

For many schools, the MDiv is moving online for good

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [February 24, 2021](#) issue



The interior of Goodson Chapel at Duke Divinity School. (Photo by Bluedog423 via Creative Commons license)

Logan Lawrence had already been accepted to Duke Divinity School when she heard that the school would also be offering a mostly online version of the three-year master of divinity program beginning this fall.

She immediately called to ask if she could switch her enrollment to the so-called hybrid program, which will require only one week of in-person classes each

semester.

Lawrence, 20, who works as a youth pastor at a United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, is engaged to a man serving in the US Army.

“I didn’t know how to balance a military marriage and divinity school,” said Lawrence. “This works out so much better for me.”

These days, nearly every school is offering online programs, but Duke has decided to offer a version of its flagship degree online even after the coronavirus pandemic is over. In doing so, it joins the majority of freestanding seminaries that have slowly but inexorably moved to reshape the MDiv into an online offering.

The move also signals that online, digital-based learning will continue to grow long after the pandemic ends.

“Those who think that when COVID is over things will go back to normal are misreading what’s happening,” said L. Gregory Jones, dean of Duke Divinity School. “The role that technology plays in our lives is going to increase.”

The MDiv is required by most mainline Protestant denominations as well as the Catholic Church for anyone wanting to serve as lead pastor or associate pastor.

For years, university-based divinity schools insisted that in-person classes were a must if schools were to shape the character and religious imagination of the church’s future leaders. Many of the elite university-based divinity schools—such as Yale, Harvard, and Emory—still require residency, as do all Catholic seminaries.

But Duke has now chosen a new path. Its hybrid MDiv program will no longer require students to relocate to Durham, North Carolina. Students will take classes on Zoom and visit campus three times a year—in January, May, and August—for one-week in-person “intensives.”

For now, Duke expects that most students will still choose the residential option. The school has about 350 students enrolled in its MDiv program. It expects to admit 10 to 20 students to its hybrid MDiv this fall, said Todd Maberry, Duke Divinity’s director of admissions.

The school began offering hybrid degree programs a decade ago, including the master of arts in Christian practice and the doctor of ministry. But as it became clear

that the 2020-21 school year would remain online-only, faculty took workshops to learn new online tools.

That process, said Jones, “made it more apparent to us that we could do high-quality, online, digitally based learning.”

Freestanding seminaries have been offering remote MDiv degrees for two decades now, out of a realization that many students are already working full time and often can’t easily uproot their lives and move to the school of their choice.

“It costs to move yourself,” said Chris Meinzer, senior director of administration and chief operating officer at the Association of Theological Schools. “Tuition costs are a driving force, but a bigger driver is life. Many of our students are second-career age. They’re just not packing up and going someplace else.”

Last year, ATS, which accredits 276 seminaries and divinity schools in the US and Canada, scrapped its residency requirements for all but the PhD degree. Previously, schools had to apply for an exemption if they wanted to offer online degrees, and about 200 were approved between 2012 and 2020. Nowadays, the online MDiv is so ubiquitous the association no longer tracks how many of its schools offer it.

Catholic seminaries have so far uniformly resisted both hybrid and fully online MDiv programs, said Todd Lajiness, rector of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit and chairman of the ATS commission on accreditation.

“The integrated nature of what it means to do formation and prepare someone for the priesthood in the Roman Catholic context is very difficult to do in a sustained way remotely,” said Lajiness. “You really need to accompany people on a personal level.”

While some Catholic seminaries have been forced to go online during the pandemic, they will resume fully in-person classes when it’s safe to do so.

Tom Tanner, director of accreditation for the ATS commission, said he thought the hybrid model of online classes with occasional in-person seminars may, in fact, prove to be a better model for theological education.

“It’s the best of both worlds,” said Tanner. “Students are not uprooted from their context. It’s much less expensive, and coming to campus and meeting with students and faculty is still viewed as a positive thing.” —Religion News Service