

# Theological school partnerships with congregations: 7 models and a theological foundation



By MARY LEDERLEITNER

As part of the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers Initiative (ECFFM), The Association of Theological Schools recently hosted a peer-learning event to discuss current and future ways in which seminaries might partner with congregations to address the economic challenges facing students and alumni. Nearly 20 faculty and administrators from 12 seminaries participated in the dialogue, thinking about how God views partnership and looking at several models.

## Is there a theological foundation for partnership?

For many seminaries, the starting place for partnering with congregations is need-based. They only consider partnership seriously when they face a need they cannot address on their own. By looking at how God works, is it possible to see the theme of partnership in new ways that can be helpful for theological institutions? Does God choose partnership as a model by default because other preferred methods of working are not possible? It is easy to lose sight of the fact that God could have chosen far different methods of working. By looking at Scripture, however, it becomes clear that, while God

does work independently from humankind, often this Divine Being chooses to partner with vulnerable human beings to accomplish many divine purposes in the world. These human beings sometimes get it right and sometimes fail miserably. Yet, God's commitment to partnering perseveres despite these challenges. In light of this, participants at the event wondered if the value of this way of working is far more significant than simply a means for obtaining financial resources for students.

## A sample of fruitful partnership models

A variety of partnerships are currently in place at the 12 seminaries that participated in this event, while others are still in the dreaming stage.

# 1

## Work-in-ministry-for-free-tuition model

Partnership initiatives that provide free tuition for seminary students serving in congregations have proven difficult to create and maintain. A program at Denver Seminary, however, is working. The seminary approaches congregations not begging for help, but seeking to offer a service. They believe the model will truly benefit church leaders in reaching their own congregational goals. Denver proposes having a student oversee a specific ministry area within a church. With a commitment to work approximately 8 to 10 hours a week, the congregation is asked to pay for the student's tuition. When that commitment is increased to approximately 12 to 18 hours per week, the congregation is asked to pay the student's tuition and provide a \$10,000 annual living stipend. For a commitment of approximately 20 to 28 hours per week, they are asked to cover a student's tuition and pay a \$20,000–\$25,000 living stipend.

Based on IRS regulations, these programs fall under internships so tuition is paid directly to the seminary. Pastors from 650 congregations within a 30-mile radius of the seminary are invited to a lunch at the beginning of the school year where other pastors share the benefits of having seminary students work in their congregations. The initiative thus far has brought in more than a quarter million dollars in tuition revenue, reducing the need for student loans. All the while, seminarians are also receiving valuable ministry experience that builds their resumes for placement after graduation.

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# 2

## Fundraising-with-congregational-focus model

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary sought a private IRS letter ruling in 2002 to establish a program to equip students with practical skillsets in ministry fundraising, biblical stewardship,

and the importance of relationship building by deputizing them to raise funds on behalf of the institution. The "Partnership Program" provides students with an exceptional scholarship grant coupled with an opportunity to gain practical experience through fundraising, including establishing partnerships with local congregations.

The model helps students stay connected with congregations as they begin seminary and motivates churches to help educate future church leaders. Students sometimes share papers with supporting churches or assist in developing stewardship programs at the church, which enables pastors to give them valuable feedback. It also equips seminarians with fundraising skills they often need later as they lead churches or work with other ministries or mission organizations.

The downside to the model is that it requires a great many staffing hours to coach students as well as to keep the program running smoothly, and many churches feel a greater connection to individual students than to the seminary.

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# 3

## Pastor-residency model

At Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the Pastoral Fellowship Program is a collaborative endeavor with Christ Community Church in the Kansas City area. Since 2005, 17 alumni have participated in this collaborative endeavor. The church covers all the costs of a student's final year of tuition and gives the student a two-year associate pastor position after graduation with a compensation and benefit package equivalent to the amount paid to a public school teacher who holds a master's degree in that geographic area.

During the two-year residency program, lay congregants mentor these recent graduates in holistic ways by providing leadership coaching, access to a variety of ministry experiences, a spiritual coach, a physical trainer, and

a financial coach. After the two-year period ends, some residents stay and plant churches within the Christ Community Church network, while others serve in a variety of other congregations and ministries.

For more information, visit: <http://www.ccefc.org>

## 4 Financial-literacy-partnership model

Memphis Theological Seminary is implementing an intriguing partnership model that extends financial literacy education to pastors and church leaders so that they might ultimately address the economic needs of students. Memphis hosts a variety of symposiums on topics such as clergy taxes and fundraising—a recent gathering attracted more than 100 clergy and faith leaders. The emphasis is to empower congregations to empower congregants for generosity and stewardship. Over time, this will foster greater financial resources for individuals and churches, and those resources might be able to help ease economic challenges facing future ministers and alumni pastors.

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Several other schools are partnering with existing financial literacy programs created by pastors and congregations. New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS) is partnering with the pastor who created “dfree”—a curriculum to help congregants better manage their finances—to offer a for-credit course on financial literacy and leadership: ([http://www.fbcsomerset.com/about/pastor\\_soaries.php](http://www.fbcsomerset.com/about/pastor_soaries.php)). Trinity Evangelical Divinity School is partnering with the Good \$ense Movement and Willow Crystal Lake to create a non-credit peer budget coaching program designed to equip students with skills to help others, while deepening financial management skills that can later be carried into ministry.

For more information, visit <http://goodsensemovement.org/coaches/>

## Dreaming about new partnership models

Three additional models are in the most nascent stage of thought:

## 5 Pre-seminary-church-discernment-and-sending model

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School is considering making video tools and other resources available to help congregations become sending communities that carefully discern with and financially support future seminary students. Ideas and stories would be mined collaboratively with alumni serving in diverse denominational and ministry settings, and the tools would be prepared and made available in ways that might appeal to a wide range of congregations.

For more information, contact Mary Lederleitner at [lillyproject@tiu.edu](mailto:lillyproject@tiu.edu)

## 6 Lay-ecclesial-ministry model

St. John's University School of Theology—Seminary is considering a new partnership with parishes to set up endowments to support lay ecclesial ministers within the church. While funding is available for those called into the priesthood or religious orders, currently there is little to no funding for lay ecclesial ministers, for whom demand is growing.

For more information, contact Barbara Sutton at [bsutton@csbsju.edu](mailto:bsutton@csbsju.edu)

## 7 Academic-loan-reimbursement-for-pastoral-service model

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School is hoping to partner with congregations and denominations to influence “Academic Loan Reimbursement” as part of call processes and hiring negotiations. Relationships will need to be built with denominations, church planting

networks, and congregations to see this become an increasing reality. By doing so, the economic burden of seminary would be shared more with the congregations that benefit most from the educational investment.

For more information, contact Mary Lederleitner at [lillyproject@tiu.edu](mailto:lillyproject@tiu.edu)

## Where to start

As we looked at the many different models of partnering with congregations, several things became clear. Seminaries first need to think strategically about their own potential partnerships with congregations, analyzing potential opportunities and barriers to working together. Secondly, seminaries need to focus not just on what can be gained from congregations, but also how partnerships can be mutually beneficial.



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