Ministry Demands Creativity

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It's virtually impossible these days to attend a conference in the field of higher education without finding someone talking about it. Whether the topic is online learning, distance education, the wired campus or MOOCs (massive open online courses), the new landscape cannot be escaped.

The way we access information and learn in our culture is changing. And, except for the most curmudgeon-like, most of us in the world of higher education are beginning to realize that the change is not all bad. In fact, intermingled among the challenges are exciting opportunities that promise to make high-quality educational programs available to those who otherwise might never have had the chance.

Theological education is no exception. Seminaries and divinity schools — those educational institutions that prepare people for Christian ministry and other theological, ministry-related vocations — are retooling themselves to meet the needs of people in the 21st century.

These changes defy the old boundaries of conservative or liberal, progressive or evangelical, Protestant or Catholic. At stake is not whether theological education is needed in the 21st century, but how it will be delivered. For the first time in its history, the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools now allows seminaries to offer a fully approved graduate degree through distance education—the Master of Arts degree.

The good news is that the Capital Region is privileged to benefit from this creativity in theological education and is well on its way to becoming a wonderfully rich place to study theology and prepare for Christian ministry.

The Capital Region Theological Center offers extraordinary courses and programs for theological education at various levels. St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry has classes at the Pastoral Center of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany. There is a Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary campus in Schenectady. And, in January 2014, Northeastern Seminary at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester will begin offering fully accredited programs for the benefit of those in this region with a hybrid distance education model that seeks to make the best of multiple delivery systems—and save students time and travel costs.

Professors will teach before half the students in a classroom at our main campus and will be joined by a group of students in a classroom at Hudson Valley Community College. We are already using this system in Buffalo and Syracuse. Each extension site has a coordinator to provide face-to-face interaction and manage the flow of the class.
The changing face of Christianity in North America is demanding creative responses. Christendom no longer holds sway in contemporary culture as it once did in 19th and 20th centuries. Grassroots organizations like Missio Alliance are challenging the theoretical, managerial, and professional models of Christendom and calling for ministry preparation that is praxiological, mobilizational, and spiritual. That is, ministry education must be effective in training spiritually healthy, reflective practitioners who are committed to rolling up their sleeves and working for the good of the people in their communities.

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