

Seminary 2050: Communities of learning

by [Simon Oliver](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

From the Academy of ancient Greece to the medieval schools, education was understood to be centered upon conversation (*conversor*, literally meaning “being together”). Plato’s dialogues and Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* are written in the form of a conversation. Our being is relational, so learning about that being, and its relation to divinity, involves a degree of intimate relationality and a participation in the eternal conversation of the Trinity.

The conversation of learning between student and teacher is always based on the primary conversation of prayer in the community’s shared daily liturgy. Many institutions attempt to maintain the intimacy of this pedagogical tradition. The lecture, whose dominance of university education is relatively recent, is a monologue rather than a conversation, and is more given to the efficient delivery of facts than persuasion toward truth. The endless repetition of the lecture and the trade in learning are precisely what Plato condemned in the sophists.

This model of education is under threat. Massive financial constraints have driven the Church of England to educate a sizable proportion of its seminarians through much cheaper nonresidential, part-time, regional training courses delivered through distance learning, evening meetings and occasional weekend residential courses. The advent of new technologies of communication has ensured that delivery of theological education within virtual communities is cheap and efficient.

If theology is, to some degree, conducted on one’s knees, then dispersed and virtual communities of theological students present a challenge to the centrality of communal liturgy and intimate conversation in theological learning. Residential seminaries and one-on-one conversations are expensive. However, theological education is part of the lifeblood of the church. It needs ministers and teachers (ordained and lay) who know how to *be* theological, rather than simply possessing certain facts about the faith.

If the church is to educate fewer of its leaders in residential communities, it must then make the local church the place where learning can continue to be grounded in relationships and liturgy. That can happen if the local church understands itself to be a place of learning and conversation informed by scripture, tradition and reason rather than mere anecdote and personal experience. This move will also involve theological education's ceasing to be the preserve of the clergy.