



Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative

Appendix: Challenges and Opportunities Facing Theological Schools

During the last several months, Endowment staff has engaged in conversations with theological education leaders about the disrupting forces impacting their schools. Presidents, deans, board members, faculty and senior administrators have described daunting challenges that must be addressed to strengthen and sustain their institutions' efforts to prepare and support pastoral leaders into the future. At the same time, they have identified new opportunities for enhancing their schools' educational and financial capacities to carry forward this aspect of their missions. In many cases, both the challenges and opportunities facing theological schools are closely intertwined.

Based on these reports from theological schools, the Endowment offers the following brief descriptions of some of the important challenges and opportunities that appear to be common for many schools. Through the **Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative**, the Endowment seeks to assist theological schools in addressing these kinds of challenges and opportunities as they work to strengthen and sustain their efforts to prepare and support pastoral leaders for Christian churches.

Addressing the changing leadership needs of Christian congregations today and in the future

Church leaders have noted significant social and cultural trends affecting congregations and report that patterns of worship attendance and participation in congregational life are shifting. Pastors report that regular participation, which was once viewed as weekly attendance, now means attending church once or twice per month. Religious leaders also report that many forms of ministry, such as Sunday schools, youth groups and Bible studies, are not attracting the same level of participation as in the past, and many churches are finding it difficult to recruit and retain volunteers for their programs. These leaders recognize that congregations need to reassess how they approach and organize their ministries and adapt them to their new and emerging contexts. One implication is that the pastoral leadership skills needed to guide congregations today, as well as in the future, may differ from those needed in the past. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this implication quite vivid as challenges of in-person gatherings have pushed many pastors to adopt digital technologies to livestream worship and extend care to members. At the same time, researchers have documented a widening financial gap between large, well-resourced congregations and a growing number of smaller churches that struggle to employ full-time pastoral leaders. Religious leaders note that the leadership skills needed to shepherd a small congregation with meager financial resources may differ significantly from those needed to lead a well-resourced congregation with a large staff. Since patterns of congregational life are changing and most pastors will serve congregations in different ministry contexts during the course of their careers, these leaders recognize that pastors will need to possess the knowledge,

skills and experiences required to help congregations adapt to their changing contexts and to lead churches in a variety of ministry settings. These observations underscore the importance for theological schools to build and deepen relationships with local churches to understand fully the current and future leadership needs of congregations so they can prepare graduates to serve congregations of various sizes and in different ministry contexts.

Responding to the changing demographics of Christianity in the United States and Canada

As the United States and Canada continue to become more racially and ethnically diverse, the demographics of church life in both countries also are changing. Hispanic and other newer immigrant congregations, for example, are growing and increasing in number. Many of these congregations, as well as long-established Black churches, serve as anchor institutions in their communities and engage in wide-ranging ministries to support their members as well as those who live in their vicinities. Many theological schools are already exploring ways to broaden their historic religious constituencies and to come alongside current and aspiring pastoral leaders in these various communities. Leaders from these schools acknowledge that their efforts need to recognize the distinctive traditions and methods of identifying, educating and preparing pastoral leaders within many of these communities. At the same time, many schools also recognize the need to examine and address racial biases and inequities embedded in their historic educational approaches as they reach out to these religious constituencies. Several schools are seeking to enhance current and/or launch new initiatives that recognize the strengths and vitality of a broad variety of congregations and work with a spirit of mutuality that promotes learning not just for students but also for faculties of theological schools engaged in these endeavors. They acknowledge that providing contextually appropriate education for pastors and lay leaders from emerging constituencies is challenging, but they appreciate that the opportunities hold the possibility of strengthening and enlivening congregations and theological schools alike and of building and strengthening networks to support pastoral leaders from diverse Christian communities that are more inclusive and just.

Strengthening or rebuilding the financial models needed to sustain theological schools

In recent years, many theological schools have endeavored to adapt their financial models to improve their institutions' stability and viability. Today, most schools sustain their operations through a combination of student tuition and fundraising, while seeking to employ more cost-effective platforms and technologies to keep their educational programs affordable. As enrollment has declined, many schools have enhanced recruitment and developed new degree programs to serve more diverse student populations. Many also have implemented new pedagogical models and adjusted curricular requirements to make their programs more accessible. Still, many theological school leaders lament that the costs of theological education continue to rise faster than revenues for their schools, often resulting in increased tuition and fees leading to more educational debt for many graduates. The COVID-19 pandemic also has heightened awareness in many schools about disparities in the financial resources provided to students from communities of color. Theological schools are not alone in facing these daunting financial challenges, which reflect broader trends in higher education. The Endowment recognizes that presidents, deans and board members are working diligently to address these challenges. Despite their best efforts, however, many leaders know that even more substantial changes are needed. They are eager to strengthen current and explore new financial models and develop potential new funding sources to ensure that their institution's educational opportunities remain viable, accessible and affordable.

Recruiting and educating a new generation of Christian leaders

Theological schools are working hard to identify and recruit students, especially younger students, who demonstrate the leadership and spiritual gifts to serve Christian churches. They have found that the aspirations and expectations of many younger students often differ from those of previous generations. Many Protestant schools also note that a growing number of younger students identify themselves as nondenominational and do not claim membership in a particular church tradition. Observers point to a deep hunger among many young people to pursue lives of meaning and purpose and marvel at their sincere and steadfast commitment to service and social healing. Because many of these young leaders at Protestant schools choose (at least initially) to exercise their leadership outside of congregations, some pastors and church leaders are establishing strong relationships with them to aid them in creating innovative ways of congregating and in developing new ministries in local communities. These younger leaders also are quick to use new forms of technology and incorporate them into innovative forms of gathering and congregating. In this manner, many young leaders are engaging in Christian ministries both within and outside traditional congregations and seeking pastoral roles that often blend their leadership as pastors within congregations with leadership in community organizations and movements. Theological school leaders recognize that they face a challenge and opportunity as they come alongside this new generation of young leaders, build relationships with them, teach them the wisdom of biblical and theological traditions and help them connect more directly their commitments to service and innovative approaches to social healing with the ministries of Christian churches. They know that this may require pedagogical imagination and changes in instructional approaches to address the interests and needs of these young leaders and prepare them for leadership in the Christian churches that they will serve.

Attending more intentionally to the spiritual and character formation of future pastoral leaders

Since its earliest days in North America, theological education has focused on the study of Christian scripture and theology. While the patterns of study have changed over time, the emphasis on acquiring knowledge of scripture and theology and developing a theological vision for ministry remains at the core of theological education. In recent decades, most theological schools have balanced instruction in the theological disciplines with teaching students the practical skills and practices of pastoral leadership (especially in Master of Divinity degree programs). Today many schools are maintaining their traditional approaches to theological education and, at the same time, giving more attention to the spiritual and moral formation of future pastoral leaders. Theological faculty and administrators, as well as church leaders, recognize that the demonstration of personal qualities, such as spiritual maturity, moral integrity and relational ability, is critical for pastoral leadership. They also recognize that the formation and cultivation of these qualities require different kinds of educational approaches. Supported by the recent adoption of ATS' new accreditation standards, theological schools recognize the challenge and opportunity to work more intentionally to prepare students to serve as pastoral leaders who not only possess knowledge and practical skills but also display spiritual maturity and embody the moral character needed by Christian leaders today.

Developing the capacities of faculty to support new educational approaches and institutional strategies for preparing students to meet the emerging leadership needs of Christian churches

Another common challenge and opportunity for theological education focuses on the work of faculty. Theological education leaders note that necessary educational and institutional changes cannot be implemented unless faculty are prepared to teach students whose backgrounds are very different from their own and in formats that, in most cases, were not part of their own educational training. They observe that theological schools that offer attractive, immersive programs for faculty development and that recruit faculty from diverse backgrounds and training may be more likely to find changes in curriculum and educational delivery systems easier to put in place. In addition, many theological education leaders remark that schools may need to re-examine the composition of their faculty, especially the number of faculty from communities of color as well as the reliance on contingent faculty, and explore the educational and financial impacts of the composition on their institutions' abilities to carry forward their mission. At the same time, church leaders note that faculty scholarship is critical to help pastors and other religious leaders understand the wisdom embedded in Christian traditions and to draw on it to examine the ethical and moral dimensions of contemporary challenges. These church leaders are eager for schools to encourage and support faculty to engage in the kind of scholarship that opens up new horizons, and, equally important, help theological faculty learn how to communicate their work well beyond the boundaries of scholarly guilds.

Recovering from the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed tremendous stress on theological schools and churches as well as the wider communities that they serve, and many schools and churches have pivoted quickly to adapt to their changing circumstances. Many theological educators believe that the pandemic has generated a greater openness to innovation, especially in the use of digital technologies. At the same time, presidents and deans have noted that the pandemic has made visible many points of stress and conflict in their school's historic educational approaches and financial models, especially regarding racial and other biases and disparities that may be embedded in their educational strategies and financial practices. Theological educators note that there will not be a simple return to the status quo as their schools and communities eventually recover from the pandemic. Rather, they believe that the recovery will present opportunities for theological schools to re-imagine and rebuild more adaptive and inclusive educational approaches and financial models needed to strengthen their institution's effectiveness and viability for the long term.