

Seminaries find homes in congregations

Churches have long outsourced theological education. Now it's moving back.

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St. Mellitus College, London. Photo by [Sophie Francisco](#).

Seminary education is changing at a high velocity, and no one quite knows where it is headed. Almost everyone agrees that technology will be increasingly important, but no one knows precisely how. Almost everyone agrees that student indebtedness is at catastrophic levels, but no one knows how to wean schools off giving government-guaranteed loans that students will have to pay back after graduation.

(The exceptions are the few schools that aim to build an endowment that covers tuition.) Almost everyone knows that most students are not likely to dive into a three-year residential experience far from home. Instead, students are seeking out a seminary education close to home; they tend to be older, with families, and with no intention of quitting their current job. Increasingly they are staying where they are and studying online.

Arguably, this approach is better for the church. Why should potential congregational leaders uproot their lives, borrow large sums of money, and rip up local connections when they can study online, try out what they learn about ministry in their own congregations, and grow in effectiveness and competence right where they are?

Schools linked to fast-growing megachurches are among those that are adapting more quickly to these new circumstances. Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Asbury Theological Seminary's extension campus in Memphis, and the St. Mellitus College in London illustrate the trend. Their innovative programs arise from partnerships with large congregations that have a track record in evangelism, a pastoral staff adept at media and technology, and church campuses with lots of underutilized space.

Like many innovations in theological education, these changes are in part driven by necessity. Saint Paul School of Theology was located in downtown Kansas City until a financial crisis forced it to close that campus in 2013 and begin holding classes at the Church of the Resurrection in far suburban Leawood, Kansas. With some 20,000 members, Church of the Resurrection is the largest United Methodist congregation in the world.

Faculty and alumni lamented losing an inner-city address in exchange for a home at an exurban church. But the school had natural ties with COR. COR's founding pastor, Adam Hamilton, had been chair of SPST's board, and over the years the church had sent many students to the school. The school already had some experience using other sites for teaching through a partnership with Oklahoma City University. SPST courses were commonly taught live in one setting and virtually on the other campus. Even before the move, SPST had begun reenvisioning its curriculum to bring it closer to the local church, said Hal Knight, a longtime SPTS professor.

The close connection to the Church of the Resurrection allows the school to offer practicums with COR pastoral staff on nuts-and-bolts topics like funerals, stewardship, and youth ministry. It also offers the chance to learn from the wider ministry of COR, which has been one of the most effective of all mainline congregations at church growth.

The relationship has also had its tensions, according to Knight. One is that COR is part of the centrist-to-evangelical wing of the United Methodist Church, while SPST has been a more liberal and social justice-oriented institution. An academic institution and a congregation also operate on different rhythms. For example, when COR had a midweek funeral, it would sometimes bump the seminary's daily worship service out of the chapel. But church-school communication has improved over time. If the alliance is leveraged correctly, the school could position itself as a place that produces ministers who understand how to lead congregations based on the experience of COR.

Knight says SPST's regret at moving out of the city was colored with some false nostalgia: "We weren't doing a lot of social justice ministry," he said. Drafting off the energy and resources of a giant and growing congregation has allowed the school to survive when otherwise it might have closed. Knight compared SPST's alignment with the Church of the Resurrection to the way some other seminaries have embedded themselves in universities or university-related divinity schools.

Another experiment in theological education is the Memphis campus of Asbury Theological Seminary. Asbury is a school in the Wesleyan tradition, and though it has no official relationship to the United Methodist Church, it trains more than half as many UMC ministers as the 13 official UMC seminaries combined. In 2013 the school was given use of an entire building at Christ United Methodist Church, a growing congregation of some 5,000 in Memphis.

The church's pastor, Shane Stanford, is known in the UMC for cohosting the most recent iteration of the denomination's Disciple Bible study. His predecessor at Christ Church was Maxie Dunham, who later became president of Asbury. The school hired Jason Vickers from the faculty of United Theological Seminary, where he'd been a prolific author and speaker and helped take that school from the brink of extinction to viability largely by investing early in online education. As Asbury-Memphis's lone faculty member, Vickers is leading what he calls a "seminary plant," an analogy to a church plant.

This year Asbury-Memphis has close to 80 students. The school aims to serve a metropolitan region where there have been few options for theological education. Vickers calls the school “intensely regional.” Most students commute from their homes in Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, or Missouri. They don’t have to move to Wilmore, Kentucky—the site of Asbury’s main campus—but can keep their jobs, pay for school, and develop as ministers where they are.

Asbury-Memphis makes little effort to offer on-campus formation, drawing instead on Christ Church’s ministry. Vickers says the church is “neck deep in every kind of ministry imaginable in the downtown core of Memphis, so there’s a real urban renewal piece here.”

Students may complement their Memphis course work with online work at Asbury, but the school is not moving toward offering a fully remote degree. “The vision isn’t 65 hours online and 12 to 20 in Memphis, but probably the other way around,” Vickers said.

One of the youngest and fastest-growing theological schools in the West is St. Mellitus College in London, established by the bishops of London and Chelmsford in 2007. It is named after the first bishop of London, who lived in the early seventh century. Mellitus is known for his missional engagement with the pre-Christian Britons, so he’s an apt figure to preside over an institution seeking to reach post-Christian Britons.

The college, which has about 400 students, was not created ex nihilo. It is the merger of two diocesan-based initiatives for equipping missional leaders. St. Paul’s Theological Centre at Holy Trinity Brompton Church (home of the Alpha Program) joined with the North Thames Ministerial Training Center and in 2012 moved into a facility built for them at St. Jude’s Church in Earl’s Court in the west of London. The new digs include wired classrooms, a library, offices, and meeting spaces. St. Mellitus is developing an array of programs in church planting, youth ministry, and short-course introductions to Christianity.

With its focus on “generous orthodoxy,” worship, missional leadership, and engagement with a post-Christian Britain, St. Mellitus has quickly become a center for people working for the revitalization of the church in the rocky soil of the United Kingdom. It has assembled an impressive faculty, including former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. Williams said, “In a relatively short time, St. Mellitus has

established itself as a uniquely innovative training institution for ministry in the Church of England, offering a model of intellectual and spiritual formation that is serious, challenging, and creative.”

Schools linked to large churches have been able to adapt to changing circumstances.

St. Mellitus names academic excellence as a core priority—no surprise at an Anglican school. But from the beginning St. Mellitus has fused academic learning and praxis, moving well beyond the standard field-education model. It sees students’ lack of mobility as a strength, not a problem. Students spend just a little time on campus, and the school puts a great focus on students’ nurturing Christian witness in their own community. Students at St. Mellitus hear things from faculty and bishops like “We want priests who can cut mustard in the Pig & Whistle”—that is, pastors who know how to engage in witness and theological reflection at the local pub.

Sam Wells, vicar at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, said that St. Mellitus has “developed real momentum by absorbing not only ordination candidates but also next-stage new believers and laypeople dipping a toe in theological water.” While St. Mellitus is facing the growing pains expected at a young institution, Wells said the school has already done three remarkable things: invigorated the diocese of London, breathed energy into nonresidential training, and shown the wider church that Holy Trinity Brompton—which has had a unique place in the Anglican world—is serious about its connection to the whole church.

It’s the graduates who will ultimately test St. Mellitus’s claim to produce Christian leaders with “diligence for study, fervor for mission, and perseverance for ministry.” As Darrell Guder at Princeton Theological Seminary once said, “the test of theological education is not what kind of graduates a college produces at convocation, but rather what kind of Christian communities are they equipping and nurturing years after they leave the seminary.”

One of those recent graduates of St. Mellitus is already making a big impact in Canada. Graham Singh’s reentry into the Christian faith came from a coworker’s unexpected question, “Would you like to come to church with me this weekend?” Singh, a graduate of the London School of Economics who was working happily in London, gave his colleague a friendly but firm rebuff. Having been raised in a

congregation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Singh had drifted in the church's great alumni association, with only occasional visits to church on holidays back home in Ontario. His coworker respected the polite rejection but kept the door open.

One day Singh accepted the invitation and attended the friend's local church—which was Holy Trinity Brompton. There the Holy Spirit “re-called” Singh to a life of discipleship that eventually caused him to leave the business world for theological studies at St. Mellitus and ordination in the Church of England.

After serving on staff at HTB, Singh felt the call to return home to Canada. He moved with his family to Guelph, Ontario, a midsized city outside of Toronto where he grew up and where his father and grandfather had been doctors. Singh teamed up with Lakeside Church to reopen a historic 175-year-old United Church of Canada congregation—renamed Lakeside Downtown—that had closed after years of decline. Singh spent the next three years drawing on his training at St. Mellitus and building leadership and relationships in the neighborhood.

When asked why a church planter would want an old church building Singh said, “Old churches are centers for our community. There are very few parts of our human existence where we really understand the depth of our human history. Old churches help us to stay connected with a deeper sense of community and history.”

Singh then accepted the invitation of Anglican bishop Mary Irwin-Gibson to move to Montreal and to serve the almost-closed St. James Church in the core of the city. Montreal presents unique challenges to church planters. The historic dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec and the subsequent rejection of the church by people during the “quiet revolution” of the 1960s have left behind a post-Christian culture with a lingering hostility to Christian witness. Singh's engagement with the local community is bolstered by his bilingualism (a critical asset in Quebec) as well as his willingness to be a “fool for Christ” even if that means wearing a pink bunny suit and walking the streets of the city inviting people to church.

Singh worries that too many seminaries are responding to the shifting sands of gospel and culture by trying to bolt one more skill set onto an already cumbersome master's program. Singh notes that it was the dynamic partnership between the ministry of Holy Trinity Brompton Church and the bishop of London—apart from any university—that gave birth to St. Mellitus.

Central to each of these experiments in theological education is the connection to a large—even enormous—congregation that has the resources and confidence to provide ministerial training. These seminaries are also located in metropolitan regions from which they can pull students and to which they can send graduates. But these schools haven't grown by focusing only on church-growth strategies, as some critics might assume. They have been led by ministers who are deeply invested in theological education and who are effective at encouraging people who feel called to ministry. These leaders want to educate seminarians right where they are.

These experiments show that an educated clergy is still central to mainline church ministry. But what is meant by education—and how people get it—is changing.

Read the sidebar article on [startup seminaries](#).

A version of this article appears in the February 15 print edition under the title "Seminary at the megachurch." That edition incorrectly states the number of graduates from Asbury Theological Seminary relative to United Methodist seminaries. The online edition was corrected on February 16. We regret the error.