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CANADIAN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST  
CENTURY—AN UPDATE AND EVALUATION<sup>1</sup>

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*Introduction and Method*

In a supplementary volume of the *Toronto Journal of Theology* on The Future of Theological Education in Canada, published in 2009, I analyzed and examined the crisis in which theological education in Canada was then mired.<sup>2</sup> In that paper, I examined all of the types of institutions represented by CHEC (Christian Higher Education Canada), including Bible colleges, Christian universities, seminaries, and graduate schools—although I concentrated upon seminaries and graduate schools. Tracing the variety of statistics available up to the 2006–2007 academic year,

1. This paper was presented and discussed at the first “Canadian Seminaries: Challenges and Opportunities,” Pre-Forum Conference, Christian Higher Education Canada National Forum: For Christ and His Kingdom: Inspiring a New Generation, King’s University College, Edmonton, 28 May 2012. Christian Higher Education Canada (CHEC) is an association of thirty-two Christ-centered institutions of higher education in Canada. I have been an active supporter of CHEC, serving on the amalgamation team and as a council member, board member, secretary of the board, and its chair. I was secretary of the board when I delivered this paper, but the views are my own.

2. This initial paper was first delivered at a conference of the Churches’ Council on Theological Education in Canada, entitled “Who Do We Think We Are? Re-Mapping Theological Education in Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” on 8 November 2007. At that conference I was invited to speak because of my connections to CHEC, although the opinions were, of course, my own (as they are here). This paper was published as Porter, “Theological Education.” There are other papers in this supplement to the *Toronto Journal of Theology* that address Canadian theological education, but none deals with the statistical trends.

I chronicled a decline in enrollment among Christian seminaries and graduate schools in Canada, in conjunction with increased strain on financial resources as a result, as most institutions are tuition driven. I then challenged seminaries and graduate schools to consider means of addressing these problems. Finally, I addressed the issue of culture, analyzing the results of the 2007 Ipsos-Reid poll sponsored by CHEC and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. I basically found that Canadian theological education is a relatively small entity within its much larger context of Canadian society, with a number of inherent limitations that it must face.

When I wrote that first paper—to date the only paper I know of that has examined the contemporary Christian educational scene in Canada in such statistical detail—I did not know that the economic crisis of 2008 was upon us. Nor did I know that the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the accrediting body for most seminaries throughout North America, would begin to focus so much upon competency-based assessment, in direct response to the pressures of its own accrediting agency, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, and the United States Department of Education. Nevertheless, these two things did happen.

This paper revisits the situation in Canadian theological education, focusing almost exclusively upon seminaries. Many of the challenges that I identified in my original paper have become worse, especially in relation to two major areas: finances, due to inadequate financial models; and decreasing student numbers, which translates into tuition revenue (so again, finances). Other areas of concern include a slowness to implement curriculum review and revision, on the part of both ATS and individual institutions, and failure to attract wider attention within our contexts. Despite these difficulties, one of the areas not successfully pursued has been significant partnerships and mergers. It appears that many of our institutions have considered it better to slowly hang separately than to hang together (to paraphrase a quotation attributed to Benjamin Franklin).

In this paper, I examine the two major areas that I discussed before—critical numbers and curriculum—and see where Cana-

dian seminary education now stands in relation to where it was only six short years before. Then, I add two new sections, one on implications in terms of indestructible institutions and another on avenues for further consideration.

### *Critical Numbers in Canadian Seminaries*

My earlier paper had limited accessible data. I now have a more accessible source, using ATS's 2011–2012 Annual Data Tables as the data base for my analyses. I deal with two sets of critical numbers—student numbers and financial numbers.

Canada now has 39 of the 260 ATS fully accredited, candidate, and associate seminaries (table 1.1-A of the ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Tables, hereafter cited in this format). When I surveyed the situation earlier, Canada had 35 of 252 such institutions.<sup>3</sup> This means that half of the additional institutions within ATS are Canadian (4 of 8)! This also means that Canada continues to have more seminaries per capita than the United States. The Stats Can website indicates that Canada now has 34,795,416 people (previously 33,165,087). This means there is an average of one seminary per 892,190 people, a decrease of around 5,000 people per seminary than four years ago (at 947,574). The United States, by contrast, with its 221 seminaries, functions within a population of 312,780,968 (previously 301,139,947), or roughly one seminary per 1,415,298, an increase in the number of people per seminary from last time (1,387,742). Seminaries in the United States have more people potentially supporting them than previously. Seminaries in the United States also now have over 50% more people per seminary available to draw upon than do those in Canada. From the outset, we see that Canadian theological education is moving in the wrong direction—Canada is adding

3. I realize that there are some anomalies in ATS statistics, but cannot hope to address these on the basis of my limited information. One clear oddity is that there are two institutions listed among the Canadian institutions that have no reported students, the Toronto School of Theology and University of Winnipeg School of Theology (apparently because they are reported elsewhere). The United States has several such institutions as well.

seminaries at a rate that decreases the number of potential people per seminary for support, just the opposite of the United States. This has direct implications in two major areas—the number of students potentially available for seminary education, and the number of potential donors to such institutions. Those in Canada have a decreasing base of people for both, whereas the United States is growing in support.

I now turn to the number of seminary students within Canada and the United States. According to my initial report, in 2006 a total of 82,279 students were enrolled in ATS institutions. That number has decreased each year since, so that in 2011 (for the 2011–2012 academic year) a total of 74,193 are enrolled (tables 2.2-A, B, C). This represents a decline of roughly 10% over six years. Whereas in 2006 there were 6,385 enrolled in Canadian institutions, in 2011 that number had decreased to 5,234. That is a decrease of about 19% or nearly 200 students per year on average. In my original article, on the basis of observation of only a limited number of years, I estimated that “if the downward movement continues at the same rate, in a mere five years there will be fewer than 5000 students in seminary in Canada.”<sup>4</sup> I missed it slightly. If the downward trend continues, next year Canadian seminary students will have decreased to below 5000 students. This means that Canadians attend seminary as a percentage of national population at a rate of .015% (down from .019%), in contrast to the United States, where people attend seminary at a rate of .022% (also down from .025%). Within Canada, the average size of an ATS seminary is now 134 total students per institution (141 if the two institutions with no reported enrollment are excluded; down from 182 students six years ago), compared to 312 in the United States (itself down from roughly 350 students six years ago). The United States itself is experiencing a downward trend in seminary enrollment, but it is not nearly as great a decrease as in Canada.

So far, we have been dealing with rough overall figures. The distribution of these figures across institutions is worth examining in more detail.

4. Porter, “Theological Education,” 46.

TABLE 1  
Distribution of ATS Institutions by Total Head Count for All Schools  
From ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 1.4-A

Head Count	Number of Institutions	% of All Schools
Under 75	39	15%
75–150	84	32.3%
151–300	73	28.1%
301–500	32	12.3%
501–1000	17	6.5%
Over 1000	12	4.5%
No Report	3	1.2%

Comparison with 2006 indicates that there are ten more institutions in the under 75 category (29 before), sixteen more in the 75-150 category (68 before), and fewer institutions in each of the other categories (seven fewer in 151-300 from 80; nine fewer in 301-500 from 41; two fewer in 501-1000 from 19; and one fewer in over 1000 from 13). This indicates that there is an increase in smaller institutions and decrease in larger institutions, over the last six years.

By comparison, Canadian institutions do not follow exactly the same overall pattern, but there is room for concern nevertheless.

TABLE 2  
Distribution of ATS Institutions by Total Head Count for Canadian Schools  
Based on ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 1.4-C

Head Count	Number of Institutions	% of Canadian Schools
Under 75	13	33.3%
75–150	9	23.1%
151–300	13	33.3%
301–500	1	2.6%
501–1000	1	2.6%
No Report	2	5.1%

A comparison with 2006 reveals that there are four more institutions in the under 75 category (9 before), one less in the 75-150 category (10 before), two more in the 151-300 category (11 before), but two less in the 301-500 category (3 before) and one less in the 501-1000 category (2 before). There has been a clear retraction in overall numbers, including in the larger institutions, with only two Canadian institutions now exceeding 300 total headcount, whereas there were five before.

These figures can be further refined, to give a more precise estimation of where CHEC institutions stand in relation to the other Canadian theological institutions. I use the standard ATS differentiation of institutions on the basis of being evangelical, mainline Protestant, or Roman Catholic (although this is not indicated in the statistics themselves). Of the 39 ATS seminaries within Canada, evangelical seminaries number thirteen, of which eleven are CHEC members (if my calculations are correct), seventeen are mainline Protestant, and seven are Roman Catholic, whereas two are interdenominational (these two have no students, so they do not affect the statistics).<sup>5</sup> Evangelical students within ATS institutions account for 2,755 of the total number of students in graduate theological education within Canada, or 53% of the total number of students (a decrease from 56%), with an average size of 212 total students enrolled in each seminary (well down from the 254 total students of six years ago). Mainline Protestant seminaries have a total of 1,614 students, or 31% of the total, with an average size of 95 total students enrolled (down from 112 six years ago). Roman Catholic institutions have a total of 865 students, or 16% of the total, with an average institutional size of 124 total students (significantly down from the 207 students of six years ago). These are not encouraging figures. In my previous paper, I wondered out loud whether it was possible for a seminary with a total headcount of 112 to continue to be viable (mainline Protestant), but 95 students (the

5. See ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 1.2, “Significant Institutional Characteristics of Each Member School, 2011–2012” in the Annual Data Tables, for much of the information regarding enrollment, full-time equivalent, and long-term investment.

current figure) seems perilously inadequate, with the Roman Catholic institutions now becoming similarly precarious. Evangelical institutions are doing better, but only marginally, as the average total has fallen significantly, to the point, I believe, of raising serious concern.

In my previous paper, I was unable to calculate the full-time equivalent statistics. I am now able to do so, although without the comparative figures used above. What I have been outlining above is total headcount. There is a significant difference between total headcount and full-time equivalent, and it is the full-time equivalent that has a direct relationship to tuition revenue. The 5,234 total headcount of ATS seminary students translates into only 2,746 full-time equivalent students.<sup>6</sup> In other words, if each student were taking a minimal full load (and assuming, for the sake of discussion, that this is calculated similarly), there are only 2,746 full-time students taking advanced theological studies in ATS institutions in all of Canada.

The distribution of full-time equivalent students across types of theological institution is also interesting. The evangelical institutions account for 1,396 of these full-time equivalents, or 51%, with an average size of 107 full-time equivalent students per institution. In other words, evangelical institutions may have a larger headcount, but these convert to fewer full-time equivalents than they do in other institutions. The mainline Protestant institutions have 895 full-time equivalents, or 32%, a slight increase in percentage over their head count, with an average size of 53 full-time equivalent students. Roman Catholic institutions account for 455 full-time equivalents, or 16%, with an average size of 65 full-time equivalent students per institution. These figures indicate a number of very small institutions.

A further examination of the distribution of institutions according to full-time equivalent over all ATS institutions provides further insight.

6. There seems to be a slight discrepancy between the figures presented in Table 2.3-C of the ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Tables, which presents the total full-time equivalent enrollment as 2,738, and my own calculations.

TABLE 3  
 Distribution of ATS Institutions by Full-Time Equivalent for All Schools  
 From ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 1.5-A

Full-Time Equivalent	Number of Institutions	% of All Schools
Under 75	80	30.8%
75–150	91	35.0%
151–300	46	17.7%
301–500	22	8.5%
501–1000	11	4.2%
Over 1000	7	2.7%
No Report	3	1.2%

As discussed above, when considering total enrollment, there is an increase since 2006 in the number of institutions under 75 by eleven (from 69) and from 75-150 by fourteen (from 77). As would be expected, there is a fall in number of institutions from 151-300 by fifteen (from 61), from 301-500 by one (from 23), and from 501-1000 by two (from 13). There is an increase by two in institutions over 1000 (from 5).

A comparison of only Canadian institutions on the basis of full-time equivalent students is even more troubling.

TABLE 4  
 Distribution of ATS Institutions by Full-Time Equivalent  
 for Canadian Schools  
 From ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 1.5-C

Full-Time Equivalent	Number of Institutions	% of Canadian Schools
Under 75	22	54.6%
75–150	12	30.8%
151–300	2	5.1%
301–500	1	2.6%
No Report	2	5.1%

As indicated above, when considering total enrollment, there is an increase in the number of institutions under 75 by four

(from 18) and from 75-150 by one (from 11). There is a decrease in the other categories: from 151-300 by one (from 3), from 301-500 by one (from 2). This indicates that nearly 60% of the Canadian institutions are smaller than 75 full-time equivalent, and 87% (nearly 90%) are smaller than 150 full-time equivalent students.

These figures are disturbing in a number of ways. Most importantly, virtually all of the Canadian theological institutions are small. Evangelical institutions are the largest, but 107 full-time equivalent average is still a relatively small number of students, especially as it reflects a declining trend. Mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic institutions are in far worse shape (something I will say more about below). Some of the institutions that are included in these figures are distressingly small, and I must wonder whether they have the critical mass necessary to educate their students sufficiently well to merit accreditation as graduate level institutions. Among all the Canadian ATS institutions, there are ten institutions with 26 or fewer full-time equivalent, the lowest two with a mere six full-time equivalent each—only one evangelical institution is within this group of ten. This group of ten institutions, nevertheless, represents more than one-quarter of all of the ATS accredited seminaries in Canada. Second, as we all know, the cost of processing a part-time student is just about the same as that of a full-time student. However, with such low numbers of full-time equivalent students overall, the total tuition resources are very limited, even though institutions are processing a far larger number of students, and it further raises the question of sustainability.

There is, I believe, increasing realization over the last five or so years that there is no viable or sustainable financial model for higher education, to say nothing of theological education. Whereas the typical business model involves sales of product versus expenses to provide said product, education follows a different model. Every educational model developed so far seems to require some form of outside income source besides the money generated through tuition, even those with endowments (the source of the endowment being an outside income source, such as gifts or bequests). This is certainly true of Canadian

provincial universities, whose financial models are dependent upon the provincial government providing a large portion of their operating funding. The same is true of private institutions, such as seminaries, with the exception that they usually do not have the opportunity to benefit from taxpayer dollars in the same way that provincial universities do. There are a few seminaries that do benefit from either direct or indirect governmental support, often channeled through a larger institution, such as a university (my institution receives a small portion of money in this way, even though it is fully independent). For most theological institutions, especially evangelical institutions, however, their primary source of income is tuition revenue. I do not have specific figures (and do not know if such figures are available), but the range of tuition revenue for Canadian theological institutions as a part of general operations probably extends from 30% upwards, with many of our institutions being considered tuition-driven institutions, that is, those that are primarily dependent upon tuition revenue for their financial existence. This is entirely appropriate, in that it gives these institutions an indication of whether as institutions they are providing the kind of training sought by students, and hence by the church, if they can recruit students to their programs and if students go out from their institutions and fulfill their appointed roles. However, tuition revenue, as we all realize, is itself unstable. Long-term planning is made more difficult because fluctuations in tuition (and the underlying student numbers) mean that an institution will have to adjust to an unusually large or small year of incoming students, which will need to work its way through the institution during the longevity of the program. More importantly, if the trends that I noted above continue, then the tuition revenue stream will continue to shrink for most institutions, while our costs will continue to grow, so that income and expenses will begin to diverge at an alarming rate. If the indicators above are not remedied, reliance upon tuition revenue as a source of long-term financial growth or even sustainability will become increasingly difficult. Tuition is clearly the major source of revenue for most evangelical institutions.

Another source of income is endowment-generated income. ATS provides some useful information regarding endowments. Reporting of long-term investments allows examination of the endowments of ATS institutions—although this does not indicate how much income is generated by these endowments (see table 1.2 in the 2011–2012 Annual Data Tables). The results are as follows:

TABLE 5  
Investment Holdings of All Canadian ATS Schools  
(amount in millions of dollars)  
From ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 1.2

Amount	Number of Institutions	% of Canadian Inst.
Above 19.9	2	5%
15-19.9	2	5%
10-14.9	4	10%
5-9.9	7	18%
Up to 4.9	11	28%
0	13	33%

One-third of all of the ATS accredited seminaries in Canada have no significant endowments. Nearly two-thirds of the institutions (61%) have under 5 million dollars in endowments. Only two have endowments over 19.9 million, one at 20 million and the other at 21 million.

TABLE 6  
Investment Holdings of Canadian Evangelical ATS Schools  
(amount in millions of dollars)  
From ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 1.2

Amount	Number of Institutions	% of Canadian Inst.
Above 19.9	1	8%
15-19.9	1	8%
10-14.9	1	8%
5-9.9	2	15%
Up to 4.9	2	15%
0	6	46%

The situation is similarly bad for evangelical institutions, where nearly half of them have no endowment funds, and again nearly two-thirds (61%) have under 5 million dollars.

These figures reveal several important, yet perhaps not readily self-evident, facts. The major one is that many if not most of these institutions, whether Canadian-wide or specifically evangelical, are almost assuredly dependent upon sources of income that do not include endowment income (or tuition). Three major sources need to be mentioned—one is annual fund giving or contributions, another is denominational support, and a third is larger institutional (and perhaps directly or indirectly governmental) support.

A number of institutions rely upon direct or indirect governmental support. Institutions that enjoy this support are particularly vulnerable, I believe, because such support will almost assuredly come to an end—perhaps sooner rather than later—because of larger financial constraints and increasing secularization in Canadian society. The situation only requires that it become known to the wider taxpaying populace—or their elected representatives—that Christian theological seminaries, and especially evangelical ones, are receiving taxpayer money to educate Christian clergy for this to be curtailed. In some ways, this is probably appropriate. One might make a case that an educated Christian clergy is a benefit to the overall society, but this argument is probably not sufficient. Other religions could make the same claim, and I think that most Christians would probably not want their tax dollars to fund educating such clergy. Further, I think that it is reasonable for Christians themselves, and their churches, to provide support for the training of their clergy, as it is not a governmental mandate. Other institutions, although probably few if any evangelical ones, receive direct affiliated institutional support. This would include institutions that are closely tied to a provincial university, where their assets are held by the larger institution. This too is a precarious situation for an institution to find itself in, as it is dependent upon the larger institution believing, and continuing to believe, that a theological institution is necessary for the larger life of the university.

As for denominational support, many of the 39 Canadian ATS institutions have strong denominational ties; however, several of these institutions are quite small in size. For example, two Lutheran Church of Canada institutions have only a relatively small number of students, the Southern Baptist theological seminary is about the same small size, and at least one Roman Catholic institution is quite small. I have only anecdotal evidence regarding denominational support of institutions, but if most denominational support is like that of mine, theological institutions will need to think seriously about their futures. My denomination only provides 2.8% of operating revenue. This amount has fallen progressively and dramatically since before my arrival at McMaster Divinity College in 2001. I suspect that some of the denominations will need to economize their support of their institutions. Over the last several years, the United Church of Canada, because of its plummeting church membership and hence decrease in need for clergy, has had to re-assess the future of its theological institutions (a task not yet complete), and the Anglicans may well need to do likewise. The Presbyterians may also find that two institutions is a luxury they cannot afford. Even the Roman Catholic institutions—some of them well supported by various structures, including generous bishops—may need to be reassessed, although their number in Canada has increased by two over the last five years (from 5 to 7).

Finally, general giving is the avenue that most institutions rely upon to make up the difference between their major source of income, usually tuition, and their solvency. In distinct ways, this is appropriate, as it reflects the ability of the institution to get its message out to its constituency and it gives this constituency an opportunity to respond in support of the institution. However, there are also some major problems with reliance upon this kind of support. One is the fact that such support is subject to the vagaries of the general financial climate. The last financial downturn in 2008 showed a general decrease in giving to educational institutions, including theological institutions, on both large and small scales. Such support may return in better financial times, but most institutions need such support on a year by year basis, and so waiting for more prosperous economic times,

when economic cycles can take years to recover, puts them in a vulnerable financial position.

As a result, most institutions dream of having a large endowment as the cure of all financial problems. Harvard University is the envy of educational institutions worldwide, because of its nearly 30 billion dollar endowment. One has only to mention this phenomenal amount dedicated to supporting Harvard's educational endeavors to get sighs of envy from others in higher education. One can just hear administrators ask themselves, "What would it be like to have that kind of endowment?" I am in many ways fortunate to be the President of the institution that has the highest endowment of all of the 39 Canadian ATS institutions, with an endowment and other long-term investments of roughly 21 million dollars. This is not the 30 billion dollars of Harvard University, to be sure, but Harvard and McMaster Divinity College have some statistical similarities: our ratios of operational budget to size of endowment and to income produced by endowment are roughly the same. Harvard has an endowment of just short of 30 billion dollars in relation to an operating budget of about 4 billion dollars, producing about 40% of its income.<sup>7</sup> McMaster Divinity College has an endowment of 21 million dollars in relation to an operating budget of about 3 million dollars, producing an equivalent percentage. As a result, Harvard's endowment produces about the same proportion of annual operations for the University as our endowment does for our operations. Such an endowment is not, however, stress-free. Endowments also are subject to the fluctuations of the market, and if an institution is too reliant upon them, planning can be upset by both long- and short-term market variations. During the recent economic downturn, Harvard had to cancel some of its building projects, freeze salaries, and let many people go, because of the fall in its endowment value and hence the money available to spend. McMaster Divinity College, thankfully, did not do any of these things. Endowments are a good means of maintaining institutional stability, in that they provide a long-

7. For these facts, see Christensen and Eyring, *Innovative University*, pp. xxvii, 8; cf. 185–91.

term source of continued financial resources. However, they are not as flexible as sometimes needed during tough economic times, and are subject to market fluctuations. They also take a long time to build, and the drawdown is small (currently around 5%) in comparison to the total amount.

Whereas five years ago the situation for theological education both in the United States and in Canada was serious, it is now even more precarious. I do not want to catastrophize the predicament by saying that I think that theological education is on the brink of extinction. That would be too extreme. However, that does not mean that it will continue as it has in the past, or that it will not take much hard work on the part of all who are involved in it. In my previous article, I noted that it was Einstein who said that it is unreasonable to continue to do the same thing and expect a different result—some say this is the definition of insanity. I believe that it is clear that we must do some things differently. I will address some of those below in subsequent sections. Nevertheless, let me say here that whatever steps we have been taking do not show signs of effecting the kinds of changes that we need to reverse what is clearly a downward trend. In many institutions, we are perilously close to reaching a minimal threshold of sustainability in student numbers and probably also in other financial indicators. Increasing costs of living, staffing costs, infrastructure costs, and salaries, along with a realistic cap on the ability to increase tuition and find other forms of income, make it imperative that student numbers not decrease further. In fact, we need a significantly larger number of students involved in theological education to establish the kinds of critical numbers needed if we are to sustain all of the present institutions. However, we perhaps need to evaluate whether we require all of the current institutions. We have already seen the effects of decreasing student numbers. These include institutions whose financial sustainability has been jeopardized, to the point where they have been if not unable to continue, at least not able to continue as before. At the least, they will be unable to provide the kinds of faculty and support that students at the graduate level warrant and that are necessary for the kind of training that institutions are expected to provide. As I

noted above, one of the avenues that has not been explored as a way of dealing with the issues raised here is strategic partnerships and mergers. Institutions across the spectrum of theological education in Canada have closed down, have forfeited accreditation, or have cut back radically on programs or in other areas, but to my knowledge no seminaries have engaged in successful merger or partnership to the point of creating a new, more viable institution. I will return to this issue below.

#### *Curriculum and the Canadian Seminary*

Whereas the critical numbers reveal a situation that is distressing in the least, curriculum including both degrees offered and the construction of such degrees provides one means of addressing these difficulties. If our situation is serious, then why is it that so little is being done? There are several considerations to weigh.

The first is that theological education has for too long focused upon a single degree, the MDiv. The MDiv degree is a general-purpose theological degree that was designed as a post-baccalaureate degree for those who had a broad liberal arts education. There are a number of problems with this degree. One is that there are fewer and fewer theological students who come directly from a broad liberal arts degree and without any other kind of theological training or experience. More and more students in theological education are already working in ministry, and so have already gained valuable experience in both the knowledge and skills required for ministry. Many of these students, when they come to seminary, find that seminary is unnecessarily redundant, because of their accumulated experience, with few avenues for addressing this situation. There are some advanced placements that they can take advantage of, but very few other opportunities.

A second consideration is that their ministry experience means that they are often unable to undertake the degree as it was designed. The MDiv degree was originally designed as a three-year residential degree, more often than not undertaken by single men directly out of their undergraduate programs. Most people who attend seminary today are already experienced in

ministry, and many of them are actively involved in some type of ministry. This both affects their ability to relocate for the purpose of education, and constricts their availability for undertaking the traditional theological curriculum. Efforts are being made to have modular courses, various types of reconfigured courses, and of course mediated learning through on-line offerings, but these are for the most part still designed to function in relation to the standard theological curriculum. The standard theological curriculum is at least as old as ATS itself. My academic dean tells me that Dan Aleshire, the executive director of ATS, has stated in public that the basic MDiv curriculum has not changed appreciably since ATS was instituted in the 1930s. My own investigation of the issue indicates that the standard theological curriculum may well be even older than that, going back to the Harvard Divinity School curriculum as developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It does not matter when the current curriculum was first developed, since the point is that it is an understatement to say that the curriculum of the MDiv, whether it is called by this name or by its predecessor, the BD, is static and inflexible. It emphasizes a series of introductory survey type courses in a world that increasingly demands subject-specific expertise. It is also patronizing and limiting for mature students who rightly expect to be able to make their own educational choices. I can think of no other subject area that has been as intransigent in development of curricular options as has the standard theological curriculum. All of the major professions, as well as most other academic areas, have shown far more willingness to creatively reconstruct and develop their curriculum than has the MDiv, the standard theological degree. This probably has a relationship to the decreasing number of people interested in pursuing this degree option.

There are some interesting and in some ways encouraging signs that some institutions are finding ways to circumvent the unnecessary constriction of the MDiv degree. One of these is to emphasize other degrees. ATS as an accrediting institution still continues (unnecessarily) to emphasize the MDiv, as is witnessed by their data-gathering itself, which places emphasis on the MDiv, and their numerous seminars and discussions that

inevitably focus on the MDiv. However, ATS institutions, rightly, are attempting to break out of these confines. There are two trends that are most readily noticeable from the ATS data.

The first is the emphasis on advanced ministerial degrees. It should not come as a surprise that a number of Canadian institutions have followed what appears to be a long-standing trend in ATS institutions continent-wide in offering advanced ministerial degrees, presumably mostly the DMin. Of the 39 Canadian ATS institutions, I note that four of them emphasize advanced ministerial degrees to the point of these becoming the predominant degree offered by their institution (ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 2.15). These include Acadia Divinity College, where there are 42 total students and 26 full-time equivalent in the MDiv, but 72 total students and 24 full-time equivalent in advanced ministerial degrees; Knox Theological College with 35/18 in the MDiv and 67/22 in advanced ministerial degrees; Providence Theological Seminary, with 17/9 in the MDiv and 26/9 in advanced ministerial degrees; and St. Stephen's College, with 0 students in the MDiv and 28/9 in advanced ministerial degrees. There was a time in the 1980s or so when it was thought that seminaries would follow the way of medical schools and law schools and make the first ministerial degree the DMin or equivalent. That movement did not catch on, so that the first degree is still the MDiv. Nevertheless, a number of institutions are offering advanced ministerial degrees and doing so quite successfully, including one that has no MDiv degree students. The history of the DMin, at least in Canada, is that it has had its ups and downs. There was a time when offering the DMin was a boom industry, but then the situation became quiescent, when one senior administrator was heard to say that "everyone who wants a DMin has one." There are now apparently others who want them, so some institutions are pursuing this actively again. Over the last six years, advanced ministerial degrees have been the fastest growing degree category for Canadian seminaries in ATS (ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Tables 2.2 and 2.3). My major reservations about the DMin are, first of all, that it is a degree of unproven worth. What exactly can a person do with a DMin that the same person cannot do with another theological degree?

Some might say that they can teach in a theological institution, but I would question whether this is accurate, as the DMin was never designed as an academic degree (even if it is used this way). Hence, in many ways the DMin remains a “dead end” degree (to quote a person who should remain anonymous) if one wishes to keep educational options open regarding ministry and other avenues. It is entirely possible that a well-thought-out program of continuing education would better serve the purposes of pastors wishing for more theological knowledge. It waits to be seen whether this degree actually helps its institutions in the long term.

The second trend is the emphasis on advanced research degrees. The offering of advanced research degrees has also become an apparent strategy for ATS institutions, including Canadian ones. As with advanced ministerial degrees, advanced research degrees have also shown growth over the last six years (ATS 2011–2012 Annual Data Table 2.15). There are nine Canadian ATS institutions that emphasize advanced research degrees, two of them evangelical institutions. These include: Emmanuel College of Victoria University with 62 total students and 45 full-time equivalent in the MDiv, and 45 total students and 43 full-time equivalent in advanced research degrees; Lutheran Theological Seminary (SK), with 15/3 in the MDiv, and 5/3 in advanced research degrees; McGill University Faculty of Religious Studies with 32/32 in the MDiv, and 44/44 in advanced research degrees; McMaster Divinity College, with 55/38 in the MDiv, and 53/53 in advanced research degrees; Regis College, with 19/16 in the MDiv, and 57/41 in advanced research degrees; St. Paul University Faculty of Theology, with 0 MDiv students, and 30/30 in advanced research degrees; Trinity College Faculty of Divinity, with 33/18 in the MDiv, and 20/18 in advanced research degrees; University of St. Michael’s College, with 12/9 in the MDiv, and 89/88 in advanced research degrees; and Wycliffe College, with 50/35 in the MDiv, and 61/58 in advanced research degrees. Whereas advanced research degrees have recognized academic integrity, and even the ability to help prepare people for ministerial work if structured appropriately, the major questions with this strategy are the cost of the degree

within the institution and the need for trained academics in a world that seems to have less interest in theology. The running of advanced theological degree programs is institutionally quite expensive, as it requires specialized faculty, small class sizes, and other additional resources such as library and electronic resources—all of which can impose a disproportionately large financial burden on an institution, especially if it is struggling to survive. Further, if there are fewer people interested in Christianity—as reflected by static or decreasing church attendance and fewer interested in seminary itself—then it stands to reason that there will be fewer interested in studying it in other venues, and hence less need for trained academics to teach it.

There are many factors regarding curriculum to consider. These include the degrees offered, their content, their availability and access, and their means of delivery, among others. However, I believe that one of the inhibiting factors in theological education has been the lack of a spirit of adventure and innovation. There has been a genuine hesitance to try to develop new curricular offerings and degrees that address the kinds of situations that ministry of today requires. Instead, there has been an attempt to make the one old shoe fit all feet. This has been, I believe, one of the major shortcomings of ATS as an accrediting agency. We all know that accrediting agencies themselves are not meant to be innovators, but I believe that ATS has been particularly recalcitrant, placing the priorities of the mainstream Protestant institutions—even though they have represented smaller numbers of students for some time—ahead of those of the evangelical institutions. The result is emphasis upon a degree that is old-fashioned and out of date. It is only recently that ATS is addressing this issue with its latest revision of the standards, but I fear that it is too little and perhaps too late. There is still not enough innovative thinking and even the allowing of institutions to develop and pioneer new types of degree programs to ensure currency in their educational offerings. Another major shortcoming of ATS is that it is accredited by CHEA, an accrediting agency of accrediting agencies responsible to the United States Department of Education. The increasing intrusion of the Department of Education is bound to cost theological institutions

both their freedom to operate and perhaps their finances to do so. For example, the latest edict is that future ATS accrediting visits will require a ministry practitioner on each panel, and for those with mediated learning programs expertise in this area. The costs of these additional people will be borne by the institutions themselves. This does not even address the advisability or practicality of adding such people, such as ministry practitioners with sufficient knowledge and expertise to participate in accreditation. Education (and its scrutiny and regulation) is not meant to be a federal governmental function in the United States, and so this clear case of constitutional violation can only have long-term detriments. To a large extent, this encroachment was exacerbated, if not brought on, by the United States guaranteed federal loan program, as colleges and universities in the United States became more and more dependent upon students getting federal loans as their tuition costs consistently outstripped inflation by sizeable amounts. As a result, it is perhaps time to weigh whether Canadians should consider establishing a separate accrediting agency for Canadian institutions of theological education. We can learn from the shortcomings of those in the United States by resisting the urge to over-bureaucratize the process and allow institutions to innovate and embrace the need for change.

#### *Implications for Practice*

Despite the situation I have identified, there are still some Canadian seminaries that are probably “indestructible.” By indestructible, I mean that they will be able to survive for the next thirty to fifty years—although even here I believe that there are cautions for all of our institutions. I apologize if I am inaccurate in some of the observations that I make, but they are designed to glean implications from which all institutions can learn.

The first category of indestructible institution is the closely linked denominational seminary. In this category, for instance, is Canadian Southern Baptist Seminary in Cochrane, Alberta. On the basis of their ATS website, they have a number of issues that they must address, but they also have strong backing from the Southern Baptist mission board. As long as the mission board

believes in the work of the seminary, they will probably survive, despite low enrollment, a budget that probably cannot be balanced on the basis of tuition, a small faculty, and other challenges. Similar is Wycliffe College in Toronto. With the problems that the Anglican Church of Canada is having, and comparison of Wycliffe to the other Anglican theological colleges, I am confident that the evangelicals within the Canadian Anglican church will ensure that Wycliffe remains viable. Wycliffe is also a member of the Toronto School of Theology. Membership helps to provide added resources, especially faculty, so that Wycliffe can afford to have a relatively small faculty and still continue to offer degrees, including advanced research degrees. However, there is the constant challenge of working with faculty who are not of the same theological convictions and institutions whose own priorities are very different. Apart from these two, I cannot see any other Canadian institutions that are so denominationally secure.

The second category of institution is endowment supported. In this category belongs my own institution, McMaster Divinity College, whose endowment has doubled over the last ten or so years. Having a relatively large endowment is a tremendous asset. As noted above, there are a number of restrictions that it entails, but it also provides a solid financial platform upon which to build. Even with the fluctuations in the market, with a wise and well-managed endowment one can endure such uncertainty and ensure that there is sufficient funding to continue. Such an endowment may provide for such an institution to survive, but it may also mean that it does not thrive, through over-dependence upon the endowment at the expense of developing other sources of income, such as annual donor giving and tuition revenue (our tuition rate is significantly lower than many institutions, and probably lower than it should be). However, if the situation became dire enough, with sufficient cutbacks in faculty and staff, McMaster Divinity College could probably weather most financial storms.

The final indestructible institution is Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. Regent has a reasonable endowment for an evangelical institution, but its strength is in its

international profile, which allows it to attract students from all over the world. This includes not only Canada but the United States and abroad. Most seminaries remain strictly regional institutions. That is, they attract the vast majority of their students from their own immediate area. This is true for most seminary programs, except for advanced degrees, especially advanced research degrees. But for most master's level degrees, students attend institutions within their immediate area. Regent has overcome this limitation and so has expanded its catchment area probably beyond that of any other seminary in Canada, and certainly any other evangelical institution. Regent also has reasonably favorable tuition costs when its tuition costs are compared to those of its competitive institutions across North America. Compared to most other Canadian seminaries, however, Regent is relatively more expensive, which may imperil its future growth.

#### *Suggestions for Further Consideration*

Three issues merit further consideration and research. The first is the overall educational and cultural situation in which Canadian seminaries, and in particular evangelical seminaries, find themselves. This research is only a first step. Most of our institutions are long-lived and continue to endure, despite fluctuating circumstances. The rate at which institutions die out is surprisingly slow, and so it takes some time for them to disappear. Nevertheless, disappear they do in one form or another. What I would wish for is something much more robust for all—that is, thriving seminaries that have sufficient and growing resources to be able to educate students the way that they deserve to be educated, money to pay faculty what they deserve to be paid, and buildings that are appropriate for the use to which they are put. In this light, Canadian theological education has serious challenges ahead of it that must be investigated. The two major challenges are student enrollment and finances, and these are inextricably related to each other. Sufficient students are required to offer the programs that are needed to generate the tuition revenue to sustain such institutions. Other means of finances are required to

continue to build such institutions, whether long-term investments or yearly contributions.

The second issue is partnerships. Of all of the possible ways forward in addressing a challenging situation, partnerships have not emerged as a viable means of moving forward, and we need to know why. Good partnerships provide the opportunity for two or more institutions to work together in ways that economize on relatively scarce resources, while also allowing institutional identity to be retained. One apparently successful amalgamation by the Christian and Missionary Alliance and Church of the Nazarene created Ambrose University College in Calgary, Alberta. However, I do not know of a similar venture among seminaries or theological graduate schools in Canada. If I am right in my estimations and analyses above, all Canadian seminaries are going to face much more difficult times ahead before they face easier times, and so partnerships that would promote their work while also maintaining institutional identity and integrity would seem prudent. The ideal time for such partnerships is when institutions are relatively secure and sound, rather than waiting until one or more of them is in serious financial trouble and has thus curtailed its available options. At that point, it is probably too late for a constructive partnership. Nevertheless, the stakeholders in institutions often would apparently rather lose their institutions and all that they have accomplished and accumulated through the years than run the risk of partnering with an “unworthy” institution. The perception of such unworthiness is, in my experience, usually based upon relatively insignificant issues when compared with the losses that can be incurred by failure to take positive steps together.

Finally, I believe that the current situation of accreditation provides a useful opportunity to investigate whether a Canadian-wide evangelical accrediting agency for theological institutions might be wise. I do not see any immediate remedy to the situation in the United States with increasing governmental encroachment upon what was designed to be a voluntary and peer-regulated process that has now become a federalized, bureaucratized, and imposed structure, with decreasing freedom for accrediting agencies (who themselves must now be accredited) and their

institutions. I am not suggesting that Canadians mirror what has happened in the United States but that we learn from what went wrong and investigate building a new and robust volunteer accrediting agency that is flexibly responsive to the needs of its member institutions. By this, we can guarantee all that we wish to guarantee about theological education, while providing leadership to others, both here and in the United States, regarding how such an agency and its institutions can function.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, I have attempted to revisit five years later the situation regarding seminary education in Canada. I would have liked to report that the potential problems that I identified then have all been satisfactorily addressed, so that we face a clear and unhindered future for theological education at the seminary and graduate level in Canada. To the contrary, I believe that many of the problems that I identified are at least as severe, or even more dire, than they were when I addressed them those few short years ago. There is a clear crisis in student enrollment that all institutions must face and address together, because it has serious ramifications for our institutional existence. These are closely related to issues of finances upon which we are all dependent. I do not have any quick fixes to these problems, but I have suggested that there are some areas that we can pursue together to address such concerns, including enrollment and finances, constructive partnerships, and even new forms of accreditation. I am sure there are many more such proposals that merit discussion as well.

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