumenical continuing education requirements for annual ministerial credentialing.

Theological educators must be intensely committed to a sharpened focus on training excellent pastoral leaders, and to convincing the world—or at least a greater number of those who care—that a rigorous graduate education is not simply a nice enhancement; it is essential to the future health of church and society.