

Seminaries see no 'hard times' uptick: Enrollment slipping

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

The notion that enrollments at theological schools rise in tough economic times did not hold true for Protestant and Catholic seminaries in North America this academic year. In fact, over the past three years, the total student population slipped about 6 percent—down to 75,500 from a three-year plateau in mid-decade when more than 80,000 students were studying theology.

“The idea of going back to school seems to have worked for U.S. education in general,” said Daniel Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, but not for seminaries, whose enrollment slid again in the past year about 2 percent, according to ATS data released in April.

Mainline Protestant schools have seen enrollments rise and fall over the past decade. Between the fall of 2000, when student bodies totaled 22,651, and last fall, when they had 22,068, mainline seminaries had peak years of 24,133 in 2002 and 24,024 in 2005.

Aleshire said in an interview that he has not heard convincing reasons for the fluctuations in enrollment.

Some speculation, at least for mainline Protestants, suggests that with the number of congregations able to afford a full-time pastor gradually declining, prospective students are asking, “Why go to seminary?” For prospective students with a sense of “call” or commitment to ministry, added Aleshire, such theories will not hold water.

Evangelical seminaries have increased enrollment at their satellite centers or extension campuses—going from 7,598 students in 2000 to 11,025 in 2007—but slipping the past two years down to 9,734. By contrast, enrollment at mainline seminary extension centers rose from 620 in 2000 to 1,401 by 2004, but only about 480 students now study at those centers.

“The drop in enrollment away from the main campuses may reflect the number of extension centers that have closed for financial reasons,” said Aleshire.

One statistical trend shown in new ATS figures is that large schools are enrolling a higher percentage of students. About 30 seminaries with at least 500 students—12 percent of ATS schools—account for half of the 75,500 seminarians. In 2001, schools exceeding 500 students accounted for 47 percent.

Evangelical seminaries have grown larger in size and more numerous in the past decade, according to Eliza Smith Brown, director of communications for ATS. They now have more than twice the enrollment of seminaries with mainline Protestant ties.

The 13 largest schools (with enrollments above 1,000) are all known for their theologically conservative perspective. The largest is Fuller Theological Seminary (4,038), followed by two Southern Baptist schools—Southwestern in Fort Worth, Texas (2,591), and Southern Baptist in Louisville, Kentucky (2,585). Dallas Theological Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary are fourth and fifth largest in size at 1,974 and 1,892 students respectively.

Fuller has steadily added what its officials call “regional campuses.” Its newest is in Houston, the seventh satellite of the original campus in Pasadena, California.

The ATS annual enrollment report did not include figures on courses taught online. But that option—at least at Fuller—has grown in popularity with students and some faculty members, said Kevin Osborn, Fuller’s executive director for distributed learning.

When ATS leaders hold their biennial meeting this June in Montreal, Aleshire said, seminary leaders will begin what “is going to be a complex and, I anticipate, tough conversation” over the percentage of course work done on the main campus and about the length of time needed to earn a degree. “Already it’s taking an average of over four years to get through a three-year program,” he said. “At Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America schools you can’t earn it in less than four years.” The discussions in Montreal will inform a task force that will report back in two years.

“We have schools deeply divided on this. We’ve got schools that think that we’ve got to have more course work, not less, and it’s got to be all residency,” Aleshire said. “But others are committed to make it with shorter duration and [through more]

options than [are] currently available.”