

Facing theological ed's existential crisis

Four schools and the creative paths they're charting

by [Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue



(Illustration by Daniel Hertzberg)

At a 2015 gathering of educators in Pittsburgh, Stephen Graham of the Association of Theological Schools had one pressing question: Is it time to reset theological education?

“The ordinary solutions are just not sufficient anymore for many schools,” he said.

Since then, a number of seminaries have opted to sell their campuses, rent space, or merge with other institutions. Some have closed.

A confluence of factors brought theological schools to this point, among them Christianity's shrinking footprint in the United States and negative perceptions of Christianity around the world. Fewer and fewer students are enrolling in MDiv degree programs. And although more students are taking advantage of MA degree

offerings, more ATS schools are declining than experiencing growth.

These challenges were made all the more complex and urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused massive disruption to many educational institutions.

Ted Smith, author of *The End of Theological Education*, takes the long view of the decline in seminary enrollment, seeing it as part of a much larger trend. It's not just clergy and congregations experiencing decline, he said. US society itself is experiencing a profound shift, as voluntary associations like the Boy Scouts and Rotary clubs also are on the wane.

Many schools that have changed their educational models have also expanded their definition of what it means to be a minister—while making training both more affordable and easier to access, frequently online. The four schools featured below have taken different routes to survival, but they share at least one thing in common: they serve as laboratories for an unpredictable future.

In 2017, the governing board of Andover Newton Seminary, the oldest seminary in the United States, signed a historic affiliation agreement with Yale Divinity School, merging the two schools.

The merger required closing Andover Newton's Massachusetts location. But because ANS students are now also YDS students, they have access to all the spaces and services the Connecticut campus offers, said Sarah Drummond, founding dean of the newly minted Andover Newton at Yale Divinity School.

"ANS's offices and conference rooms, as well as a student fellowship space and overnight guest space, are located in the northwest section of the YDS quadrangle," she said. "They have distinct space, but ANS and YDS are inseparable."

Drummond said the decision to enter merger negotiations was about money. "When you combine lots of deferred maintenance, decreasing enrollment, and a tuition-dependent revenue structure, our donors were getting really nervous," she said.

ANS students make up roughly one-third of the MDiv population at YDS. Edwin Perez just finished his second year as an MDiv student, although he has been engaged in ministry for approximately eight years. Ordained originally in the Pentecostal tradition, Perez enrolled at ANS so he could be ordained as a United Church of Christ minister.

In addition to pursuing his degree, Perez serves as pastor to two congregations: the Congregational Church of Naugatuck and the bilingual Manantial de Gracia UCC.

Perez said that ANS's focus on providing opportunities for connections between students has made it easy to build formal and informal relationships with others in colloquiums and in weekly dinners and worship services.

"The manner in which Andover Newton fosters community is unique, perhaps because of the traditions that have historically been tied to it," said Perez. (ANS has a historical affiliation with both the UCC and American Baptist Churches USA.) "While we all care about community at YDS, it is refreshing to see what ANS brings to the broader community: another perspective in reimagining church."

On the flip side, Perez, who needs to work to support his studies, said that he wishes the school would provide evening classes for those in his situation. "It is quite difficult. And I suspect it's an issue in other places as well," he said.

Natalie Owens-Pike, also pursuing ordination in the UCC, graduated from ANS this past spring. A former teacher and nonprofit director, she was looking for a seminary environment that combined strong academic credentials with a small community and training for ministry.

"It felt like this could be the best of both worlds," she said of the ANS and YDS collaboration.

Owens-Pike, who worked as an interim sabbatical pastor and in pulpit supply while in seminary, said she's noticed a lot of concern in congregations about "what comes next" as they navigate shrinking post-pandemic church attendance at a time when there may be increased need among their own members.

Now director of ministry to the online campus at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, Owens-Pike is, in some ways, already part of the next wave of pastoral outreach, launching a new role at the church as pastor to those who primarily join worship and church programming online.

She said she isn't overly anxious about the future. She notes that she has done a lot of river canoeing and rafting: "I'm someone who trusts the river to carry us to where we need to go."

Though the ANS-YDS merger required many years of work and some tough choices, Drummond said she feels like there have been a lot of signs from God that they did the right thing—including an impressive applicant pool, flourishing programs, and graduates landing great jobs.

For the first time, she said, she’s participating in an institutional strategic planning process “without it feeling like a purely imaginary exercise.”

The idea of a United Lutheran Seminary has been around for more than a century, said R. Guy Erwin. But it took awhile for the vision to become a reality.

Erwin, a former Evangelical Lutheran Church in America bishop, became president of the dual-campus ULS in 2020, three years after it was born of a merger between two Pennsylvania institutions: the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

“Nobody wanted the [two] seminaries to be fundamentally different than they were,” Erwin said of the merger process.

Founded in 1826 in a town that later became famous as the site of one of the Civil War’s pivotal battles, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg’s first mission was to train students to minister in pioneer territory.

Launched almost 40 years later, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia was situated in an urban setting. Its original focus was on ministry to Philadelphia’s under-resourced populations. The school was also central in spurring Lutherans to create a common prayer book.

At the merged ULS, the Gettysburg campus has more than 40 acres, while the one in Philadelphia is half of a large city block. Approximately a third of the school’s residential students live in Philadelphia, as do most of the faculty. But, said Erwin, “until I retire, I’m committed to not divesting ourselves of either campus.”

More than half of ULS students are enrolled in the MDiv program. The school also has a growing population of DMin candidates.

MDiv candidate Brynn Anderson said she was drawn to the Philadelphia campus because she hopes to go into campus ministry and prefers to learn in an urban setting.

The 24-year-old digital native said she's comfortable nurturing online connections and enjoys the chance to learn from professors in other locations and make new friends. On the other hand, she said, "I would like to see more people here." (She estimates 15 to 20 students reside in the Philadelphia buildings full-time.)

At the Gettysburg campus approximately 140 miles to the west, Hannah Tonn recently wrapped up her first year in the MA program. She said she preferred the openness, comfort, and safety of the Gettysburg environment.

After finishing her degree next year, Tonn hopes to go on to a PhD program that would prepare her to teach ancient history or the history of early Christianity. If she has any regrets, it's the lack of professors who live in and around Gettysburg, she said.

In addition to the two campuses, ULS also has a substantial group of students who are enrolled in distributed learning or a "third campus." This cohort doesn't take in-person classes, though they do gather for on-site intensives.

Christian Hicks is a second-year MDiv student at the distributed learning third campus. He said he loves the program because ULS has made it possible for him to hold down a full-time job as director of enrollment for graduate and professional studies at Eastern University, to be a parent, and to attend all of his classes online.

"If you had asked me ten years [ago] if I ever would have considered online seminary, I would have said no. By nature, it's a very relational program," he said. "But given where I am in life, and where a lot of my classmates are, this is the better option. The great thing is, we don't have to sacrifice the quality, comradery, or the faith formation."

Since becoming president of ULS, Erwin has dealt with a number of complicated issues, from the effects of the pandemic to the need to find ways to make faculty pay scales equitable. But despite the tumult of the past three years, Erwin sounded confident that the ULS community was adapting, "with a certain amount of hand-holding and a lot of love."

It's clear, however, that he doesn't see the work of adaptation as complete.

Given the different ways in which students are learning, it's difficult to encourage graduates to become part of a community devoted to learning once they graduate,

Erwin said. Should continuing education be a requirement? Should a period of residency or an internship precede ordination? Clergy education doesn't end with obtaining a degree, he said.

"I'm convinced that the church needs us to find ways to force our future leaders into communities of learning, so that when they leave the seminary, they just don't put their books on the shelf and hang their hood in the closet and never look back," he said.

Born in 2012, the Iona Collaborative at Seminary of the Southwest works to support and increase the prominence of bivocational clergy. Nandra Perry, who directs the program, said it evolved out of a way of training local priests in the Episcopal Diocese of Texas.

"This was a way to prepare people for ministry who, for whatever reason, could not attend a residential seminary . . . to work in congregations that, for whatever reason, could not afford to pay a seminary-trained clergyperson," she said.

But soon other dioceses wanted to replicate the model in their own settings. In 2017, the Seminary of the Southwest, an Episcopal Church-affiliated school in Austin, became the program's administrator.

Currently, Iona provides curricular resources to 35 US Episcopal dioceses, with the seminary producing academic content in partnership with local educators who are responsible for preparing people for part-time ministry.

"We have become a community of theological educators who come together to collaborate on best practices, sharing resources, and learning with each other," Perry said.

Though course content is offered online, students often meet in person with instructors at a central location in a diocese, Perry said. If a diocese stretches over a vast geographic area, there are fewer in-person encounters and more online instruction. Periodic retreats for participants in various Iona Collaborative programs bring peers together and help strengthen networks, particularly those formed by bivocational ministers, she added.

Two Lilly Endowment grants have allowed Iona to expand the breadth of its offerings.

One Lilly-funded program, Thriving in Bi-Vocational Ministry, provides continuing education resources to newly ordained, locally trained clergy. (This year, the program has expanded to include lay pastoral leadership.)

The other, Thriving Bi-Vocational Congregations, provides spiritual direction via Zoom to the congregations of small churches. It's an opportunity for congregation members not only to take responsibility for their own spiritual growth but to help craft a vision for their church.

In a denomination that has traditionally asked clergy to take on the bulk of leadership responsibilities, Iona offers small congregations a chance to thrive and dioceses reasons not to give up on them.

"We are learning so much from these small congregations about how to be church together," Perry said. "We think these little churches are actually an amazing lab for the Episcopal Church."

Perry speaks from experience. In addition to directing the Iona Collaborative, she's also vicar of a small congregation, St. Philip's Episcopal Church, in Hearne, Texas (average attendance: 19 on a Sunday).

"It is precisely in rural America where the Episcopal Church is sometimes most needed," Perry said. "I wish you could meet the people in these congregations, in these small places. I want to tell more of the story. Because I really do feel that these are the stories that give us hope."

When Gregory Henson was appointed president of the North American Baptist-affiliated Sioux Falls Seminary in 2013, he found a group of people who were interested in creating a model of theological education and formation that was affordable and relevant.

When SFS launched the Kairos Project the following year, it focused on a model of learning that was built on relationships with churches, denominations, and other seminaries. Henson—who was trained in business, although he had also served as a pastor and a youth director—said the focus of the project was always about principles rather than money.

"The Kairos Project was born out of a commitment to the mission of stewarding followers of Jesus who flourish in their vocations for the sake of the world," he said.

“It was not developed to be an answer to financial challenges.”

In 2021, the Kairos Project, which had become a network of seminaries (called legacy partners), became Kairos University. Rather than merging or embedding, these seminaries, which include both US and Canadian schools, are “trying to find a third way to think about collaboration,” said Henson, now president of Kairos University.

Kairos students represent more than 70 denominational traditions and span a wide spectrum of theological perspectives. The hope is that Kairos can honor the history and identity of each seminary community while creating shared resources and reducing costs.

This approach to learning, which Kairos calls “theological hospitality,” spurs students to test their convictions across denominational lines, encouraging them to “have the humility to recognize that we’re all trying to follow Jesus,” said Henson. “But you also need to be able to talk and think about the things you say to be true about God.”

While all of their accredited programs can function online, Henson said Kairos encourages students to recognize they have multiple communities of learning at their disposal.

Kairos wants to center learning on “communities of practice” like church and family, Henson said, as well as the classroom. Every student in a denominational ordination process has a mentor team, which includes faculty as well as a vocational mentor (often drawn from a church or denomination) and a personal mentor.

Kairos has both an academic emphasis and a practical one on integrating counseling and faith. In addition to offering two master’s and a PhD degree in mental health, Kairos owns and operates one of the largest outpatient mental health clinics in the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, area.

Jenna Hiron is the family ministries director at Terwillegar Community Church in Edmonton, Alberta, and an MDiv student at Kairos. Though she is taking her classes online, she said, it’s still important to be doing it in the company of students in her locale who are part of the process.

“Geography matters, when it comes to working out and understanding how our faith is practiced within our local context,” she said.

Hiron, the mother of an eight-year-old and a five-year-old, said her experience at Kairos has been “exceptional.” Having the flexibility to do the program virtually made it possible. And she appreciates the diverse backgrounds of people she has met, as well as the ability to choose courses tailored to her goals.

Because the school favors an “outcomes-based approach,” Hiron said, she is in charge of her own educational journey and is able to ask questions like, Where am I at right now? Where do I want to be? What do I need to learn in order to be more effective in my ministry area? Next year Hiron will pursue ordination in the North American Baptist tradition.

At Kairos, instead of paying per class or per credit hour, students pay for a monthly subscription. If an MDiv student pays \$300 every month, for example, it makes costs more predictable and detaches course content from costs. Board meetings are open, Henson said, and faculty make decisions by consensus.

But Henson said that while the school’s multimodal learning model has gotten a fair amount of attention, he doesn’t want to pretend that it would work for everyone.

Seminaries need to think collectively, he said, about how they can stay affordable, accessible, and relevant, while remaining faithful to the call to form disciples. Every day, he said, there are people “God is inviting into deeper journeys of discipleship, deeper opportunities, and leadership in His church. How do we come alongside them?”

Online and hybrid learning. Education geared to nontraditional learners. Making theological education more accessible and affordable. These aren’t magic bullets. Though some theological institutions have managed to find constructive approaches to the changes around them, higher education itself is navigating enormous challenges.

Ted Smith said that although he believes there will be less need for clergy with professional degrees to staff the congregations of the future, “there’s a greater need for religious leaders of many other kinds. The desire for learning about God and the Bible and justice is still really intense. It’s just not flowing through those voluntary associations anymore.”

Asked if the existential angst of the past was gone, ANS's Drummond answered with a hefty dose of realism.

"It's more manageable," she said. But "in this culture, it can never be gone."