

If I had \$1 billion: Presidents' wish list

by [James Kenneth Echols](#)

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What would seminary leaders do if suddenly money were no obstacle—if a generous donor left them, say, \$1 billion?

In a recent television commercial, a man in a desert discovers a lamp in the sand. He rubs it, and a genie appears. Although the genie is prepared to grant three wishes, the man's first wish—for a new Mercedes automobile—is granted, and he drives away in excitement, forfeiting the remaining two wishes. One billion dollars from a donor would be a huge wish come true and would make an extraordinary difference in the life and ministry of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

First, I'd support the seminary's basic ministry of preparing women and men to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ten percent of the gift would renovate the campus with state-of-the-art classrooms, a technologically sophisticated library, attractive worship space, comfortable housing units, an inviting conference center, etc. I'd place an additional 40 percent in the unrestricted portion of the seminary's endowment, and use the earnings to underwrite more generous financial aid for students, more generous salaries for faculty and staff, expansion of the faculty in key areas, and operating expenses.

Second, I'd put 15 percent of the gift in the endowment to support a first-class program of lay and continuing theological education. Assuming a 5 percent spending rate, an annual budget of \$7.5 million would open up enormous possibilities for on- and off-campus educational offerings. Extension centers could be established both in and outside of congregations, and a special grants program could assist congregations in their own Christian education efforts. Educational technologies of all kinds would be available. Loren Mead says that one of the challenges for the church is to become an apostolic people. This money would "equip the saints for the work of ministry."

Third, I'd use 10 percent to support creative, exciting and relevant programming for youth and young adults. Programs would emphasize nurture in the faith, theological reflection and leadership development for both church and society—i.e., discerning one's vocational call in the context of various occupations. The possibilities for retreats, internships, travel seminars, camping experiences, work groups and cross-cultural exchange programs are endless.

Finally, the remaining 25 percent would be designated as the "Praxis Fund." With an annual budget of \$25 million, this fund would take seriously the words of the Christ in Luke 4:18-19 and Matthew 25:35-36. Through grants to congregations and other humanitarian groups, work with community-based organizations, and projects funded and carried out by the seminary itself, the institution would embody its commitment to being "centered in the gospel and open to the world." In this case, the seminary would be involved in "doing justice and loving kindness" in God's world.

I hope to stumble upon a lamp right here in Hyde Park, knowing that one rub will lead to a genie and three wishes. I'll make my *second* wish a wish for a Mercedes.
—James Kenneth Echols, president, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Pacific School of Religion occupies a beautiful campus overlooking the San Francisco Bay and has relatively little deferred maintenance, so my first priority would be to reduce student debt and raise faculty salaries.

I left seminary and graduate school in the 1970s with no debt. Today, despite generous financial aid packages, many of our graduates face debt loads that will prevent them from accepting appointments in rural and inner-city settings where they are most needed. Some \$16 million would enable us to double financial assistance.

PSR pays faculty and staff fairly well, but people make a financial sacrifice to work here. Turnover is low because PSR is a good place to work, but I worry about our ability to attract the next generation of theological educators. Competition from state universities and wealthy undergraduate colleges is increasingly intense. About \$600,000 per year would make the school competitive. That's another \$12 million in endowment.

My personal dream would be for a new initiative focusing on the renewal of organized religion in the United States. A number of important centers for the study

of American religion exist, but none has yet taken on the challenge of working with religious leaders to shape the future of American religions. Imagine Harvard's Kennedy Center with a focus not on government but on religion, and a location not in Boston but in Berkeley!

—*William McKinney, president, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, California*

I'd try to get rid of a great deal of the money immediately, since a fully endowed program is often a formula for disaster. Such a scenario, for instance, would make the institution much less dependent on its church and other constituencies.

So the next week, after the trustees summarily dismiss me and I am walking the streets of Chicago homeless and alone . . .

Taking the question a little more as it was intended, I'd be inclined to utilize new resources to build a much more comprehensive program of Christian formation and reflection. Such a program might involve endowing some or all of the following:

A comprehensive and congregationally based program of lay Christian formation involving serious adult catechesis and spiritual formation;

A vastly expanded and baroquely intricate set of interconnections with youth ministry organizations, Christian colleges and universities, and other institutions that would cultivate a "culture of the call" to ordained ministry and other forms of ministry;

An expanded program of theological education involving a retreat center (perhaps in rural Illinois or Wisconsin or Indiana) as well as (pardon my extending the military metaphor) an "advance center" in inner-city Chicago as alternate sites for Christian formation;

Vastly expanded academic offerings including lectures by famous people like Martin Marty, the archbishop of Canterbury, the Dalai Lama and Oprah Winfrey (and I get to take all of them to lunch), and expansion of our Ph.D. program and library facilities to make the seminary the envy of the academic world, with a special emphasis on provoking the envy of Northwestern University;

The establishment of a regular helicopter service across Lake Michigan for our Michigan students, and Lear jet service to take our faculty on fabulous research ventures.

OK, the last one is a bit crazy, because we don't have space for a runway. But the overall emphasis would be on using the resources to build the intellectual and formational capacities of the churches we serve. I hope we can do some of that anyway.

—*Ted A. Campbell, president, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois*

I would think long and hard about a comment that a Third World student leader once made to our trustees: "I pray that Fuller will never have quite enough money to do what God wants it to do." Thus far, the Lord has been very faithful in this regard!

And I would not want us to use this new money in a way that would isolate us from people who care deeply about the relationship of theological education to frontline ministries. We regularly receive urgent requests to assist various movements and institutions in providing the educational resources for promoting the cause of the gospel in difficult situations. I would begin spending the money, then, by calling together a representative accountability group from both North America and the larger global church—pastors, laypersons, representatives of other theological schools—to reflect with us on some of the key challenges facing the worldwide Christian movement. What can theological schools do to provide the kind of theologically formed leadership for taking on these challenges? And, knowing that no single seminary can do it alone, how can we best partner with other theological schools in fulfilling the necessary tasks?

I would pay special attention to strengthening our human resources. In the final analysis theological education is about faculty and students interacting in a way that strengthens the church's ability to promote the cause of the gospel. I would establish new financial aid programs for students to come to Fuller, but also work with fledgling seminaries in Africa, Asia and Latin America to develop scholars, libraries and curricula for equipping the exploding church in the Southern Hemisphere.

We would also need to consider programs of faculty nurture that would enable us to provide solid theological guidance to these leaders and institutions. I would initiate ambitious participant-observer research programs, in which our faculty members and graduate students preparing for seminary teaching would be given adequate time and support to study frontline ministries in North America and around the world. And I would see to it that we provide the necessary funding to experiment

with their recommended changes for theological education.

All of this may seem a bit heavy on the process dimension. But rather than moving too quickly to spend the money on new programs, much encouragement is needed right now for asking the right questions!

—*Richard J. Mouw, president, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California*

Admissions requirements could be raised by offering scholarship grants for one year of preseminary courses for applicants who are endorsed by the church but who lack a strong liberal-arts background, have inadequate writing skills, or are new to the Christian faith and need further catechetical instruction.

More rigorous admissions criteria would permit faculty to assume a common academic foundation on which to engage students at a deeper level in the academic curriculum. (An alternative would be to make the basic M.Div. degree a four-year course of study, with opportunities for advanced work and specialization for those students not needing remedial work who wish to do further graduate work or a specialized ministry.)

Curricula could be structured so that periods of intensive academic study were supplemented with off-campus internships, immersion experiences or cross-cultural programs. All students would be expected to spend a significant period of time living in a culture that is different from their own. They would be encouraged (perhaps required) to spend time in a non-Christian culture, whether of another religion such as Islam, Judaism or Buddhism, or in a secular context where Christianity is regarded as simplistic, irrelevant or oppressive. Students would be asked to reflect on the experience of being part of a religious minority rather than a member of a dominant culture, to offer an analysis of the religious, social, economic and political culture in which they have lived, and to be able to offer a clear and coherent defense of the Christian faith to those who do not share it. Financial grants would support travel and living expenses.

New faculty could be hired to enrich both the formal and informal curriculum. We might add a poet, for example, or a rabbi, astronomer, physician or politician: individuals who would stretch our theological imagination as they encourage students and faculty to engage the broader culture in which they live, and to relate their theological insights to that culture.

Faculty could be offered incentive grants, and time away from teaching, to experience three to six months of full-time ministry in a congregation or other ministry setting, such as a school or college chaplaincy. These experiences would not replace regular sabbaticals for research but would provide opportunities for teachers to experience some of the different contexts in which seminary graduates live and work. They would also enable faculty to serve as a better resource for clergy and congregations, and to assist in the development of pedagogical models and methods that can be used by clergy and lay leaders in their roles as teachers and educators.

New programs could be developed to take the resources of the seminary off-campus to areas not served by theological schools. Some courses would be offered on-line; others would involve travel to other parts of the country or world. Learnings from those different settings would then shape instruction on campus. Such initiatives would keep the seminary curriculum conversant with the changing needs of the church and the world.

—*Martha J. Horne, dean, Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia, Alexandria, Virginia*