

Constraints and opportunities: Nick Carter on retooling seminaries

Feature in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

Andover Newton Theological School, which is celebrating its 200th anniversary, is regarded as the country's oldest free-standing graduate school of theology. Affiliated with the American Baptist Churches and the United Church of Christ, the school traces its roots to the 1807 founding of Andover Seminary following a breakaway from Harvard. The school has been led since 2004 by Nick Carter, an American Baptist minister. Carter previously served as executive director of SANE/FREEZE, a grassroots movement against nuclear proliferation, and as founder of Wayfarers Consultants, which works with religious and nonprofit organizations. We asked him about the major challenges in theological education, especially in the case of seminaries not associated with universities.

From many perspectives, theological education seems to be in a time of ferment or crisis. For one thing, the relationship of denominations to seminaries seems to be changing. What do you see happening on this front?

While there is much to celebrate, the reality is that denominational relationships generally are weaker than ever, and in some cases almost nonexistent. The case for theological education is getting lost amid the competing priorities and the demands on ever-shrinking denominational resources. Also, the move toward alternative paths to ordination in some denominations runs the risk of undermining the place of seminaries. As a result, for at least a decade in fund-raising, and recently in other areas, many seminaries have been forced to focus their efforts on local churches and individual donors.

From the seminary side, our first obligation is to look to the churches. That's what we're here for. When a minister surveys a typical mainline congregation on Sunday, he or she notices several new realities, one of which is that over 50 percent of the folks in the pews did not grow up in that tradition. Another is that the top reason

folks attend a church is the sense of community they find—not the denominational ties.

I'm not saying this relationship is dead. However, seminaries must give graduates community-building skills that apply not so much to a *postdenominational* world as to a *transdenominational* one. You need to understand and value your tradition, but you have to be able to travel with it. The declining denominational support and the need for cross-denominational leadership mean that despite our covenanted relationships with denominations, seminaries must plan for increasingly independent futures.

How are new models of ministerial leadership affecting the demands placed on seminaries and on how seminaries conceive their task?

Most models are in flux because the church and world are changing at such a rapid rate, sweeping away so many assumptions on which theological education has been based. Amid this we have to ask, what do we embrace as the essential insights and skills for transformative Christian leadership in the 21st century? What church do we think we're preparing people to lead?

An emerging model is one of ministers who are, as always, well grounded and have a clear sense of Christian identity and call, but also have the agility to move across the borders of theological, denominational and social differences and competing truth claims. We need leaders who can draw upon different styles and resources as circumstance demands. We must prepare ministers who are collaborative and yet directive, empowering and yet ready to strategically leverage power when needed. They also need to be far more missional and entrepreneurial—and, of course, adept at the miracle-working of finding more parking spaces.

One often hears that a number of free-standing seminaries are very vulnerable financially. What are the chief financial constraints? Why have they emerged lately?

A few free-standing seminaries are doing quite well. They tend to have enrollments over 350 and endowments over \$50 million. Yet there are schools with fewer students (53 percent of seminaries have full-time enrollments under 150) or hardly any endowment that are also thriving.

However, with half of all M.Div. students in the U.S. attending 12 schools (only three of which are traditional mainline ones), the question as to whether we have too many seminaries is a legitimate one.

The financial pressures on free-standing seminaries are relentless. Some experts believe that up to 20 seminaries could go out of business in the next five to seven years. The scene is sobering, but it need not be debilitating. One cannot tell the history of seminaries without recounting the many times they have teetered on the brink of financial ruin and yet survived.

The constraints are familiar: aging or maintenance-heavy campuses built for another era; the imperative not to balance the budget on the backs of debt-ridden students (debt drives people from the ministry and subverts our mission); rising administrative, energy and technology costs; and the high cost of maintaining a high-quality faculty and library. These challenges have to be met while facing competition from larger, university-related schools. For free-standing mainline seminaries, with flat or declining enrollments and disappearing denominational support, it has become a high-stakes game, and there is no longer any margin for error in managing these issues.

What options does a small seminary have?

The situation is difficult, but I don't think we have to buy the gloom-and-doom scenario. Perhaps the financial challenges will free us up for innovation. Some small seminaries serve a particular religious or geographical constituency that might go unserved if they didn't exist.

More important than the fate of this or that seminary is the fact that all of us in theological education have to rethink how we do business, build partnerships and relate to schools we may have traditionally seen as competitors. We need to remember that we are laboring in the same vineyard. It may be that our special calling is to break down institutional barriers, share resources and reinvent the structural model for seminaries.

For nearly two years, leaders at Andover Newton, Colgate Rochester Crozer, Bangor and Episcopal Divinity School have been exploring innovative ways in which we can work together. Thanks to support from the Luce Foundation, three of the schools are now linked by video conferencing and are offering their first joint course this spring. We're even exploring common approaches to employee benefits and the possibility

of pooled management of our investment portfolios. In addition, Bangor recently outsourced its information technology services to Andover Newton. Seven years ago, Hebrew College relocated to the Andover Newton campus. We've begun to offer joint courses and merged our maintenance operations, and now we're looking at sharing a bookstore, dorms and library administration.

I think all of us need to learn some lessons from the private sector. If we were more open to creative thinking on the administration, finance and property side of things, fewer seminaries would face a risk of going out of business, and they might just do a better job of delivering on their mission.