

Anderson University School of Theology

“Trends in Theological Education in North America”

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Delivered at the Church of God Theological Administrators’ and Instructors Forum,
Fritzlar, Germany, March 15-19, 2010

Abstract: This paper examines the theological trends in North America that are
impacting seminaries.

Over the next few hours I want to invite you to “think about” the landscape of theological education in North America. I know there are significant cultural differences between how ministerial preparation is done in different parts of the world but my hope is we might discover some common ground as we think through what has been done in the past and what may be required for the future.

The preparation of spiritual leaders has a long history. From the Old Testament schools of the prophets,¹ to the second century schools of Justin in Rome and Origin in Alexandria², to the Monasteries and burgeoning Universities of the Middle Ages³ the people of God have been determined to pass on the faith once delivered to the saints.

In the sixteenth century the Roman Catholic Church created a new environment for the formation of priests called the “seminary” literally meaning seedbed. At the Council of Trent⁴ (1545-1563) the Catholic Church officially adopted the term seminary as the place where spiritual leaders would be developed apart from the corrupting influences of the culture.

“In the United States, a seminary is one of several institutions that provide post baccalaureate training for men and women for various churches and synagogues.”⁵ Other terms used to describe such educational spaces are “Schools of Theology or Divinity Schools” the latter often located within larger Universities.

In the United States prior to the nineteenth century clergy were encouraged to obtain a liberal arts undergraduate degree and then serve in a parish under the tut ledge of a seasoned minister. However by the twentieth century collective wisdom discerned that this tutorial approach was creating gaps in clergy knowledge and formation therefore denominations began to form their own seminaries for the education of clergy. “Concern for the adequacy of such preparation led Massachusetts Congregationalists to found Andover Theological Seminary in 1808”⁶. Other denominations followed the lead and two centuries later (2009) the number of accredited seminaries in the United States and Canada has grown to over 250 schools.

In the nineteenth century individual seminaries under the guidance of their own ecclesial judicatories guided the growth and development of seminaries in North America. However in 1918 The Association of Theological Schools was formed to give oversight for the education of persons for the practice of ministry and for research in the theological disciplines. In 1936 the association also began the daunting task of accrediting theological schools.

¹ II Kings 2

² Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Erdmann Publishing, 1970), 172.

³ Charles Van Engen, *Shifting Paradigms in Ministry Formation* (Glendora, California: Charles Van Engen Publisher, 1994) 6.

⁴ 4. Jackson W. Carroll et al, *Being There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 9.

⁵ 4. Jackson W. Carroll et al, “Being There” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 9.

⁶ IBID, 9

In the early years of theological education in the United States most seminaries within the Association of Theological Schools were affiliated with and dominated by main line denominations. Most of these main line protestant denominations were transplanted from England (Episcopal and Methodist) Germany (Lutheran) Scotland (Presbyterian). In addition to these European churches the United Church of Christ (Congregationalists) American Baptist (USA) and Disciples of Christ (Christian) became known as the “Seven Sisters “of Protestantism. There are other groups linked with mainline churches however these “Seven Sisters of American Protestantism (William Hutchinson) were the largest and most influential.

The Association of Theological Schools categorizes member schools as Mainline, Evangelical and Catholic. Currently 56% of member schools are Mainline, 22% are Evangelical, 20% are Catholic and 1% is Orthodox. However in regards to enrollment, “Evangelical Schools on average are considerably larger than their main line and catholic counterparts. Average Evangelical enrollment is 452. Average Mainline enrollment is 258. Average Roman Catholic enrollment is 142.”⁷ Evangelical seminaries and congregations continue to grow while Mainline Seminaries and congregations are in decline.

The future of theological schools in North America is uncertain. Some leaders are more optimistic than others. Dan Aleshire, President of ATS writes “there is almost no one who is unreservedly optimistic. I am more hopeful than worried and, every once in a while, unreservedly optimistic”.⁸ It is true that in the past fifty years ATS membership has grown by one hundred schools with only one closure. But even for those who are unreservedly optimistic there are certain trends impacting the future of theological education. Theological schools that will survive and thrive will be those who are nimble enough to negotiate a changing landscape.

Allow me to highlight five current trends shaping theological education in North America.

1. There is a widening chasm between churches and seminaries.
2. There are increasing numbers of students matriculating into seminaries that have not grown up in the church.
3. There is a growing awareness that seminary education is inaccessible for many potential students.
4. There are increasing voices raising the question...is seminary worth the financial costs?
5. There are forthcoming population shifts regarding race and ethnicity that will impact the ability of seminaries to prepare culturally competent leaders for the 21st Century and beyond.

THE WIDENING CHASM

Several years ago Leith Anderson, a mega church (2,000+) pastor in Minneapolis, Minnesota and friend of theological education was asked by a group of Seminary Presidents, “What do mega church pastors think about seminaries today?” His answer was, “they don’t think about

⁷ 4. Jackson W. Carroll et al, “Being There” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

⁸ Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels* (Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 169.

seminaries. They are busy with the task of running their churches thus seminaries are not on their radar screen”

Michael Battle former President of Interdenominational Theological Seminary and current Ambassador to the African Union said, “The church is necessary for the seminary, but the seminary is not necessary for the church.”⁹ While one may debate his statement, it is true that if churches decided they no longer need theological schools most if not all seminaries would be in trouble.

In the United States and Canada church attendance is higher than most developing countries.¹⁰ However church attendance patterns in North America are declining. “Some denominations have been declining in membership for forty years, and many theological schools are related to these denominations. On the other hand some denominations have been growing, and many seminaries are related to these denominations.”¹¹

Some critics contend that seminaries are equipping pastors to lead old paradigm churches that are eroding away. In a recent conversation with some mega church pastors Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary reported that several pastors said “for what they are called upon to do an MBA degree would be more helpful to them than a MDIV degree”.¹²

“In 2007 the number of megachurches in the United states grew by 108% over the 2000 figures. While representing less than one half of one percent of all churches in the United States, the attendance at these churches is approximately 4.5 million”¹³ Some contend that old paradigm seminaries, like old paradigm churches, focus upon the chaplain model where clergy are prepared to preach, care and administer churches of 100-200 people. For most part this is true. However, the question is “will the old paradigm churches continue to exist”¹⁴ (and they will) and if they do survive can they afford to hire a high debt seminary graduates?

David Tiede (President emeritus of Luther Seminary) advocates that the new paradigm of theological education is the “apostolate”. He writes, “We don’t have an established church that needs chaplains as much as we have a culture that needs to hear the Christian story because it’s not as embedded as it once was.”¹⁵ An Apostolate approach means developing leaders who know how to “initiate, start, and spread”¹⁶ rather than convene, manage and control.

If seminaries could begin developing apostles for the church a great need would be met for both church and seminary. If seminaries could supply not only biblical/theological and historical resources and but could also produce inspired evangelist/apostles for new paradigm churches, the

⁹ IBID, 129

¹⁰ U.S 25-35%; Canada 15%; Great Britain and Western Europe 5-6%.

¹¹ IBID 134

¹² Richard Mouw, Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents Annual Meeting 2010.

¹³ 3. Scott Thurma, Dave Travis and Warren Bird, “Megachurches Today 2005: Summary of Research Findings,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

¹⁴ A recent study from the University of Arizona report that only 1% of churches actually close their doors. The lowest percentage among organizations.

¹⁵ Holly Miller, “Theological Education at the Crossroads”, In Trust, (Autumn 2008), 8.

¹⁶ IBID,8

widening gap between seminary and church could close and partnerships in the ministry of the Gospel could be formed.

THE CHANGING STUDENT POPULATION

Thirty-fifty years ago the typical North American seminary student would have been a white male having grown up in the church. The stories of scripture would have been embedded in **his** heart through eighteen to twenty years of Sunday school, youth retreats, camps, conventions and short term mission trips.

Often a call to ministry would have come during one of these extracurricular activities sponsored by the church. The “call to ministry” would be processed with an influential congregational pastor. The congregational pastor would then help a youth member define the call and then help him begin to think about seminary after a good liberal arts education from a church related college. Parents and congregants were proud of their “sons” who would go off to prepare for the noble calling of parish pastor. The ministry was an esteemed vocation and the wider culture valued those who were called, prepared and commissioned to serve Christ through the church. However in the words of one popular artist, “times they are a changing”.

Dan Aleshire reminds us that “many students who come to ATS schools today have not grown up in the church.”¹⁷ The once assumed spiritual foundation of a life nurtured in the context of the church is no longer a reality. Therefore theological educators, who have often understood their mission as “developing minds,” must now be called also to work at the task of spiritual formation because congregants do not want leaders who can simply parse Greek verbs but desire pastors who are spiritually mature and who own a passionate belief. Seminaries in the future must do “very intellectually sophisticated stuff and encourage, at the same time, the kind of believing that provides integrity for a religious leader.”¹⁸

In addition to the increasing number of students who have bypassed the church on the way to seminary, are those who have grown up in the church but feel the church as they have experienced it is no longer relevant. One recent study reports “the number of students indicating an interest in congregational ministry is decreasing. ATS data suggest that older students are more likely than younger students to enter congregational ministry after graduation. But the population of younger students is on the rise. The pool of likely congregational ministers may therefore be shrinking.”¹⁹

However, on a positive note, the research also indicates that students who continue their work in seminaries are more open to the possibility of congregational ministry. Therefore seminaries are in some ways replacing congregations as the location where the call to parish ministry is being nurtured. Seminary professors are becoming the spiritual guides who are helping students process a call that may or may not take them into congregational leadership. Seminary will often

¹⁷ Daniel Aleshire, “Theological Education at the Crossroads”, *In Trust*, (Autumn 2008), 8.

¹⁸ *IBID*, 8.

¹⁹ 3. Barbara Wheeler, Sharon Miller, and Dan Aleshire, “How Are We Doing?”, *Auburn Studies*, No. 13, (November 2007), 15.

become the first step in beginning to understand and enter the cross cultural assignment of church life.

Seminary communities, especially evangelical schools, report a growing number of students who are beginning to prepare themselves for specialized ministry assignments within and without congregations. Some seminary and ecclesial leaders have feared the growing specialized master level degrees would work against a congregation(s) ability to fill leadership needs. However, “more than half of surveyed M.A. graduates served in ministerial positions after graduation and for those in professional M.A. programs (such as pastoral care or religious education), 58 percent are now ordained or licensed”.²⁰

Today classrooms are filled with women and men who have a wide variety of educational goals. Faculty members can no longer assume that class members are going to be solo church pastors or missionaries. There will be an increasing need for seminaries to employ professors who have a vital connection with the visible church if healthy congregations are to be a part of the religious landscape in North America.

THE NEED FOR ACCESSIBILITY

In the past (40-50 years) students primarily entered seminary directly from liberal arts undergraduate institutions. Tuition costs were largely funded by denominational budgets seeking to invest in future church leaders. Students (males) came to seminaries with a suit case in hand and lived in dormitories for three to four years. A long term value of theological schools in Canada and the United States has been that “teachers and students should study together over time.”²¹

This value found its way into ATS accreditation standards by mandating that every degree program should require one year of residential study. This seemed to work well until the potential seminary student populations began to change and national demographics began to shift from the north and east to the south and west. Presently “two- thirds of all schools in the United States and Canada are located in the eastern third of the two nations.”²²

In the decade of the sixties many denominations began to allow women to be ordained so female enrollments began to grow. In the eighties many adults in their thirties and forties decided to enter ministry thus seminary populations began to mature. However many older students find it difficult to pick up and move across country to attend seminary because of family responsibilities. For the past decade the question of residency²³ has come into question for both practical and philosophical reasons.

The first reason regards the practical implications of population shifts. Seminaries have come to realize that in order to serve large populations of students living at a distance they must create modes of curriculum delivery that take into consideration the question of accessibility. Beginning in the last decade of the twentieth century ATS allowed for one-third of a degree

²⁰ Jon Hooton, “The Graduates Speak”, In Trust, (New Year 2008), 15.

²¹ Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels* (Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 146.

²² IBID,147

²³ This will be an agenda item for the 2010 Biennial Meeting of Theological Schools in North America.

program to be offered by distance education (via internet or extension). During the first decade of the twenty-first century two-thirds of a degree program may now be offered through distance education. Since students for various reasons choose not to relocate to attend seminary, schools have to decide if they will develop delivery systems that make accredited degree programs possible.

Secondly some theological educators argue philosophically, that the geographically located seminary is not the best way to do theological education in the twenty-first century. Several are advocating a new approach to graduate theological education called “in-ministry formation.”²⁴ This approach insists ministry formation should be in a local missional context. Under this model a seminary student must first be recognized as a leader in a local context before admission into seminary. The seminary and church then enter into a partnership for theological education. The seminary provides biblical/theological/historical instruction via the internet, extension campuses and intensive residential programs while local churches or other missional enterprises provide formation and skills for ministerial preparation.

If seminaries are serious about making theological education accessible then they must begin to think outside the box and offer a variety of pathways to make education possible.

FINANCIAL AFFORDABILITY

One recent study by the U.S. Department of Education stated that “higher education has become too expensive to be afforded by the percentage of the population that need higher education if the United States is to stay competitive as a knowledge-based economy in a global marketplace”²⁵ While graduate theological education is, for the most part, considerably lower than other graduate programs such as law and medicine there is still a growing concern related to price.

The revenues to support seminary education come from student tuition, denominational support, endowment earnings and charitable gifts from individuals. The average cost for a three year Master of Divinity degree in North America has risen to \$100,000 dollars²⁶. When all aid is considered “students however bear about one-third of costs of their theological degree program. Forty-two percent of graduates say they will leave seminary with between ten-thirty thousand dollars in educational debt. Repayment of debt greater than thirty thousand dollars likely will be difficult if a graduate’s income is limited to the average salary for entry-level ministry positions.”²⁷

The question being asked today “is a seminary education worth the cost?” This question may cause a person to reflect strictly upon a cost benefit analysis not whether an individual or congregation would be better off having a theologically educated clergy. Certainly it is the path

²⁴ Charles Van Engen, *Shifting Paradigms in Ministry Formation* (Glendora, California: Charles Van Engen Publisher, 1994), 14-15.

²⁵ Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels* (Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 142.

²⁶ Daniel Aleshire, “Theological Education in the Twenty-first Century”, Montreal School of Theology, October 19, 2005, page 1.

²⁷ Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels* (Grand Rapids Mi: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 144.

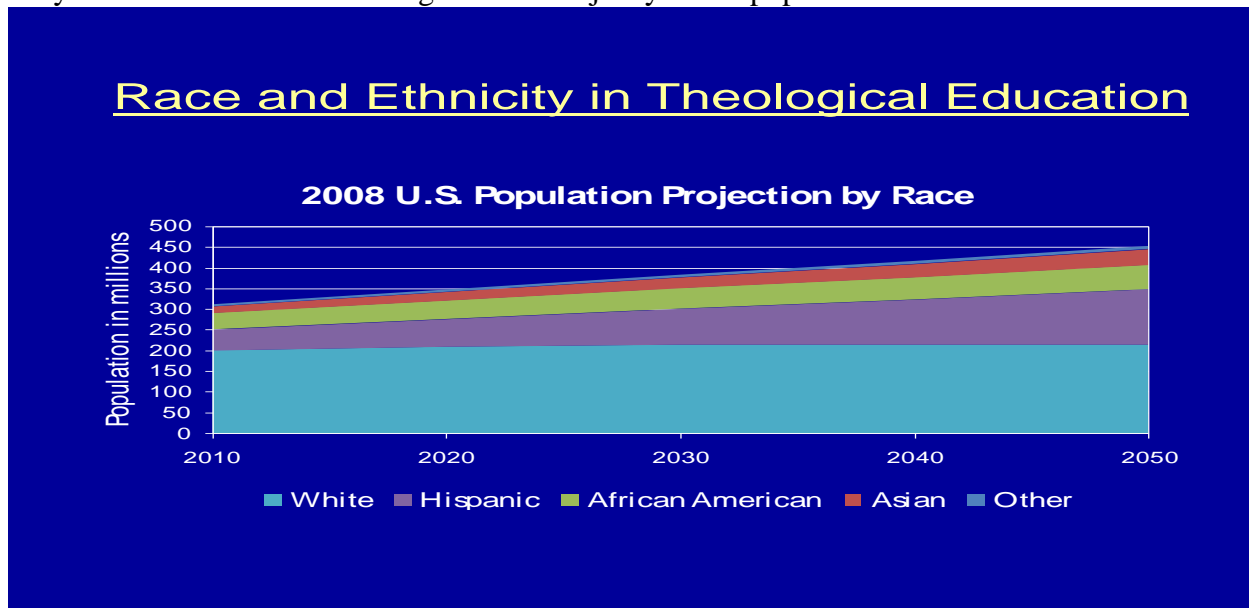
of wisdom for ministerial students to honestly evaluate whether they can pay for the education received.

Perhaps a better question is, “how can we make theological education not only more accessible but also more affordable?” This question requires those who believe in an educated clergy to have the courage to raise scholarship funds and stream line residential and online programs so that students get in and get out of degree programs in a timely and cost effective manner. It also requires schools to build the case for theological education so that donors and denominations are willing to prioritize giving to those schools that are graduating culturally competent ministers of the Gospel.

DIVERSITY

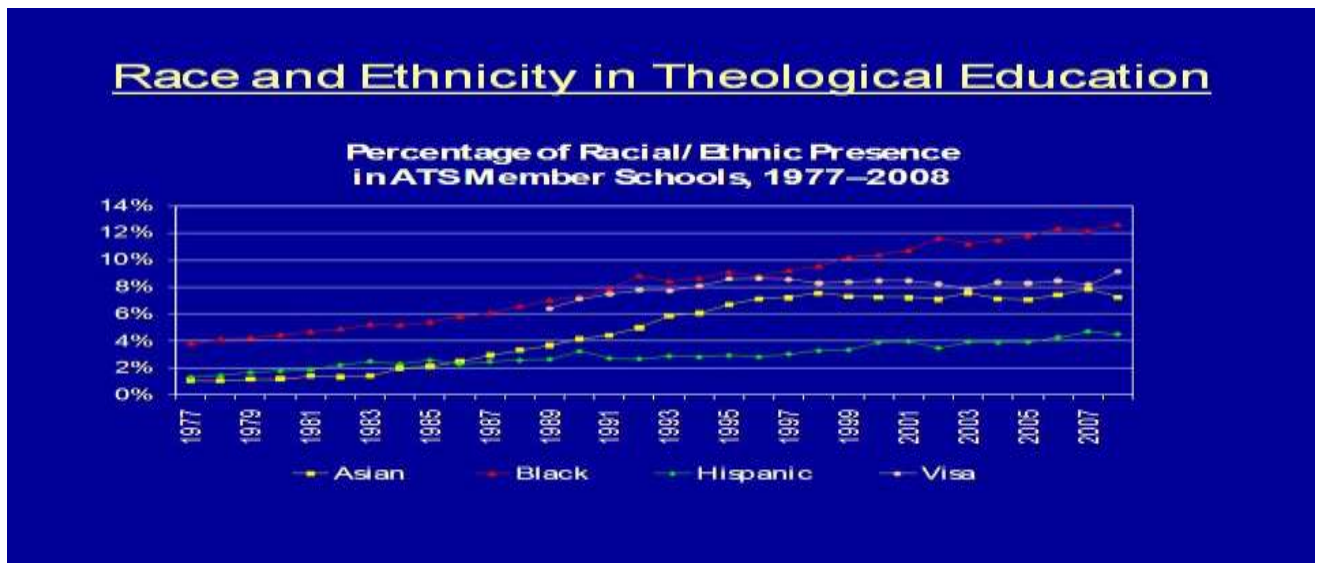
One of the greatest challenges and opportunities for theological schools is our nation’s growing diversity. This challenge has a theological and practical component. Theologically “it is one thing to conclude that racial prejudice and the discrimination that it causes are wrong and another to conclude that diversity is a theological virtue.”²⁸ To theologically embrace diversity is to live into the idea that God created diversity and has called it good. Therefore from a theological perspective schools will be better when there is a growing diversity of people joining together for a common mission.

Practically speaking North American culture is becoming more diverse therefore graduates must be prepared to lead in multiethnic contexts. The United States Census Bureau estimates that by the year 2040 whites will no longer be the majority of the population in the United States.



²⁸ Daniel Aleshire, “Gifts Differing: Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education”, Chief Academic Officers Society Seminar, (June 2008), 6.

Dan Aleshire in a fall 2009 meeting of theological schools in Canada and the United States reported that “historically ATS schools were white institutions in the 1960s. There were three black ATS member schools consisting of Howard Divinity, International Theological Consortium and Virginia Union. With the success of the civil rights movement people of color have radically changed the complexion of seminaries in the United States. Now non white headcount enrollment is approaching 40% and is continuing to grow”. If theological schools are to be relevant then schools must begin to reflect in constituency (faculty, staff and students) the diversity of the broader culture in regard to race, and ethnicity.

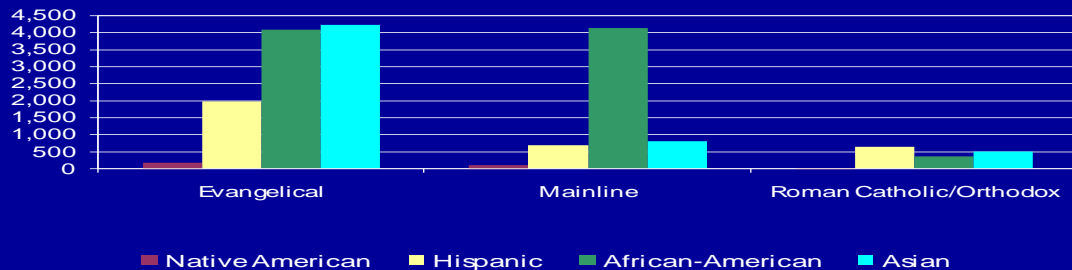


Aleshire also reported that “currently racial diversity is distributed in very different patterns across ATS schools. These students, however, don’t attend all seminaries in equal percentages”. Likewise different racial populations align themselves with different church families. ATS demographic studies report “the largest racial/ethnic group in evangelical Protestant schools is Asian/Asian North American (by a few hundred more than African American), and the largest Racial/ethnic group in Roman Catholic seminaries is Hispanic/Latino”²⁹.

²⁹ Dan Aleshire’s October 2009 report on Race and Ethnicity.

Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education

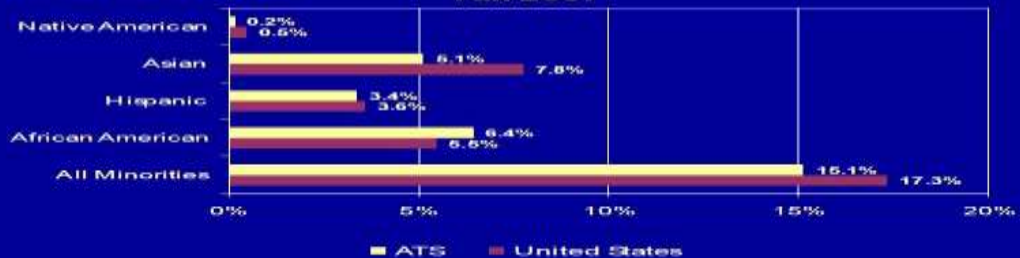
**Head Count Enrollment
by Racial/Ethnic Category and Ecclesial Family, Fall 2007**



One of the greatest challenges for ATS schools is to find minority faculty and staff to join ATS schools. The future is not encouraging for recruiting minority faculty. Again the current data from ATS reminds us that the “progress on the inclusion of racial/ethnic faculty is not as far along as the progress on student enrollment. The percentage of racial/ethnic faculty has been running between 15 to 17 percent of the total fulltime faculty of ATS for the past several years. The number of ethnic students enrolled in advanced research degrees is not keeping pace with ethnic population growth therefore the challenge will be great to find qualified ethnic faculty members to meet the needs in graduate theological education”³⁰. Larger and more affluent seminaries often have the inside track in recruiting minority faculty.

Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education

**Racial/Ethnic Faculty in ATS and U.S. Higher Education
Fall 2007**



³⁰ Ibid

Indeed times they are a changing. In her book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle proposes that “about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.”³¹

Theological education in the United States and Canada and the ministries of the church who gave her birth are changing. It would be wise for theological educators to recognize that cultural shifts have always taken place and it appears as though God has used these seismic shifts as opportunities to communicate divine intent. Rather than idealizing and protecting the past we can choose to welcome the future as a God given missional opportunity to prepare informed leaders to lead the church of God.

³¹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008)16.

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