

Seminary 2050: Parish-based education

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

As denominations continue to devolve into loose confederations of churches, the seminaries will find themselves in direct relationship with congregations.

The good news in this is that seminaries will be more accountable to congregations and less able to hide behind denominational bureaucracies. Congregations will insist that seminaries produce pastors who are not only theologically trained but also skilled in communicating their education in the parish context. Churches will send their people to schools that promise this result, without regard to denominational affiliation. Hopefully, this shift will result in curricular revisions that make it clear that theological education exists for the church and not the academic guilds.

The bad news in this new congregation-seminary relationship is that the seminaries will increasingly find that they are competing with one another. Since the churches are as self-interested as any other institution, they are going to think of themselves as consumers of theological education who have a right to get what they want, the way they want it. And seminaries will be tempted to ensure they are keeping the customer happy. Some have already begun to worry that distance education and Internet classes have put them on a slippery slope, at the bottom of which they will discover that theology has been turned into a commodity.

Clearly, it is better to form pastors in community than on the Internet. The reason students will resist the temptation to simply purchase theological education through stay-at-home shopping has to do with the seminary's devotion to creating pastors. If the seminaries make a compelling case for pastoral formation in community, students will come.