

Innovative moment

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The church ordinarily does a good job burying the dead. It has a harder time burying programs or institutions that are no longer fulfilling their intended mission.

That challenge is one of many facing theological education. With declining student enrollment, diminishing revenue and often deferred maintenance on aging buildings, many seminaries are trying hard to cast a viable vision of the future and to figure out what programs are crucial, which should be revised and which should be buried.

Institutions in survival mode typically spend little time or energy in visionary thinking. It would be a shame if the current crisis in seminary education didn't lead to fresh thinking about how the church calls, trains and places people for pastoral ministry and other forms of church leadership. As L. Gregory Jones notes ( ["Something old, something new"](#)), seminary educators have been trying to re-envision seminary education for decades, but little has changed on the ground.

Fortunately, the Association of Theological Schools and some of its member schools are thinking in new ways about theological education. Several seminaries are experimenting with a multifaith approach to education, which has the prospect of bringing in new revenue and students and is a bold strategy for engaging people of other faiths. It also raises the question of whether it is possible to form Christian students for ministry in such a setting—especially when many seminarians are not very grounded in their own faith upon arrival.

The crisis in seminary education is also prompting some to rethink the curriculum. Should the three-year master of divinity degree continue to be the standard for pastoral preparation or should different models be offered? The question is especially pressing given that the future is likely to see a rising demand for bivocational pastors who are called to serve in small churches.

The traditional seminary curriculum has always had to fight against compartmentalized learning. The task of integrating learning and applying it to ministry has often been left for students to figure out on their own. One hopeful sign is that some seminaries are thinking about developing a competency-based curriculum. They are asking: What competencies do church leaders need? What kind of curriculum best develops those skills?

However seminary education is revised, two elements are crucial: first, an emphasis on the praxis model of learning, with increased opportunities for on-the-job training under supervision; and second, more training that is built around the specific needs of congregations and contemporary modes of proclaiming and embodying God's healing and hope, peace and justice.