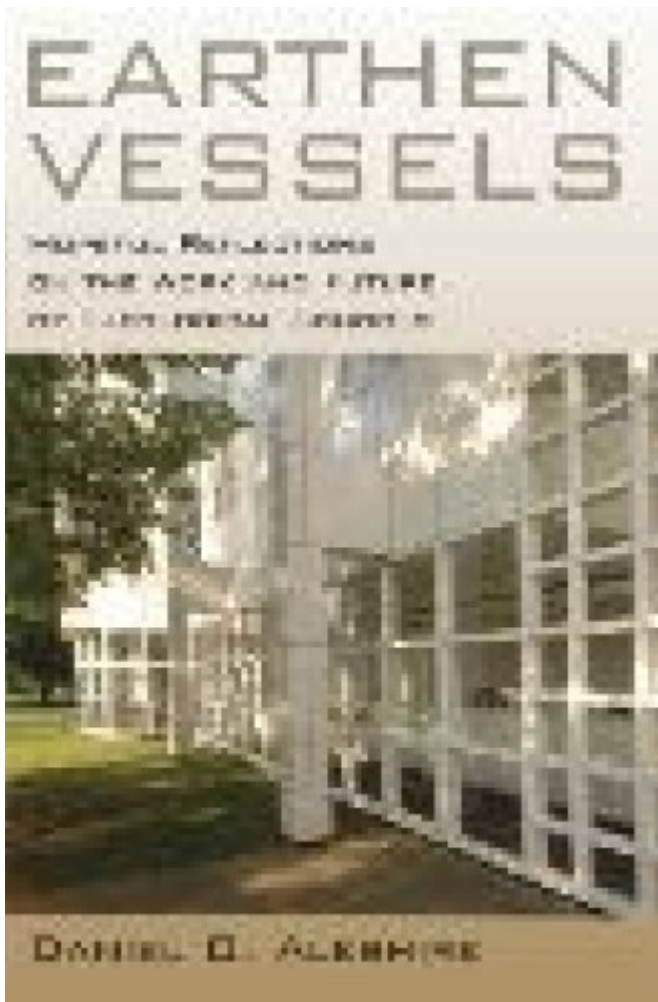


Precarious institutions

by [Dale T. Irvin](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools

Daniel O. Aleshire
Eerdmans

Wilbert Webster White, founder of New York Theological Seminary, once wrote that by 1900 he had become “clearly convinced that a reform was needed in theological education amounting practically to a revolution.” More than a century later, Daniel Aleshire is still convinced that reform is needed in theological education—reform amounting if not to a revolution, then at least to significant change. Aleshire contends that in many respects we are coming to the end of the world as we know it. The change in North American society is “deep, pervasive, and marks a turn away from the way things have been,” he writes in *Earthen Vessels*. “Theological schools will need to adapt, but change is precarious business.”

Aleshire is executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, an organization made up of some 250 graduate schools of theological education. ATS provides resources for its member schools and works closely with the Commission on Accreditation, the nationally recognized accrediting body for graduate-level professional theological training. It is hard to imagine a better perch than Aleshire’s from which to see and understand what is happening in theological education in North America today.

Aleshire’s approach is a descriptive one that he calls appreciative inquiry: “I want to describe what these schools do when they are working at their best, when they are doing what they were designed to do,” he says. His goal is to make the case for accredited theological education at a time when institutions of graduate theological learning are on the whole weaker than they have been in decades. Exploring the contours of such settings and the work that goes on within theological education, he makes a case not only for theological schools but for a well-educated clergy.

The landscape of theological education that Aleshire surveys is riddled with challenges. The weakening over the past several decades of the denominational structures to which a number of seminaries and divinity schools are tied, and the accompanying drop in the funding that these churches provide to their schools, has had a significant negative impact on the Protestant denominations that have historically trained their clergy for ministry. The Roman Catholic Church has also experienced a significant decline in the number of men pursuing the priesthood. The Orthodox churches, while not losing in the number of their clergy, have not registered significant increases. Among Pentecostals and many evangelicals, there is not as strong a commitment to the professional training of clergy, so although evangelical schools within ATS have grown in both enrollment and influence, many

would-be clergy within these denominations continue to pursue alternatives to accredited theological training.

Churches are paying their clergy proportionately lower salaries today than they did a generation ago, making it more difficult for ministerial candidates to justify the high cost of a graduate degree. Schools are having a harder time attracting them to take three years out of their lives and move away to graduate school. Many schools are not located near enough to potential constituencies to become effective commuter institutions, extension centers are not always easy to develop, and an entirely online master of divinity degree is still not an accredited option. The situation can be daunting.

Aleshire's remedy is to turn inward, to look deeply into the heart of the project of theological training to find the resources necessary for meeting these challenges. Theological schools, he argues, are values-driven institutions that are energized and directed by faith. Students don't generally go to seminary or divinity school to get a better job. They go there because they feel called to pursue something of higher meaning in life. Churches nurture this sense of calling in their leaders as a fundamental expression of the life of faith. The faith commitments or values that motivate seminaries and divinity schools are the treasure that lies within the precarious earthen vessels of theological learning. They are the most important resources theological schools have for overcoming their precarious situation.

But why is an accredited graduate theological degree the best way to go? Theological schools are, after all, not the only institutions training people for ministry, Aleshire recognizes. Nor are they the only places where people can learn to be effective ministers. They are, however, in Aleshire's view, the "best setting in which the knowledge, skills, perceptions, and dispositions that are needed for this time can be learned." Theological schools are hybrid institutions, related both to the church and to higher education. As such they are capable of joining believing and learning in ways that other institutions of ministerial training cannot.

The work of theological schools is to facilitate learning for a religious vocation. Aleshire explores in some depth the nature of the teaching and research that take place within theological schools, situated as they are with one foot in the accredited academy and the other in the ecclesial community. Theological learning is not so much for the accumulation of knowledge or the development of skills as it is for the formation of leaders in whom dispositions, knowledge and skills coinhere with

integrity.

Theological research follows suit. For Aleshire, research is the “risk capital” of theological education, and as such it needs to matter. By way of example he cites a number of recent projects carried out by faculty of ATS-member schools that have been funded by ATS research grants. One was a project by a faculty member at a school related to the Southern Baptist Convention who sought to renegotiate relations between the Arminian and Reformed theological wings of the church. Another explored the tension between missionary and indigenous theological understandings of the Spirit in African Christianity. A third concerned theological understandings of persons with disabilities. Aleshire’s point is that good research, like everything else in a theological school, is a values-driven pursuit, serving the intellectual needs of ecclesial communities in ways that are intellectually defensible.

Theological schools must teach, but they must also function well as institutions. Authority, structure and process are the three strands that come together to form the fabric of institutional life, and Aleshire gives each a careful look. In line with his notion that theological schools are values-driven institutions, he argues that governance needs to be guided by mission. Best practices—such as shared governance, in which faculty, staff and students participate with the board in the decision-making processes of an institution—are reflective of the values with which he is concerned. Good administration is likewise empowered by internal motivations and values, such as stewardship and the desire to serve. Repeatedly Aleshire directs the reader’s gaze inward toward the values, calling and mission that are the primary resources for the effective governance and administration of a school.

Earthen Vessels is in some ways a handbook on how to sustain the reforms needed in theological schools. This change ought not entail “ceasing to be one thing and becoming another,” Aleshire writes toward the end of the book. “Instead, change resembles tree growth”: schools should add “new rings . . . without discarding the old ones.” Theological schools do not need to abandon their identities or leave behind their pasts, he contends. They need to build on these in ways that are effective and that allow them to take risks.

In the end, the risks that theological schools must take are not for their own sake. “In a culture that gives religion a less-esteemed place, the church needs leaders who can passionately make the case for faith, who have the gifts and abilities to lead congregations, and can help those congregations do faith’s work in the world,”

Aleshire writes. “Ministry is never about the minister; it is always about the gospel the minister proclaims.” In other words, theological education is about the gospel that theological educators are called to nurture.

It is to this that Aleshire calls us in a fresh way. Reading through these pages, I was repeatedly drawn back not just to the mission statement of my institution, or to the various commitments and concerns of the students, faculty members and trustees who help make my institution what it is. I found myself thinking about the churches we serve as a graduate school of theological learning. What are their values? How do they understand their calling? To what are they seeking to respond in their ministry in the world?

If seminaries and divinity schools take Aleshire’s analysis and proposals seriously, they will pay more attention to the winds of the Spirit as they blow through the churches—not just the churches in North America, as Aleshire points out several times, but churches around the world whose students are coming to North America in large numbers to study for the ministry. In this regard *Earthen Vessels* points the way forward for theological education in an age of global Christianity.