

Seminary distress: In search of new models

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Jesus taught his disciples in the outdoors, without a prescribed curriculum. His lessons were passed on by way of oral tradition before being written down.

The way things are going, mainline seminaries may be returning to such informal models of theological training. At the very least, this is a time of great uncertainty in theological education, a time when students are more diverse, religious identities are in flux, financial support from denominations is down and education expenses continue to go up.

As was [reported in these pages](#) April 8, a number of seminaries have taken dramatic steps to keep their programs alive, often by making alliances with other institutions. Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, an Episcopal school in Evanston, Illinois, discontinued its M.Div. program and is considering how to offer the degree “in another format.”

A *New York Times* article (April 5) by Richard Higgins points to the large gap between the haves and the have-nots in theological education. Schools that are attached to major universities (like Duke, Vanderbilt, University of Chicago) or that have significant endowments (Princeton, Virginia Theological Seminary) are secure, but many others scramble to survive in the new environment. Higgins quotes Daniel Aleshire, head of the Association of Theological Schools, saying that 30 of the nation’s 165 seminaries are in financial distress. Higgins also notes that 39 percent of all seminarians can be found at just 20 schools.

What does all this mean? Sadness for alumni and anxiety for students, faculty and staff at the precarious institutions. But Louis Weeks, retired president of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, argues that mainline seminaries should be looking for ways to expand their offerings, not shrink them. More and more people are hungry for theological education. Weeks points to the success of his school’s extension campus in Charlotte.

Some hard questions need to be asked about the future of seminaries. For example: Do the United Methodists really need two schools in Ohio? Do the ELCA Lutherans need two in Pennsylvania? Those who love such schools will naturally flinch at the questions, but any serious look at the future will have to address them, along with questions like: Is a residential education still essential for seminaries? How much education can take place online? (One seminary professor said, "I refuse to teach embodied theology in a disembodied way!") Does the future of theological education lie in moving back to the apprenticeship model, by which young pastors learn about ministry not at a school but by apprenticing themselves to established pastors?

Jesus taught without an endowment, classrooms or a faculty, so we know that many kinds of ministerial training can work. The question is what model will work for the 21st century.