

Seminary: Not just for pastors: A career enhancer

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When Boston area artist Paula Rendino needed fresh inspiration more than a year ago, she sought her muse in an unlikely place: seminary. Art school would have been “too boring,” Rendino explained. She yearned to bring fresh depth to her work by pondering spiritual themes.

Now she does exactly that alongside dozens of ministers-in-training at Andover Newton Theological School, an ecumenical, American Baptist seminary in Newton Centre, Massachusetts.

“In seminary, you’re looking at philosophy, ethics or poetry and taking the time to really think about something,” Rendino said. “That’s so important because we live in a time where everything is fast, people write in short sentences” and “don’t take the time to think about things.”

As theological schools cope with intense financial stress, they’re getting a much-needed boost from unconventional students such as Rendino. Enrollments are rising in several corners of theological education as people with no interest in pulpit ministry come to regard the training as a powerful career enhancer.

Schools of varied stripes are noting increases:

- After 20 years without a net increase, enrollment at 118 Bible colleges climbed 1 percent in 2008 and 3 percent in 2009, according to Ralph Enlow, president of the Association for Biblical Higher Education.
- Iliff School of Theology, a United Methodist school in Denver, enrolled 102 new students in 2009. That’s up from 77 the year before and almost twice as many as in an average year (53).
- The Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, enrolled 60 new students last year—up more than 100 percent from 27 in 2008.

- At the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, new student enrollment is up 23 percent—from 125 in 2008 to 154 in 2009—as classes add more Catholic laypersons with no plans for ordination.

Several factors help account for enrollment increases. The tough job market, admissions officers say, has inspired some to pursue long-held interests in theology and related subjects. Programs such as the Fund for Theological Education's Undergraduate Fellowship encourage undergraduates to pursue advanced theological training. And seminaries have ramped up their recruitment efforts to draw from a nontraditional base of potential applicants.

"Our big push is recruiting folks who want to be social entrepreneurs and advocate for social change," said Iliff Director of Admissions David Worley in an e-mail.

Perhaps most significant has been a growing interest in what theological education has to offer. In the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, declining interest in the traditional master of divinity degree has been offset by a 20 percent increase over the past year in students pursuing other degrees at the Graduate Theological Union's nine schools.

"More people see this as an entrepreneurial venture," said GTU Dean Arthur Holder. "They're saying, 'I want to start something. I want to start a new kind of church, a virtual religious community that meets online, or an urban retreat center...' They're not expecting the denomination or church organization to do this for them. They want to get the training, the skills and the knowledge [so that] they can create it as they go along."

Tammie Denyse of Sacramento, California, is among those giving theological schools hope for the future. She's founding director of Carrie's Touch, an advocacy and support organization for women affected by breast cancer. Because cancer-related conversations often turn to spiritual themes, she wants to deepen her theological understanding in order to be as effective as possible.

"Now that I know more, I'm able to reach people who say they haven't talked to God in 20 years," Denyse said. "They've been diagnosed with this cancer, and they need something more than momma's love to get them through this difficult time."

Current national enrollment data are not yet available from the Association of Theological Schools, but officials are hopeful that a new trend has begun. Total

enrollments at ATS schools dropped 4 percent between 2006 and 2008, marking the first consecutive-year decline in more than 20 years.

If enrollments turn out to be climbing nationwide, such a development would represent good news on what has been a bleak landscape. A fall 2008 ATS report found “financial stress” at 39 percent of its 175 member schools that have no university affiliation. Among contributing factors were shrinking endowments and declining enrollments prior to 2009.

For schools that rely on tuition as their primary source of revenue, rising enrollments provide an important tool for covering costs. But hard-hit schools will need more than enrollment increases in order to overcome their financial challenges, according to Anthony Ruger, senior research fellow at the Center for the Study of Theological Education at Auburn Theological Seminary.

“Usually when a school is struggling financially, enrollment is only part of the answer,” Ruger said. “They need gifts and careful management of their endowments, as well as expenditure reductions.” *-G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Religion News Service*