

Words and numbers Daniel O. Aleshire March 2017

Theological educators work with words and know that a word, even well defined, seldom adequately expresses the reality it signifies. Words flatten reality; they treat something that is multi-dimensional as if it were unidimensional. Take two words: *seminary students*. Theological educators know that they are more than persons who study theological disciplines. They are persons from early their 20s to late 70s, are primarily curious about a religious vocation or deeply committed to one, are white or persons of color, are intellectually gifted or at least sufficiently intellectually able to have finished a baccalaureate degree, are male or female or express themselves by other gender identities, are Baptist or Catholic or Unitarian Universalist or Pentecostal or a little of each. *Seminary students* are useful words, but they sit atop a multi-dimensional reality that one would never guess from the words. Words help us get at reality, but they seldom truly embody it.

Numbers are like words; they seldom adequately express what they signify. They have a way of flattening complex and multi-dimensional reality. Numbers can trick us with their apparent specificity. ATS has just released the Annual Data Tables based on the information that was collected from member schools in fall 2016. The tables are full of numbers.

A total of 72,372 individuals were reported as students in ATS member schools, slightly more than the number reported in fall 2015, which was slightly more than the number reported in fall 2014. These past three years follow years of declining total enrollment that began in 2007. The numbers tell us that *the*

decline that consumed more than 10% of total enrollment in ATS has stopped. Enrollments are lower than they were in 2007, but they now have been stable for three years.

The number at the top—the total individual student enrollment—oversimplifies complex and substantive movements underneath. The enrollment in the MDiv has continued to decline, as has the enrollment of white students and students enrolled but not in a degree program. The number of students of color has been increasing as has the number of students enrolled in professional and masters' degree programs. The number of students attending mainline Protestant schools has decreased more than the number of students attending evangelical Protestant schools. The number of students in Canada has decreased more than students in the United States. The total enrollment in many schools has decreased, while it has increased or remained about the same in others. The total number of students, like a word, treats a multi-dimensional reality as if it were unidimensional.

Numbers don't lie: the total enrollment in ATS schools has ceased its decline and stabilized, at least over the past few years. Numbers, however, are never self-interpreting. People bring interpretations informed guesses about meaning—to the numbers. Theologians know about interpretation just like they know about words, and ATS has more than +270 member institutions primarily because of different interpretations of the same ancient words! Numbers do not mean much until they are interpreted.

What does the number of total enrollment in ATS schools mean? Perhaps the most useful interpretation is that something is changing among the persons who choose to enroll in ATS member schools and the degree programs they choose to pursue. These changes likely have their roots in shifting religious practices, in the structuring of communities of faith, and in perceptions of ministry. These changes are influenced by institutional initiatives and innovations, but they are not caused by them. After examining numbers in theological education for many decades, I am not sure how to interpret the current churning underneath the total enrollment.

The most breath-taking interpretive leap I can make is that, perhaps, God is doing something very good in this day that differs from other days—and our task as theological educators is to discern what Providence is about. Unfortunately, I have no numbers to back up that interpretation.