Formation and reclamation

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There's lots of talk about "Christian formation" and "faith development" these days, provoked by a great transformation in the ecology of faith: churches can no longer count on a thick network of Christian institutions to shape people in the faith. Families, Sunday schools, church camps, Christian student organizations, men's and women's groups, Christian journals and denominational conferences--the institutions that used to work together to instill and reinforce a religious worldview--have all been faced with internal crises, cultural challenges or dwindling resources. The erosion of any one of those institutions would have made the work of Christian formation more difficult for the others; the simultaneous weakening of all of them has meant that individual formation in Christian faith is often thin and haphazard.

The result is evident in the nature of the students who enroll in seminaries and seek to enter ministry, according to Daniel Aleshire, head of the Association of Theological Schools. Aleshire observes (see page 110) that an increasing number of seminary students are unfamiliar with their school's denominational tradition, perhaps even with church life in general. Responding to this reality presents yet another challenge for seminaries.

One of the institutions generally missing from the modern ecology of faith is the Christian denominational college, a subject Ralph Wood takes up in his review of James Burtchaell's *Dying of the Light* (see page 125). The secularization of Christian colleges in the 20th century has received considerable attention. Before Burtchaell's book appeared, George Marsden wrote *The Soul of the American University and The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship,* and Douglas Sloan produced *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestants and American Higher Education*.

The facts of the case are inarguable: the American educational landscape is dotted with colleges and universities that began with some sense of Christian mission but then largely abandoned it. How this happened has become of great interest to historians and Christian thinkers, especially those who are convinced that the secularization of the schools represents, at least to some degree, a failure of theological nerve and a loss of Christian intellectual muscle.

Wood hopes Christian colleges can be revitalized, and he suggests some of the features such colleges might display. It's hard to imagine, however, that a mainline Protestant denomination will decide it needs to highlight its denominational distinctives in higher education. And it's especially hard to believe that a formerly Presbyterian or Congregationalist college, which has made the long journey toward independence, would have any incentive to give church leaders a decisive role in hiring its faculty and creating its curriculum.

As Wood suggests, one of the questions that is ripe for debate is: What is a viable definition of "Christian college" in the mainline context? Is it defined by the curriculum, the faculty or the ethos, or some combination of the three? How are any of those aspects to be determined and controlled? What kind of pluralism and diversity of opinion and behavior are allowed?

A variety of plausible answers might be given to those questions. Perhaps the deeper and more intriguing question is whether there is any interest in mainline Protestant circles in seriously debating the options. Is the Christian college a part of the ecology of faith that mainline Protestants are willing to say is extinct? We hope not. And we'd love to see a serious ecumenical consideration within the mainline of how the Christian college can be configured and even reclaimed.