

It's time to rethink our assumptions about where theological education happens

Until 1565, the local church was also the seminary.

by [Ryan P. Bonfiglio](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue



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Under the pressure of declining enrollment and diminishing budgets, many mainline Protestant seminaries have come to rethink almost every aspect of what it means to do theological education. They have opened new degree programs and developed more flexible curricula. They've implemented “competency based” systems of evaluation and increased their online offerings.

But in the midst of this massive makeover, one aspect of theological education has remained unchanged: the site where most of it happens. It's still generally assumed that theological education takes place at academic institutions—seminaries and divinity schools.

From a historical perspective, this assumption is a rather late development. The first seminary was not founded until 1563, when it was commissioned by the Council of

Trent to serve as a *seminarium*, or “seed bed,” for clerical training in the Catholic Church. Before the 16th century, theological education was already happening in and through local churches. This was true in the pre-Constantinian period, when churches offered a rigorous, three-year education process called the catechumenate which all converts had to go through before being baptized.

From the early medieval period to the dawn of the Reformation, the task of theological education primarily fell to monasteries and urban cathedrals (we would call them “big steeple” churches). Located in cities such as Milan and Paris, these cathedral churches were places of worship, but they also were sites for clerical training and lay education. While they did not offer formal degree programs, these churches nevertheless were the locus of theological studies and scholarship for nearly a thousand years.

The creation of that first seminary triggered a seismic shift in thinking about where theological education happens. For the first time in history, it became possible to imagine clerical training and lay education as occurring outside of local churches and monasteries. Now, almost 500 years later, it is hard to imagine things any other way.

The shift away from the cathedral model has come with some unintended and unfortunate consequences. The invention of seminaries led the church to outsource what it had long taken to be an in-house responsibility: in-depth teaching on the Bible, theology, and the Christian traditions.

Not that churches have completely gotten out of the business of education. But in most cases, the type of instruction offered within local congregations is less rigorous, more of a watered-down, *Reader's Digest* substitute for the sort of teaching one gets at seminaries. This situation may be the result of a lack of resources and personnel within local congregations, but it also reflects the assumption that serious biblical and theological reflection is the prerogative of academic institutions. Though many churches remain connected to seminaries as sites for students' field education, on the whole, the day-in, day-out work of the church is less connected to the task of theological education than ever before.

It's time to rethink our assumptions about where theological education happens. Though much has changed since the Middle Ages, retrieving the cathedral model of learning has the potential not only to reinvigorate faith formation in congregations

but to revitalize seminaries and divinity schools at this critical juncture of their evolution.

I see four benefits in making the church a viable site for seminary-level theological education. First, the cathedral model challenges us to rethink the very purpose of theological education. When we associate theological and biblical training with seminaries, it is hard not to think of theological education as a pathway to a professional degree. The M.Div. and related degrees are seen as the functional equivalent of a master's of business administration degree or a master's degree in nursing insofar as they prepare candidates, both in terms of skills and credentialing, to work in a particular profession. Prior to 1563, it would have been more natural to see theological education as an aspect of discipleship, not an act of professional credentialing.

This idea is hinted at in the final chapter of Luke's Gospel in the story of two travelers meandering toward Emmaus on that first Easter afternoon. When Jesus approaches, they mistake him for a stranger and begin telling him about recent events in Jerusalem involving the crucifixion of a man from Nazareth and the rumor of an empty tomb. Eventually, Jesus interrupts. Then, in what must have been the greatest Sunday school lesson of all time, Jesus "interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

What is striking about this story is that instead of directing these two travelers to quit their jobs and enroll in a theology course in another city, Jesus brings the teaching to them. The learning they experience about Jesus and scripture occurs in the midst of their journey. Jesus goes where they are going. In fact, later in the story, when it appears that Jesus is about to part ways with them, they urge him to stay, and that evening, Jesus breaks bread with them. It's easy to imagine that the lesson begun on the road continued around that table.

The effects are transformative. Their eyes are opened and they come to recognize this stranger as the resurrected Christ. For those two travelers, the road to Emmaus doubled as a road to theological education. Almost immediately they depart for Jerusalem—presumably taking the same road in the other direction—in order to tell the 11 disciples what they learned. In the midst of their journey, in the midst of shared meals and hospitality, theological education is part of the life of discipleship.

The second benefit of church-based theological education follows directly from the first: if theological education is an act of discipleship and not primarily a pathway to a professional degree, then its potential audience is far broader than we typically imagine. The prevailing assumption in seminaries is that smaller incoming classes reflect diminishing interest in seminary-level theological training. When seminaries are forced to contract or close, it is often thought to be a market adjustment to a declining consumer base.

This might be partially true, but it doesn't tell the whole story. The factors that keep individuals from enrolling in seminary are numerous and complex and often have to do with practical considerations about finances, family, and other logistical matters. In my experience, interest in what seminaries have to offer has not diminished. In fact, folks are increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of in-depth biblical and theological teaching at their local churches, even as their life situation makes it unlikely that they would ever apply to seminary.

Back in 2015, First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, where I served as a scholar in residence, launched a program called Theology Matters, which offers short, seminary-style courses designed for lay audiences. Covering a range of topics from the Ten Commandments to scriptural "texts of terror" to the hymnody of the Reformation, each course consists of eight 40-minute sessions that combine lecture and small group discussion. While the content is pitched at a master's degree level, there are no exams or required papers, and the scope of each course is much narrower than a typical three-credit class at a seminary. We try to make each class stand on its own, so that those who miss a session don't feel left out of the next conversation. The goal of Theology Matters is to make high-level theological education accessible and relevant to folks who might never step foot on a seminary campus.

With minimal marketing, our courses average 50 to 70 participants, and an even larger audience is now accessing the online versions of these courses. When it comes to making theological education available to broader audiences, Theology Matters and other programs like it are just beginning to scratch the surface. While seminary enrollment numbers may never fully rebound, one thing is clear: people are still interested in what seminaries have traditionally offered. The question is whether churches can creatively imagine ways to engage these broader audiences with rich educational content.

The rise of seminaries led churches to outsource theological education.

The third potential benefit of the cathedral model is that it can inspire us to think in new ways about how people engage in theological education. A major trend in seminaries is toward online education. Though there's much to celebrate about these efforts, online education still isn't for everyone. Many people, from boomers to millennials, still long for serious study in the context of a physical classroom that allows for elbow-to-elbow interaction with fellow students. So what if instead of just bringing theological education online, we started thinking about taking theological education on the road?

This is exactly what happened through a unique collaboration between Columbia Theological Seminary and First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta in the spring of 2017. That semester, I taught a three-credit course on Old Testament theology that was designed for seminary students but which met in the evenings at First Presbyterian, not on the seminary campus. The course was open to both Columbia students and ten members of the church.

The course was a win for both institutions. Members of First Presbyterian got to take a deep dive into seminary learning without having to enroll in a formal degree program (or travel across town to Columbia). Columbia students were able to enter into a dynamic contextual learning experience that explored how themes in Old Testament theology inform the ministries of a particular church and community. This experiment had the added benefit of serving as an effective recruitment tool. Of the ten lay members who participated in the course, two went on to enroll as full-time students at Columbia Seminary.

What if seminaries started pursuing intentional partnerships with local churches in order to make some of their courses available to Christians where they were already gathering? What if seminary faculty created more opportunities for their students to learn alongside—and from—smart and engaged lay members in congregations? I believe that such efforts would complement initiatives in online education by making seminary content more accessible than ever before.

Fourth, if we want to be serious about bringing theological education into the local church, we can't just transfer what we do at seminary to new locations; we have to rethink how we package and present our content. On this point, there's a lot to learn from the phenomenon of TED talks. With well over 1 billion views, the popularity of

this speaker series rests not only on its fascinating presenters and compelling topics but also its short-talk format. In the time it takes to walk the dog, pick the kids up at soccer, or drive a few miles at rush hour, listeners can be inspired by talks from an almost endless list of topics. The genius of TED is that it doesn't make viewers choose between high-level content and beautifully packaged media. It merges them together.

What if the highly polished, short-format talk was adapted as a vehicle for theological education? This was the question that inspired the launch of TheoEd Talks, a faith-based speaker series I started at First Presbyterian in 2017. It invites leading thinkers in the church and the academy to give the talk of their lives in 20 minutes or less.

By packing powerful ideas in bite-sized talks, TheoEd Talks seeks to inspire diverse audiences to explore important questions about God, religion, and the power of faith to shape lives and communities. This happens through twice-a-year live events in Atlanta as well as the TheoEd.com website, where audiences can access archived talks and watch behind-the-scenes interviews with speakers.

Short-format talks like these can't possibly replace the need for more traditional, long-form curricula that include extended time for reflection and discussion. Nevertheless, the brevity and quality of TheoEd Talks provide an entry point to conversations about faith with audiences that might not otherwise darken the door of a church. Packaging theological education into more concise, visually attractive formats is not a marketing ploy or a concession to short attention spans. Rather, it is an act of intellectual and pedagogical hospitality.

Though I think returning to the cathedral model of theological education has the potential to inspire new ways of thinking about what theological education is and who it's for, it's not a panacea. Even the most well-resourced big steeple churches could not possibly provide everything needed for ministerial training. Nor can the cathedral model adequately support and sustain the sort of scholarly activity that is fostered at traditional seminaries. Only a minority of congregations have the resources and staffing at their disposal to pursue some of the initiatives named above. The cathedral model is not for every church, nor is it without a few pitfalls.

Nevertheless, many churches could follow First Presbyterian in developing scholar in residence positions for teachers looking for pathways beyond the professorate.

Medium-size and even smaller churches could partner with local divinity schools and their faculty to create Sunday morning programs or host courses with hybrid audiences like the one organized by First Presbyterian and Columbia Seminary. Regional or national denominational bodies could spearhead collaborations on curricula, speaker series, or online courses. And churches whatever the size might seek strategic connections with neighborhood partners and nonprofit organizations to create forums for learning that respond to local needs and concerns.

Even the most successful initiatives in church-based theological education won't spell the end of traditional seminaries and divinity schools. These institutions are likely here to stay in some form, and that's a good thing. But seminaries and divinity schools might also take a cue from the cathedral model and work to make theological education more public. Now, perhaps more than ever before, seminaries need to take the lead when it comes to finding ways to connect with broader, more diverse communities. This might come in the form of developing programs in public theological education. Or it could entail hiring faculty whose job it is to help bring theological education to places where Christians are already gathering, be it churches, nonprofit organizations, coffee houses, or community centers.

There may be no blueprint at hand for the future of theological education. But a promising way forward might well be found in looking to the past.

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