

Andover Newton seminary to sell campus

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [December 9, 2015](#) issue

America's oldest graduate seminary is once again blazing a trail for other mainline Protestant institutions to follow. But this time it's a path many would rather not travel.

On November 12, Andover Newton Theological School announced plans to relocate and sell its 20-acre campus in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. The move will be part of "a bold new direction" for the 208-year-old school as it struggles with deficits.

"God is doing something new in this time," said Martin Copenhaver, Andover Newton's president. "We have to figure out what it is and get with the program."

The school's future will involve a smaller faculty, lower overhead, and new partnerships. On the table are two options: become embedded within a more stable institution such as Yale Divinity School, where discussions about a partnership are ongoing, or shift to a lean, cooperative-learning model. The latter would strip away broad course offerings, focus on core subjects, and dispatch students to do much of their learning in local congregations.

Either way, Andover Newton's move is likely a harbinger of what lies ahead for about 80 of America's 100 mainline seminaries, according to Daniel Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools. Built more than a century ago, they've relied primarily on residential education models that are becoming unsustainably expensive and ill-suited to current needs.

"Andover Newton is a canary in the mine shaft on the issue of, 'What is the future of mainline institutions?'" Aleshire said. "You're going to see some mainline schools seek to affiliate with other, larger institutions. And the primary reason for that is the reduction of their indirect costs."

Andover Newton is hardly the only seminary seeking new life through restructuring. Three days before Andover Newton's plans became public, Bexley Seabury Seminary Federation announced that in 2016 it will shut down operations in Columbus, Ohio, and consolidate in Chicago. An Episcopal seminary with a history of moving and merging, Bexley Seabury currently rents space in Chicago from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Andover Newton currently relies on a mortgage line of credit to pay its bills while trying to preserve its \$18 million endowment. Even a shift to a cooperative education model might not be scalable or financially sustainable, according to Copenhaver.

But observers say today's church needs something new in the form of well-trained pastors who are unburdened by debt and capable of managing on part-time salaries from churches. If Andover Newton finds a model to meet those needs, others are apt to follow where it leads.

"It's just tough for schools that are freestanding," said Don Richter, associate director of the Louisville Institute, a research center for revitalizing American Christian institutions. "Unless you're Princeton Seminary and you've got a huge endowment, you're going to be much better off if you're a divinity school nested within a university . . . They've got the infrastructure and everything built in."

Andover Newton, which has ties to the American Baptist Churches USA and the United Church of Christ as well as a partnership with the Unitarian Universalist Association, had 450 full-time students a generation ago. There are now 225 mostly part-time students. The school will stay open for two years to allow as many of those students as possible to finish degree programs, according to the statement from leaders.

The seminary has relocated twice in its history, and if a partnership with Yale Divinity School moves forward, the school would move a third time, to New Haven, Connecticut.

Gregory E. Sterling, Yale Divinity dean, said in a statement: “We are deeply concerned with the challenge of reducing student debt for theological education. Andover Newton shares this concern. Together we can do more than either institution can do separately.” —Religion News Service; added sources

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