

Startup seminaries

by [Jason Byassee](#) and [Ross Lockhart](#)

This article appears in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue.

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Some important experiments in theological education are happening on a small scale. The Immerse program at Northwest Baptist Seminary in Langley, British Columbia, and the Yellowstone Theological Initiative in Montana are examples of what might be called “boutique” institutions, which are small enough to be able to change and try new things quickly.

Northwest Baptist is part of a consortium of conservative seminaries at Trinity Western University. It is wed to a small denomination called the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches, which has some 100 congregations in British Columbia and the Yukon Territory, a partnership called Fellowship Pacific.

Northwest has received a great deal of media attention because of its Immerse program. This competency-based model of theological education, launched in 2012, hands students a degree not when they have passed a certain number of courses but when they have demonstrated competency in a few dozen specific areas. Competency is judged by mentors assigned from the seminary faculty, the denomination, and the congregation in which the student is working.

The model is affordable because the student is employed and doing ministry while being evaluated. The degree is accredited with the Association of Theological Schools as a benevolent exception—ATS wants to support the increasing variety of models of theological education. The program works partly because Fellowship Pacific is a small group with relatively tight understanding of what makes for a good minister. Even so, denominational and school officials have had to hash out long-held stereotypes: that the school is a clueless ivory tower, and that the local church is a brainless place where charisma trumps everything else.

President Kent Anderson describes Immerse as a reverse-engineered education. Normally we think of the client of theological education as being the student. That's a mistake, according to Anderson. The client is actually the local church that will be served by this student throughout his or her career. When the seminary asks the local church what it wants, it will be amazed at what the church comes up with.

Anderson recalls that a denominational official said to the seminary faculty, "We need some more exegesis in here, some stronger hermeneutics in this program." The professors' jaws dropped—a church was opting for an academic field over how-to's or cheap tricks for growth. "It was a good moment," Anderson said.

Another startup in the northwest is the Yellowstone Theological Institute. The president, Jay Smith, was a pastor in Bozeman, Montana, who decided that much of the training he'd received in Southern Baptist institutions in the United States was ill-suited to the west, which was a post-Christendom region if not a territory hostile to the faith. "Youth groups would come up here from places like Texas and try to evangelize door-to-door, and they'd get spit at," Smith said.

Yellowstone, which started in 2012, is funded by a former parishioner of Smith's who made money in wireless technology. Plans for a beautiful campus in Bozeman are on the drawing board. Meanwhile, faculty teach some 40 students in churches in Boise, Idaho, and Bellingham, Washington, as well as in Bozeman, offering courses for both laypeople and potential ministers. The school admitted its first M.Div. student last fall—impressive for an institution without a campus. Like Immerse, the curriculum is competency-based.

Churches have long outsourced theological education to research universities or schools inspired by the university model of education. If the church is going to take back theological education, and if it wants to develop ministers who can help the church grow in unpromising soil, it will need to draw on the wisdom of pastors who have done this work. These schools are gambling that competency-based education is the way to do that.

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