

Bangor Seminary ending degree programs

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue

Bangor Theological Seminary plans to give degrees to about 45 students this spring—a large graduating class for a school that had only 13 graduates the year before. But it will be the last commencement in the seminary’s long history of serving rural churches in northern New England and beyond.

The nationwide downturn in seminary enrollment and other changes hit BTS hard beginning a decade ago and combined to write “finis” to Bangor’s role in credentialing candidates for ministry.

“Our enrollment has declined approximately 20 percent per year for the last three to four years,” BTS president Robert Grove-Markwood wrote a year ago in a letter to the seminary faculty, administrators and supporters. The total head count of seminarians had dropped from 147 to 78 in the period between 2006 and 2011.

The seminary was imprudent in withdrawing 9 percent from its endowment in the 2011-12 school year and could not continue on that path, BTS leaders said. After discussions with Auburn Seminary researchers and an analysis of projected costs, the board concluded that “we can no longer afford to spend almost \$60,000 annually to educate one full-time student,” Grove-Markwood said.

“The decision to change our business model, discontinuing graduate degrees, was a unanimous but painful decision,” wrote Grove-Markwood, a longtime pastor from Presque Isle, Maine, who has worn many hats in serving the seminary.

The suddenly large class of 2013 developed because many part-time students decided to pursue their degrees before it was too late. Academic dean Steven Lewis said that “the faculty, with my encouragement, reduced the M.Div. requirements from 90 hours to 81, and some M.Div. students switched to the M.A. degree in order to complete some degree.”

The June 22 graduation ceremony will mark the end of what began in 1814 as Maine Charity School and became a degree-granting seminary after 1900. BTS opened a second campus two decades ago at State Street Congregational Church in Portland to attract students from a more populated area.

The graduation rites will be held at privately run Husson University in Bangor. The seminary moved in 2005 from its historic campus to a wing of Husson's administrative building.

"It was sad in a way, but some onetime seminary buildings were put to good use," said Grove-Markwood in an interview with the Century. After a local Masonic Lodge building burned, the fraternal order bought the seminary's chapel and refurbished it. "Bangor Public Library took over the seminary library building, and another building on the old campus is used for low-income and veterans housing," he said.

Tributes to the seminary's contributions on June 22 will come from, among others, Geoffrey A. Black, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, and Daniel Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, who will be the graduation speaker.

Aleshire once observed that Bangor Seminary had a legacy of outperforming its resources, according to Grove-Markwood. "The danger, he noted, is that we may think we can always do this, but the hard reality is that most challenges are threats over which seminaries have no control."

Bangor Seminary officials candidly said that they were adversely affected by two particular developments. One was the increased awareness that ATS, the chief accrediting agency for seminaries, had become more flexible on M.Div. entrance requirements.

For much of the 20th century, Bangor Seminary attracted students from other states by allowing those lacking a B.A. to take two years of liberal arts classes—taught by Bangor's adjunct faculty—followed by three years of M.Div. studies. The students could complete studies for a bachelor's degree while serving a church as a "supply" or licensed minister.

But this so-called Bangor Plan apparently lost its distinctive appeal in the 1990s as more prospective students learned that ATS allowed any theological school to let 10 percent of its students begin M.Div. study without an undergraduate degree.

The second development was Bangor's loss of accreditation with the United Methodist Church. In 2007, Methodists trimmed their list of schools at which their seminarians could earn credentials for ordination. Bangor was one of eight schools dropped. Methodists once made up about 25 percent of the student body at Bangor. "That really contributed to our very precipitous trajectory," said Grove-Markwood.

However, the seminary hasn't abandoned goals for educating clergy. "There is a critical need for a learned ministry and leadership," he said. "If we are not going to have all those M.Div.'s and churches can't afford them, how do we provide a quality ministry?"

Board members, hoping that endowment funds, grants and continued donor interest can be sustained, are talking about a BTS Center, based in southern Maine, to meet future needs. If the plans sound amorphous, it is because "we are not finished with the seminary—it's our primary interest right now," said Grove-Markwood.

About 16 students at Bangor Seminary not receiving degrees this June will be able to complete their studies through "a generous agreement" with Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts. The job losses for a handful of faculty and several staffers are "the most painful" part of the situation, said Grove-Markwood.