

Episcopal seminaries adjust to realities: Declining revenue, new plans

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 8, 2008](#) issue

The deans of Episcopal seminaries warned bishops and other church leaders last year that their theological schools must deal creatively with hard financial realities. The schools can no longer function separately as “11 little grocery stores trying to sell the same products to the church,” declared Donn Morgan of Berkeley, California, then convener of the Council of Deans.

The challenges have been felt not only in the Episcopal Church—which has been torn by breakaway parishes and dissenting dioceses—but in virtually all U.S. denominations, added Ward Ewing of New York City, the current council convener. “Seminaries are in the midst of major transformational change,” Ewing told bishops in September.

Actions by three Episcopal seminaries reflected that crisis. Pullback plans were announced by schools in Evanston, Illinois, and Rochester, New York. A promising financial partnership was struck in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

- Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, located near Northwestern University in Evanston, announced February 20 that the school will stop offering its Master of Divinity degree “as a freestanding, three-year residential program.” In addition, Seabury-Western has suspended recruitment and admissions in all degree and certificate programs until it can develop new plans.

The seminary board of trustees acted because of an expected \$500,000 shortfall in revenue for the current fiscal year and debts totaling \$3 million, officials said. “The seminary is not closing its doors,” said Chicago bishop Jeffrey Lee. “It is engaging in a radical reassessment of what shape its mission has to take in this time.”

Seabury-Western plans to assist current students, including about 50 in traditional degree programs, to complete their studies at other schools, possibly at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, located across the street. No immediate decisions were announced regarding the future of the 30 staff and 10 faculty positions.

- Bexley Hall, an Episcopal school whose main campus is affiliated with Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, decided to close its Rochester, New York, campus. Eleven of the 13 students enrolled in the Rochester Master of Divinity program will graduate in May.

“We were too thin on the ground [in Rochester] to meet the labyrinthine requirements of the state and the accrediting agency,” said Bexley dean John R. Kevern in a statement to Episcopal New Service. The satellite M.Div. program will close in May.

Bexley had affiliated in 1968 with Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, an American Baptist school, but became independent again in 1998. As fewer ordination-seekers enrolled there—at least four schools in the city of Rochester grant M.Div. degrees—Bexley decided to concentrate on the shared campus in Columbus where Bexley’s enrollment and endowment have grown.

- Episcopal Divinity School announced on March 6 that it will sell seven buildings to its Cambridge neighbor Lesley University for \$33.5 million. Lesley, a secular school specializing in teacher education, will share library and student dining facilities with EDS, which will retain ownership of 13 buildings on its eight-acre campus.

“This partnership anchors the financial foundation of EDS while releasing our creative energy as never before,” said Steven Charleston, president and dean. With the sale, Charleston said, he would be leaving the seminary posts June 30 after nine years there.

The agreement was a good fit, said Nancy Davidge, director of communications for the divinity school, which has 97 students in degree and certificate programs this year. “Both schools are champions of social justice,” she said.

Finding partners to share financial burdens is a key step for survival, Donn Morgan, dean of Church Divinity School of the Pacific, said in an interview. CDSP is part of the nine-seminary Graduate Theological Union in and around Berkeley, California.

“The Episcopal Church doesn’t give us any money from [its] budgets,” Morgan said. Without overtaxing many debt-loaded students with hefty tuitions, the Episcopal theological schools need to raise money for scholarships, salaries and huge maintenance or renovation costs for older buildings. “We have to handle the electric bills on our desks,” he said.

In New York City, Episcopal-related General Theological Seminary hopes to generate income from its newly dedicated Desmond Tutu Center with 60 guest rooms and conference space, and from a city-approved, mixed-use residential and office building on its Manhattan campus.

“I think the commercial partnership is bold, but I think it will change the character of theological education,” Morgan said.

If so, that may be the case also in Cambridge. Episcopal Divinity School will be sharing its campus with one of the largest U.S. schools training teachers for K-12 education—with 12,000 students at 150 locations in 24 states.

Writing to other Episcopal deans February 25 when the Lesley University pact was imminent, Charleston hinted that the partnership would have some effect on the seminary ethos. “In simple language, our new friends at Lesley, who share our values and vision, would become our neighbors on campus, changing us as we change them,” he said.

At the same time, intermingling student populations is not new in Cambridge. Episcopal Divinity is a member of the Boston Theological Institute, a consortium of nine seminaries and departments of religion. EDS is only a few blocks from Harvard Yard, and seminarians have eaten at a Harvard dining hall since EDS closed its dining hall last year. Also, Lesley has leased EDS’s Lawrence Hall since 2005 to house undergraduate students.

Lesley will provide EDS with apartment-style housing for its students and families within walking distance of the campus, while acquiring three dormitories for up to 250 of its undergraduates. Lesley president Joseph B. Moore said the partnership makes the greatest use of “institutional space” in Cambridge.

The new shared-use arrangements with Lesley, plus income from its purchase of the seven EDS buildings and the anticipated decrease in operating costs, gave the seminary trustees confidence in the school’s future. The board at its February

meeting appointed two new assistant professors—one in religion and society, one in early Christian historical studies.

“Not all Episcopal seminaries are in deep financial trouble, but there isn’t one that doesn’t wrestle with challenges,” Morgan said. He and Ewing have been prodding bishops, seminary trustees and other church leaders to fashion divinity schools that collaborate with other seminaries in order to serve churches better.

The deans have identified these seminary goals: to develop Latino ministries; to enhance “distance learning”; to create certificates for lay ministries as well as degrees for traditional ordination; and to form partnerships with overseas Anglican churches.

With the Internet and other technological advantages, geographical proximity is not a requirement. In Ewing’s words, schools need to seek coalitions in which “each seminary becomes a gateway to the resources of all the seminaries.”