

THE PARISH PAPER

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Editor: Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

January 2015 - Volume 23, Number 1

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Our Future Pastors: Assessing the State of the Pipeline

Significant trends suggest that attracting and preparing people for pastoral leadership is becoming more difficult. What obstacles stand in the way of supplying congregations with the kind of leadership required in the future?

Their Preparation for Ministry

Those who wish to be congregational leaders typically obtain the Masters of Divinity (M.Div.) degree. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) lists a membership of 275 schools, with enrollment of around 30,000 M.Div. students. Currently, two out of three M.Div. graduates seek to serve in parish ministry.¹

Seminary enrollments peaked in 2006, but have declined about one percent annually since. Student enrollments reflect the changing religious environment—declining attendance, weakening denominational support, and financial challenges. Those tracking seminary enrollments do not predict substantial growth of the student population over the next ten years.²

Question: Two trends stand out in theological education—a declining number of people attending seminary and a decreasing number of current ministry students planning to seek a pastoral position. Will there be an adequate supply of seminary-trained pastors to meet the demand in the future? It is not clear because two other trends stand out in the context of the local congregation. Currently, the average age of pastors is 55; therefore, the number of retirements will rise, creating vacancies. With the shrinking size of many congregations, fewer churches will be able to employ a full-time pastor after the retirement of their current one. How will these trends affect congregational needs for pastoral leadership?

The Demographics of Current Students

The profile of those seeking theological education shifted in terms of average age, gender, race, ethnicity, and marital status over the past decade. The enrollment decline in recent years is almost entirely linked to a falloff in white student enrollments.³

Over the same period, the percentage of Hispanics enrolled increased by 50 percent; the African-American percentage grew by 13 percent.

Seminary enrollments show a decline for students in their twenties, thirties, and forties. However, enrollments for students fifty to sixty-five years of age grew modestly and stabilized. The cohort over sixty-five years of age continues to grow. Once overall enrollments began to fall, enrollments for women fell faster. The percentage of women currently enrolled in M.Div. programs has stabilized at about 30 percent. Further, the profile of women preparing for ministry confirms that they are more likely than men to be unmarried, older, or single parents.

Question: Today's seminary students are less likely to be mobile and able to relocate compared to students in the past. To overcome the barriers of location, seminaries opened extension centers or branch campuses, offered night and weekend classes, created "online" or "distance" education, and/or created hybrid courses using these new strategies. Will these new approaches meet the needs of underserved populations seeking to answer the call to pastoral ministry?

Why Do They Go to Seminary

Most seminary students say that they are seeking a M.Div. degree because they are responding to a call



"I SEE YOU RECEIVED YOUR SEMINARY DEGREE THROUGH A DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM..."

from God. Other reasons are important as well—a desire to serve others, to find spiritual fulfillment, for personal growth, and for intellectual development.

Pastors and other leaders spend significant amounts of time mentoring and training people for ministry. A number of seminary students named the congregation in which they grew up as a significant influence in their sense of call to ministry. They spoke of the “tap on the shoulder” by the pastor or an admired member, who recognized their gifts for ministry.⁴

Question: Some congregations emphasize a theology of vocation, which expects that God calls everyone, every day, to ministry. Other churches that practice a culture of calling, a place where people hear God’s call, are relationally healthy and create many leadership-development opportunities for both young people and adults. Does our congregation identify and nurture future ministers?

Their Financial Lives

Although the average cost of theological education is modest compared to other graduate degree programs, tuition rates prohibit many from enrolling. Students now pay an average of 88 to 139 percent more in tuition (in real, after inflation dollars) than enrolled students in 1991. Increasingly, students carry forward educational debt from their undergraduate degree, plus any amount of debt incurred during seminary. Almost two out of three students today incur some debt to complete their masters’ degree. Roughly one in four students graduate with more than \$40,000 of debt.⁵

Post-graduation debt profoundly affects the personal, family, and work lives of students. Faced with loan payments, most wish they had borrowed less. Half said that they face difficult financial circumstances. Debt-laden students report a reduction in their standard of living, postponing health care, or making the difficult choice to take a higher paying non-ministerial position (with the hope of making their loan payments).

Question: Churches of all sizes set aside annual funds, or establish endowments, for financial assistance to seminary students. Some churches also create scholarships for college students who plan to enter seminary. Many congregations develop supportive relationships with one or more of their denomination’s seminaries. What role does our church play in making seminary training more accessible and affordable?

Their Evaluation of Seminary and Preparation for Ministry

Seminaries vary in the amount and quality of vocational guidance they provide students. Some graduates feel they received little counseling about career oppor-

tunities and experienced poor placement services. As a result, they were more uncertain about seeking ordination and less knowledgeable about, and thus less interested in, congregational ministry.

M.Div. graduates said they were most satisfied with the teaching and overall academic experience, support, and accessibility of faculty, helpfulness of administration and staff, and their friendships with other students. They believe that the seminary prepared them for ministry by developing their trust in God, self-knowledge, ability to think theologically, and ability to use and interpret Scripture. They reported lower levels of satisfaction with their ability to administer a parish.⁶

Question: Some congregations offer internships—paid or unpaid—to help people practice their ministry gifts. Other churches frequently invite seminary students to preach in their pulpit or actively seek out students looking for a “first call.” Does our congregation build the kind of relationships that form bridges for individuals making the transition from theological student to pastor?

The Bottom Line

Every congregation serves the wider church by strengthening the traits that attract people to ministry in the first place. For example, leader-generating churches take seriously the task of making disciples. They also align their resources with their vision for vital ministry rather than operating in maintenance mode. By their involvement in local mission and outreach, future ministers in their midst cannot miss ministry’s relevancy to the world.

Some churches identify, support, and send out one or more future pastors each year. Others cannot claim that a single member has entered preparation for ministry during the past twenty years. Which kind of leader-sending congregation describes our church?

1. Data based on 2010 Graduating Student Survey from ATS. Sharon Miller, Director of Research, Center for the Study of Theological Education (CSTE), conversation, November 2014.

2. B. Wheeler, A. Ruger, and S. Miller, *Theological Student Enrollment*, CSTE, August 2013.

3. A. Ruger and C. Meinzer, *Through Toil & Tribulation: Financial Theological Education 2001-2011*, July 2014.

4. B. Wheeler, et al., *On Our Way: A Study of Students’ Paths to Seminary*, CSTE, February 2014, 30.

5. S. Miller, “Where’s the Pipeline: Female Students in Theological Education,” presentation at the Religious Research Association, November 2014.

6. S. Miller, “Where’s the Pipeline.”