

Emerging in Seattle: Education at Mars Hill

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

If you could start a seminary from scratch, how would you do it?

You'd probably try to avoid the straitjacketed theological curriculum of the 19th-century German university, which scrupulously separated the study of the Bible, theology, church history and ministry from one another. You would focus on integrating fields of learning as much as you could without risking your accreditation. You'd try to blend the energy of the evangelical world and the intellectual openness of the mainline. You'd locate the seminary in a city that people want to live in.

In short, you'd make it a lot like Mars Hill Graduate School in Seattle.

The seminary began in 1997 as a school of counseling, using faculty from evangelical Colorado Christian University. The school sought oversight and help in gaining accreditation from Western Seminary, a Conservative Baptist Association school in Portland, Oregon, before setting out on its own in 2000.

MHGS has 350 students, with 50 in the four-year-old master of divinity program. Jo-Ann Badley, professor of New Testament, summed up MHGS's greatest strength and weakness: "The only tradition here is we have no traditions." The Apostles' Creed constitutes the school's only faith statement. For good or ill, the school has no denominational or institutional tradition to uphold.

MHGS is located in what is easily the hippest seminary venue I've ever seen. In early 2007 the school moved from an office park in the suburbs to an old warehouse with exposed wood beams and brickwork in the trendy neighborhood of Belltown, with a view of the harbor, Alaska-bound cruise ships and the Edgewater Hotel, where the Beatles once stayed. "We left the flaws in the hardwood floors," said academic dean Keith Anderson. "Just varnished 'em up and moved in."

The seminary has become a go-to school for people in the Emergent movement, or “conversation,” with Taylor University in Indiana acting almost as a feeder school. Dwight Friesen, professor of practical theology at Mars Hill, has been a speaker on the Emergent circuit, though he downplays the link to the seminary. “Conversations don’t need seminaries,” he says.

Many students have found their way to Mars Hill by reading Emergent author Brian McLaren and then seeing his name on the school’s Web site. (He is an adjunct faculty member.) Others have noticed the school’s association with *The Other Journal*, a smart evangelical online quarterly which has its offices on campus. Other students find the school through the ultrahip Web site.

Badley and Friesen shook their heads at the willingness of people in their 20s to pack up and move on the basis of a Web site. But when I mentioned how cool the site is, Friesen perked up and said, “Just wait till you see the new one!”

MHGS’s curriculum is organized around its motto: “text. soul. culture.” (Internet punctuation and style pervades the place.) *Text* refers to Badley’s biblical classes and Friesen’s philosophy seminars. *Soul* refers to the school’s effort to integrate scripture’s claims into students’ lives and into the practice of counseling. All students, M.Div. candidates included, take two practicum courses (“It’s a terrible name, but would ‘laboratory’ be better?” Anderson comments), which are akin to group therapy sessions. Students tell their faith stories in a small group and then react to each other’s stories, considering whether the teller’s manner “creates space or disrupts it.” These sessions are often grueling semester-long experiments. The school schedules its weekly eucharistic worship as a service to practicum members who emerge from the small groups needing some sacramental repair. *Culture* is the least well defined of the three categories, according to Friesen. Badley explained it this way: “We look for signs of grace not only in the church, but everywhere.”

Though Seattle is known for its irreligiosity, the MHGS community loves the city’s rich culture. Noting the long evangelical tradition of engaging culture, Friesen declares that that tradition has been reoriented at MHGS with an emphasis on mutual dialogue rather than on haranguing the godless world. “It’s more than listening to secular music and looking at paintings,” he said. It extends to *creating* culture—another theme of Emergent churches. Student Meredith Danhouse tells me of her senior ministry project—a photography exhibit on baptism that’s on display in the chapel. Faculty members recently made a trip to Ethiopia to learn about

domestic-abuse-survivor ministries, and they brought back an extraordinary tapestry depicting the Last Supper in North African style; it was displayed on the school's professionally lit art wall.

The school has many problems related to funding. One unnamed supporter lamented, "At Princeton they pay you to go there, but at Mars Hill they beg you to come and then charge the bejesus out of you." Friesen worried about the ethics of imposing large debts on students, many of whom go into the risky business of planting new churches. The school has a new building to pay for, a library collection to build, accreditation with the Association of Theological Schools to acquire (it is an affiliate member), scholarships to fund and faculty to hire. "Everything needs to be done *now*," Anderson says with a sigh.

The school's focus on counseling threatens to tip over into full-blown triumph of the therapeutic. A onetime adjunct professor at MHGS told me of how a faculty member marched into his class and instructed him to sit down and consider how his teaching was making his students feel. Three students had vented vehemently; the adjunct professor was asked if he heard them—and only then was he allowed to continue. "It was surreal," he said. Seven of the school's 13 faculty members teach counseling.

The school has worked to reacquaint itself with church tradition. Orthodox iconography fills the chapel. Chimes sound at three-hour intervals, inviting students to pray. "Many of our students have problems with the church," Friesen explained, pointing out that they generally come from conservative circles where they have often been captive to narrow theological and political agendas. "We're like a place to recover from being Southern Baptist," quipped Friesen. Students I met were reading Stanley Hauerwas and James McClendon in theology and Raymond Brown and Ellen Davis in their "text" classes. I heard students banter about McLaren's and Rob Bell's approaches to worship.

A strange feature of Seattle's religion scene is that Mars Hill is the name not only of an unusual postevangelical seminary but also of an überconservative church led by onetime Emergent devotee Mark Driscoll. Now something of a neoconservative, Driscoll lectures and writes about what he sees as the dangers of the Emergent movement, as well as about the inferiority of women, the immorality of gays, and how Jesus was a real mensch, with "big bulging biceps." His 6,000-member church has multiple sites, including a campus three blocks away from MHGS.

Driscoll used to stick his finger in the eye of readers of the *Seattle Times* with a regular column until the paper dropped him for insinuating that former National Association of Evangelicals head Ted Haggard's wife was to blame for his trysts with a male prostitute—because she had “let herself go.” Taking the confrontational approach, Driscoll and his Mars Hill have had extraordinary success in “pagan” Seattle.

As Mars Hill the grad school struggles with branding—and, like most seminaries, with money and buildings—it does so with the zeal of a convert and the entrepreneurial sense of evangelicalism at its best: “Sure it's expensive, but God will provide.” When I talked with MHGS faculty, administrators and students, I couldn't help noticing their enthusiasm. Student Meredith Dancause told me about Eagle and Child, a student group named for C. S. Lewis's favorite pub in Oxford, which meets regularly to kvetch and support one another. “Only here the school listens to us,” she says. Friesen nods, ticking off student suggestions that quickly got adopted into the school's life.

The ministries that students like Dancause pursue will be key in determining the school's future: if their work thrives, they will probably send more students to seminary—and particularly to MHGS.