

Seminaries under pressure: Ready or not, here comes change

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If church leaders had the chance to fashion a seminary from scratch, what would it look like? Would it have its own campus? Would it be tied to a denomination or be fully ecumenical? Would the classical academic subjects be taught and, if so, how would that learning be correlated with the work of forming spiritual leaders and training them in the practice of ministry? Would greater emphasis be placed on supervised ministry? Might the entire curriculum be based on an apprenticeship model of learning?

While this kind of important reflection is going on in some circles, students and churches must continue to reckon with seminaries as they exist—with their campuses and buildings, faculty and staff, governing boards and supporting constituencies. Yet change is coming to these institutions whether they want it or not, for many face decreasing enrollments and lack the financial resources to continue business as usual. The Association of Theological Schools reports that of the member schools that responded to a survey last April, 53 percent saw their endowments drop from 21 to 30 percent between June 2008 and March 2009; another 15 percent experienced an even deeper drop. Seminaries that were living on the edge financially before the recession were forced to cut faculty and staff, freeze or reduce wages and benefits, defer maintenance and reduce other spending, especially on libraries.

The average ATS member school spends 60 to 70 percent of its budget on institutional support and only 30 to 40 percent on educational programs. “This model is not sustainable,” the ATS report bluntly concludes. Seminaries are going to have to rethink their economic model and focus on strategies that have greater sustainability, says Daniel Aleshire, ATS executive director.

There is a long history of seminaries merging or pooling resources to achieve greater efficiencies, but some recent attempts at merger or affiliation have foundered,

showing that there are limits to this strategy as well. As Aleshire indicates, seminaries must consider new economic models.

Seminaries and their constituencies should use this moment to consider new pedagogical models as well. Take, for example, the longstanding disconnect between the practical fields of ministry and the academic disciplines of Bible, theology, ethics and church history. Curricular discussions have focused on how to help students integrate the practical and theoretical aspects of study, but most efforts end up maintaining the division and placing the burden of integration on the students more than on the curriculum and the faculty. Is it time to organize courses around the life and mission of the church?

Change usually comes slowly to institutions, but these are not usual times. Deft administrators and imaginative teachers will have to take some risks to redefine theological education for the next generation.