

Why should small churches give to seminaries?

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A colleague came to visit me at my office. He had been asked to talk with all the Presbyterian pastors in our geographic area to see if we would add the Theological Education Fund (TEF) to our budget. They wanted each church to give at least 1% to the fund that would be disbursed to our denominational seminaries.

I have always given to my seminary personally, but when I imagined bringing the request to our local church board, I (literally) hit my head on my desk.

“You have to understand. We’re a small church. I’m the pastor, secretary, janitor, and plumber. Last week an elder instructed me on how to put termite poison in the piling foundations (that’s where I drew the line),” I exhaled and continued.

“You’re asking us to give money to seminaries, some of which have massive endowments. Do you know how many secretaries some of these seminaries have? Their secretaries have secretaries. And they keep adding Vice Presidents. The weirdest thing about the addition of all the management? The student body keeps dwindling. Many of these seminaries have residential student bodies that are the same size of our small church.

“The students they do have are coming out with more debt, which puts a greater burden on churches to pay us more. You see how we run. We’re on a shoestring here. You can’t ask small churches to give to seminaries. It makes no sense.”

He left. He didn't return the next year, and I’m sure he was probably deterred from asking any more small church pastors to make room in their budgets.

It’s been many years, and I know I was wrong. I don’t think I was wrong about the VPs and secretaries. Since that day, I’ve only seen the student bodies dwindle with the addition of VPs, Deans, and attending secretaries. (When I’ve asked why, I get a strange response about how the office of the President has more power when he or she has more VPs.) This is not the case with all seminaries, of course. A couple of them have faced such dwindling endowments that they've had to become

shoestrings as well.

But I was wrong about small churches not supporting seminaries. I guess I didn't understand the academic ecosystem well enough. Gifts to institutions mean that we have a bit more of a relationship and a little more power in decisions. Seminaries have to care about what churches think. And churches have to think critically about what seminaries are up to (beyond the usual conservative criticism that the institutions are too liberal).

Am I saying that seminaries don't care about small churches? No, I'm not. My seminary has worked hard build relationships with educational events and lunches with pastors. But I do think we have some challenging years ahead, and the more we can communicate honestly with one another, the better. Giving and receiving gifts opens up more conversations, it allows pastors to communicate what we need. That conversation with the TEF rep was an important one to have. He needed to hear what my session was saying behind closed doors. And we all need to keep having these dialogues.