

Revisioning seminary

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue



Le Vieux Séminaire, Montreal, circa 1888. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Philippe Du Berger](#).

In our annual theological education issue, Will Willimon observes that the most effective clergy he knows are finding creative ways to start new communities of faith—but seminaries are not teaching them how to do it ([“Making ministry difficult”](#)). “Seminaries have changed less in the past 100 years than vibrant congregations have changed in the past two decades,” says Willimon.

I don’t think Willimon goes far enough. I don’t believe that theological education has changed in its basic assumptions and structures for *centuries*: it’s a graduate school environment, complete with residential campus and students working in academic disciplines—languages, history, Bible and theology.

I am a grateful product of those assumptions and structures and as resistant to the idea of change as anyone. But it’s time for bold, creative experiments in preparing women and men for the unique challenges of 21st-century America. Pressing issues become more critical each year: the cost of seminary, for example, continues to climb, with the unhappy result that students graduate with significant and prohibitive debt and look for jobs at a time when there are fewer full-time positions that pay enough to accommodate the debt.

Although the idea of online theological education makes me cringe, it deserves our best, creative thinking. Happily, this is happening in some schools. In [“Face-to-screen learning,”](#) Lawrence Wood documents the increased use of online learning

and challenges some of us to reconsider our aversion to it.

Seminary curricula must continue to provide the basic intellectual rigor that a thoughtful ministry requires, as well as opportunities to work in hands-on residencies and internships, observe experienced ministers and gain concrete experience. The Lilly Endowment's pastoral residency program is one approach that seems to be working well. Seminary curricula must also include something new; they must equip leaders for ministry that may not include the traditional pastorate of a congregation with its own real estate and buildings.

Seminary administrators and teachers are among the smartest people I know. I wish they would all gather in a room, acknowledge that the current seminary model is out of date and come up with a vision for theological education that equips ministers for the 21st century—a vision that then continues to change and emerge.