Is it worth it? The value of a theological education

by John Dart in the February 22, 2003 issue

Daniel Aleshire has been executive director of the Association of Theological Schools since 1998. The Pittsburgh-based association is the accrediting and program agency for graduate theological education in North America. The ATS has 244 Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox member schools. Before joining the ATS staff in 1990, Aleshire, an ordained minister with a Ph.D. in psychology, served on the faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, for 12 years. I asked him about recent trends and challenges in theological education.

Many theological schools linked primarily to one denomination have long accepted students from various church backgrounds. This raises a question: Would some seminary mergers be in order for those struggling to meet expenses? To put it bluntly, are there too many theological schools?

That's really like asking "are there are too many congregations or too many denominations?" The answer is yes if religious sentiment were organized on the basis of efficiency.

Most Protestant congregations are small, and given the apparent shortage of candidates financially willing to serve pastorates in small congregations, it would be more efficient to determine the "right" size for a solo pastor congregation and merge smaller congregations into larger congregations. I don't think that will happen, because congregations are communities of history, connection and value. Most will not give up that community for a more efficient operation. There are many Protestant denominations with declining memberships, and it would be more efficient for them to merge into larger and more robust denominations. But most won't. Denominations reflect historically and theologically diverse visions of faith and ecclesial order.

For the same reasons, theological schools do not organize themselves on the basis of efficiency. Seminaries are enduring legacies of theological visions, historical movements and ethnic communities. The mergers that do occur are the result of denominational unions (like the creation of Garrett-Evangelical Theological

Seminary, formed with the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist churches); of efforts to enhance similar confessional or academic commitments (Oberlin merging with Vanderbilt Divinity School, or Rochester with Colgate and Crozer), or of changing educational needs (such as the mergers of free-standing schools of Christian education with seminaries).

Are alternatives to mergers afoot?

Yes, I see the emergence of new patterns of cooperation. During 2003, McCormick will complete a new building on the campus of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and this partnership will help both schools. It probably will never be a merger, but it will enhance an already good institutional partnership. In the 1960s, the seminaries in and around Berkeley formed the Graduate Theological Union. While the California schools keep their distinctive ecclesial identities, their joint venture creates economies of operation and an enriched theological education for all. Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, new systems of seminary relationships ensure more cooperation among clustered seminaries, and less duplication of effort and expense. Union in New York is developing a partnership with Columbia University to maintain its enduring institutional contribution to American religion in general and liberal Protestantism in particular.

Are denominationally sponsored seminaries getting ever-smaller percentages of financial support from the related church? And if so, does that translate into less control?

The contributions from denominations dropped dramatically in the past 30 years, according to a study of seven mainline denominations begun by Badgett Dillard, who was once treasurer of the ATS, and continued by Anthony Ruger, who is analyzing the 2000-01 data at the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education. The data tell the story. In 1970-71, seminaries that were related to five of the seven mainline denominations in the study received approximately 70-80 percent of their total gift income from the denominations. (The percentage for the other two mainline denominations was smaller.) By 1990-91 the range was 30-60 percent, and in the 2000-01 analysis, it looks as if the average percentage of gift income from these five mainline denominations will be less than 40 percent.

Sometimes this reduced contribution reflects less control by the denomination, but not necessarily. The seminaries related to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America are experiencing a declining ratio of gift income from the denomination, but the ELCA continues to elect all of their boards. Other mainline schools have self-perpetuating boards of trustees and thereby less direct control by the church.

You have said that the prolonged dip in the stock market is hurting some schools more than others. Why is that?

ATS schools can be divided into four major groups in terms of their primary sources of income: 1) interest from endowment funds, 2) student tuition payments, 3) denominational and/or individual gifts, and 4) balanced revenue from at least two of these sources.

Obviously, schools hurt most by the bear market are those most dependent on endowment. To determine how much to spend from their endowment, schools average the value of their endowment over 12 quarters. This keeps them from overspending if the endowment suddenly increases (as in the late 1990s) or underspending if the investment suddenly decreases (as in the past three years). The U.S. stock market has ended its third consecutive year of losses, and this trend has caught up with those schools.

Some schools that are primarily tuition-driven are actually doing fairly well because university enrollments, and to some extent seminary enrollments, tend to increase in hard economic times. Schools with balanced sources of revenue are, as you would expect, in the middle. Their endowment income is down, but the total budget is not as stressed.

The now-lengthy trend of "older" students choosing to enter ministry and attend seminary has helped churches gain some knowledgeable clergy in recent years, has it not?

Indeed, the average age of M.Div. students is much older than the average age of law or medical students. One Auburn Center study found that law and medical students decide on their plans in late high school or early college years, and that seminary students, on average, think about theological education after college. Older students bring life experience, needed diversity, and more commitment to congregational ministry.

My concerns about older students are twofold. The first is financial. This year it costs between $75,000 and $100,000 to educate a student through a three-year M.Div.

program. The students pay, on average, about 30 percent of this amount in tuition, and the rest comes from endowment, gifts and grants. A 50-year-old graduate will get 15 years of ministerial work for this investment, while a 30-year-old graduate, if he or she stays in ministry, will get 35 years of work. If you want to talk “efficiency” in theological education, older students make for less “efficient” use of educational dollars than younger students. Yet I think it would be silly to discourage older students from attending seminary for financial reasons. Theological education is still inexpensive compared to almost any other form of graduate, professional education, and the benefit is greater than the cost.

My second concern is more subtle. We know from several studies that an increasing percentage of church members belong to larger congregations. These congregations are complex ministerial environments that need pastors with a decade or so of experience by early mid-career, so that they come to these congregations with experience and high career energy. By the time older graduates can accrue the experience that large-membership congregations require, they are close to retirement. Admittedly, these two worries are routinely proven to be unfounded by the presence of highly talented, energetic older graduates.

We do hear church leaders say that a continued low ratio of younger clergy candidates could be harmful to church life.

Speaking only for myself, I have a religious worry: Why has the church not attracted its own youth to the hard work and great joy of vocational ministry? Other professions have attracted younger aspirants, why not ministry? At a more practical level, younger graduates can “make do” more easily with the lower starting salaries in congregational ministry as well as bring youthful enthusiasm to churches. And an inadequate number of younger ministry candidates could exacerbate the tendency toward older and older mainline congregations.

Are there any significant shifts today in the enrollment of minorities?

Racial/ethnic students constituted 20 percent of the total enrollment in ATS schools in 1999—a huge rise from 30 years before, of course. In more recent statistics, the number of racial/ethnic students increased 24 percent from 1997 to 2001, while the number of white students increased 7 percent over the same period. These are pleasing trends, but African-American and Hispanic/Latino students continue to represent a smaller percentage of students enrolled in seminaries than their

percentage in the general population. Hispanic/Latino students are the most underrepresented of any minority group.

What about women at theological schools?

The most telling enrollment data about women is the number of them seeking the M.Div. degree. Steadily increasing since the early 1970s, the total number of women in this program has grown from 8,203 (of a total enrollment of 28,283) to 9,722 (of a total enrollment of 30,763). In the last five years, women in the M.Div. programs grew by 1,519, while the number of male M.div.-seekers has grown by 921. Women represent nearly one-third of the students enrolled in ATS schools.

Theological education still lags behind other graduate and advanced professional education when it comes to women students. In 2000, the last time we checked the comparison data at ATS, women constituted just over half of the enrollment in law schools, just under half in medical schools, and about half in graduate education overall. This overall percentage includes higher numbers among mainline Protestant schools that are offset by the lower numbers in conservative Protestant and Roman Catholic schools—though a growing number of women in these latter two groups of schools are pursuing nonordination M.Div. degrees.

What is the major issue facing mainline theological educators?

I think that the major issue is this: What is the value of seminary-educated religious leadership? As membership in mainline Protestant churches declines, alternative patterns of education and routes to ordination are increasing. As “new paradigm” churches exercise leadership among evangelical Protestants, questions about the relevance of theological education drift through the hallways at megachurch conferences.

Mainline Protestants have assumed the value of theological education, and for most of the 20th century had sufficient cultural status and membership strength that the assumption was never challenged. It is different now. Sometimes, people ask if it is “ just” to have students spend three years in graduate, professional education, given the earning potential of ministerial careers. Or questions are raised about whether seminaries educate students adequately for the practices of ministry in increasingly complex congregational work. And some ask whether graduate-level ministerial training is an elitist form of education that excludes racial-ethnic and other culturally marginalized candidates.

This question, in its many forms, requires a compelling answer. In my judgment, the only satisfying one will be demonstrating that theological education adds enough value to religious leadership that it is worth the effort, time and money. Seminaries that do their work well should turn out graduates who do their work well, and we hope people in the pews will appreciate the difference.

What other challenges confront mainline Protestant seminaries?

It appears to me that schools are changing in three very fundamental ways.

First, seminaries are among the last institutions that denominations have. In an earlier era, the denominations had tightly related social ministry agencies, health-care agencies, colleges and universities, seminaries, child-care agencies and publishing houses. These organizations functioned in addition to the denomination-controlled missions, education and benevolence entities. Now, most of the related institutions have distanced themselves from, or been distanced by, the founding denominations.

The seminaries, though less tightly related today to denominations, are still called upon by denominations to participate on committees, provide lay education and offer programs that, in another day, would have been shared among a larger constellation of denomination-related institutions. As a result, seminaries have more to do on behalf of the denominations, even thought they are not as well funded by the denominations.

Second, the students coming to seminary are less religiously formed than previous generations of students appear to have been. Compared to the scene 50 years ago, schools today have to provide formation in faith as well as education for ministry.

Third, every seminary is educating a wider range of students, in terms of denominations represented by the students. It is easier to educate students for ministry when they all come from and will stay in the same denomination. It is more complex to educate mainline Protestants, black Pentecostals and Unitarians in the same M.Div. program. These factors, among others, create an educational and institutional setting that is new, different and very demanding.