

## **THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL FUNDING ISSUES MAY 2010**

### **A. THE SCOPE OF THIS REPORT**

The scope of this report is limited to the 11 theological schools currently receiving a funding grant from The United Church of Canada. The four education centres are not included because the two groups are connected to the church in significantly different ways and have distinctive relationships of obligation and responsibility that challenge each group with different issues. The nine non-Aboriginal theological schools, for instance, are either ecumenical endeavours or member colleges of a secular university, while the centres are entirely United Church entities that are more reliant upon the church constituency for funding and purpose. The same can be said of the two Aboriginal schools, and this report will reflect that important distinction. There are important questions that must be addressed regarding the funding and future of the education centres. These will require a separate process for discussion, which has yet to be determined. The directors of each of the four education centres agree with the wisdom of having a separate process.

The scope of this report is also limited to the issue of the church's funding of its theological schools. It does not address questions surrounding *testamur*, learning outcomes for leadership, candidacy pathways, alternative pathways to accreditation/ordination/commissioning, or educational curricula. It does not because it cannot, and it need not. Each of these important areas is the subject of ongoing discussions involving a web of appointed members, staff, and organizational partners connected to separate, but interlocking, timelines and processes.

Any decisions regarding the church's funding of its theological schools need not wait for these other deliberations to be resolved, however. As will be noted later in this report, for the foreseeable future the church will continue to need, and value, the academic education that a theological school can offer. How many such schools The United Church of Canada has the capacity to fund in a post-Christendom era of diminishing resources is the presenting concern of this report. The more crucial underlying concern is: how can the United Church be a significant partner in the provision of the highest possible level of educational excellence while funding fewer theological schools?

### **B. THE BASIS OF THIS REPORT**

The analysis and recommendations contained in this report are the result of extensive research and consultation. There has been a review of relevant literature, including reports commissioned in 1936, 1941, 1986, 1992, and 2004's "Strengthening and Consolidating Report." From the 1960s to the 1980s there were also several reports on the shape and meaning of ministry. Two "think tanks" were held with representatives of theological schools, educational centres, and the Education and Vocation Advisory Committee of General Council. Finally, there have been extensive conversations with the Deans and Principals Group, including a 2009 consultation with Dr. Dan Aleshire, the Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. As might be expected, the various parties are not of a common mind about what course of action the church should take.

## **C. BACKGROUND: THE CHANGING STORY OF THE CHURCH/SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP**

### **In the Beginning**

From its inception in 1925 The United Church of Canada has had a waxing and waning, yet virtually continuous, discussion about the number and kind of theological institutions it needs and can sustain. The earliest of these concerns still echo in Article 14.2 of the Basis of Union:

The policy of the Church shall be the maintenance of a limited number of thoroughly equipped theological schools, due regard being paid to the needs of different parts of the country. In furtherance of this policy amalgamation shall be effected as soon as possible in localities where two or more theological schools are doing the same type of work.

Inherent in this article are three enduring principles regarding the provision of theological education in The United Church of Canada:

- Educational excellence: limiting the number of schools so that each might be “thoroughly equipped” to provide the best possible training for church leadership
- Geographical equity: paying “due regard” to the regional needs of the church.
- Rationalized presence: avoiding duplication within those regions

In the decades following Union the United Church successfully enacted these principles as it expanded or established schools to meet the leadership needs of its increasing number of congregations. The original relationship between the denomination and the schools did not remain static, however.

### **Church and School: A Relationship in Three Eras**

Dr. Sandra Beardsall, professor of Church History and Ecumenics at St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon, writes of three eras in the church/theological school relationship.<sup>1</sup> The first of these eras lasted from the 1600s to the 1950s. During this time the churches and their schools were tightly coupled together as one another's primary partners, although this was a frequently contentious relationship. In most cases, they were also firmly linked to the university in common cause:

Canadian Protestant and Anglican church leaders viewed their theological schools' close connections with the countries' universities not as threats to the church/school relationship, but as integral to their mission as architects of a moral, progressive, and Christian Canada.<sup>2</sup>

The second era, as described by Beardsall, lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s when, as the result of social changes, the churches began losing their prestige, privilege, and influence. Few saw the downward trend in enrolments as the beginning of a decline from which no mainstream church would recover. There was, instead, widespread enthusiasm for the emerging ecumenical movement that encouraged cooperation and collaboration across once impermeable institutional and denominational boundaries. When it came to theological education, the major denominations all saw in this ecumenical moment an opportunity to deal with their “overcapacity.” In some situations ecumenical theological schools were created, while in others ecumenical consortiums were established. By the mid-1970s the majority of mainstream Protestant seminarians in Canada were studying theology ecumenically.

During this second era, the tightly coupled relationship between church/theological school loosened significantly:

While the churches at their national levels were promoting ecumenical education, they were not as prepared for the particular configurations that would result, or for the ways that these new relationships would complicate the church/school partnership. Imagining that consolidation and national collective oversight would empower church leaders, they instead found themselves often sidelined as their schools took on new, ecumenical identities, which were sometimes attached to deeper connections to secular universities.<sup>3</sup>

These decades also witnessed the growing influence of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada to the point where, according to Beardsall,

the ATS plays the role of primary oversight that church judicatories once did (or wanted to): offering scrutiny, support, and correction.... The ATS sometimes functions to protect the school from the whims of church decision-makers. And its standards help even quite disparate theological schools to recognize common goals.... [I]ts powerful role in the life of individual seminaries, and in the shared lives of the seminary community, cannot but complicate the church/school relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Aiding and abetting the loosening of the church/school bond during this era was the church's declining financial support for the schools and its inattentiveness to developing a broad-based and intentional approach to raising up candidates for ordained and diaconal ministries.

The third era in the relationship between the church and the theological schools began in the 1990s and continues to the present day. The stresses and strains on the church/schools relationship that came out into the open in the 1960s have intensified unabated in the last two decades. Church and school have yet to become uncoupled, yet their link remains fragile. That a decisive uncoupling has not taken place is significant, according to Beardsall:

It is not, I would argue, in the historical "nature" of the Canadian schools to burst their denominational tethers, even as they form a variety of relationships and/or find themselves in dispute with their denominational judicatories.... While each denomination and schools has a unique set of tethers, the overall picture is one of fairly firm knots linking the church and the school, but long ropes that allow for considerable flexibility of movement and decision-making. Perceived regional distinctions loom large in Canadian identity discussions, and these spill over into religious communities, mitigating any attempt to rein the two in too closely.<sup>5</sup>

It is equally accurate to say that a commitment to the theological schools is integral to the DNA of The United Church of Canada. Among the legion of loyal regional supporters of each of our theological schools are also to be found some of those most committed to the United Church as a historic Canadian expression of church, a living community of faith, and an elusive yet delicious ideal. The reality of these dual, and apparently conflicting, bonds of affection may partially explain why the church has been so reluctant to cease funding any of its theological schools. Fear of an angry backlash against the church from an affected school's regional constituency and alumni may also explain the church's unwillingness to "grasp the thistle."

## **D. THE CURRENT SITUATION**

### **A Cross-Denominational and North American Reality**

The issues confronting, and confounding, The United Church of Canada and its schools are not at all unique. Every mainline Protestant denomination in North America and their schools are experiencing a drastic drop in candidates and student enrolments, escalating operating costs,

decaying buildings needing major retrofitting, and an increasingly non-resident, part-time student body demanding new forms of course delivery. So widespread was the crisis in the relationship between theological schools and their denominations that the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada struck a Theological Schools and the Church Task Force in 2004. North American Protestantism founded theological schools upon the optimistic assumptions of Christendom, never imagining the decline in numbers and loss of social status that is currently upon them. Even the evangelical branch of the Canadian church is having to come to terms with having more theological schools than it can sustain.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to what might be expected, the crisis of overcapacity is, in fact, more acute in Canada than it is in the United States. Canada has 35 ATS-accredited seminaries in a population of 33,165,087 people, or roughly one seminary for every 947,574 people. The United States has 217 seminaries in a population of 301,139,947, or roughly one school for every 1,387,742 people.<sup>7</sup> As Dr. Stanley Porter, president of McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, notes:

This [fewer schools] is also in a country that has a population that indicates that it attends church at roughly twice the frequency as do Canadians, has a larger number who self-identify as Christians, has a much more favourable taxation system with regard to charitable giving, [and] knows much more about and supports Christian higher education....<sup>8</sup>

“As a result,” Porter concludes, “I do not believe that we can legitimately continue to support the number of seminaries that we have in Canada.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Much More than Money**

The brief history presented earlier of the historic relationship between The United Church of Canada and its schools illustrates that much more than money holds us together in these financially difficult times. The majority of faculty and senior administrators of the schools have a believer’s commitment to the good of the church; and the church values the best in theological scholarship. The church needs the schools to provide its emerging leadership with academic knowledge related to scripture, theology, worship, history, Christian ethics, and the practice of ministry; and the schools need the church to provide them with students via *testamur*<sup>10</sup> and to grant access to church membership for fundraising purposes. We are also bound by founding charters of incorporation governing the joint trusteeship of property and membership of boards of governance, and by memoranda of agreement that give The United Church of Canada a voice in the appointments of principals, deans, and faculty. We are, in short, each other’s partners in a number of ways.

Whether or not the rapidly changing church can rely on the theological schools to provide the breadth of education and training for ministerial leadership remains a topic of ongoing discussion. At the present time, however, there is no question that what the theological schools have to offer will continue to be valued by the church, and vice versa. This would remain true even if funding were reduced or eliminated because the relationship is founded on more than money. This is not to say, however, that such a change would not severely strain the church’s relationship with some of the schools, perhaps to the point where one or more of the schools might decide to completely uncouple themselves from The United Church of Canada.

### **Currently Funded Schools and Current Levels of Funding**

The United Church funds a total of 11 theological schools, two of which are Aboriginal schools, and one of which (VST) houses a Native Ministries program.

It would be much less painful for the church to decide to stop funding some of the schools if it was clear that one or more were underperforming. This is not the case, however. Each of the 11 schools currently receiving funding from the United Church is being well run administratively and fiscally. Each one is offering quality, innovative, and contextually sensitive programming.

Of the 11 schools, the two Aboriginal schools receive a majority of their revenue from the United Church. The average percentage of the non-Aboriginal schools' total annual revenue received from the United Church is approximately 9 percent. It is worth noting that this level of support is below the 10 percent figure that the church has traditionally used as its benchmark for meaningful support. Some of the schools are more financially fragile than others. This means that some could continue to operate pretty much as they have been if the church reduces or eliminates funding, while others likely could not.

Annual grants from the GCO are calculated using a formula that begins with an equal Common Grant figure (\$73,829 in 2010) and then factors each school's total enrolment, ordered ministry enrolment, and graduate student enrolment.

In the 2010 budget \$1,718,573 has been allocated for the operating grants to the 11 theological schools:

**Table 1. Education Grants for 2010 Based on the Funding Formula**

Atlantic School of Theology (Halifax)	131,351
Centre for Christian Studies (Winnipeg)	99,485
Dr. Jessie Saulteaux Resource Centre (Beausejour, MB)	196,375 (136,375 + 60,000 top-up)
Emmanuel College of Victoria University (Toronto)	296,385
Faculty of Theology, University of Winnipeg	103,200
Francis Sandy Theological School (Paris, Ontario)	158,893 (118,893 + 40,000 top-up)
Queen's School of Religion, Faculty of Theology at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario)	98,112
St. Andrew's College (Saskatoon)	96,829
St. Stephen's College (Edmonton)	113,934
United Theological College, affiliated with McGill and Montreal School of Theology (Montreal)	99,353
Vancouver School of Theology	123,008
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,516,925</b>

It is worth noting that the total 2010 budget allocated to all forms of theological education (four education centres, Designated Lay Ministry Program, initiatives grants, student aid, In-Ministry Program at AST, Future Quest Youth Leadership Program at Queen's, Common Life Program) amounts to \$2,159,073.

### **So What's Wrong with Maintaining the Status Quo?**

When the deans and principals met to discuss the issue of United Church funding, there was general agreement that maintaining the status quo is one of the less desirable options for moving forward. The United Church's average contribution has already fallen below the critical threshold of 10 percent of school revenues. With an anticipated \$200,000 cut to the 2011 education budget, this average percentage would fall to 7 percent (and much lower for some of

the individual schools). It is very likely that further cuts will be required in subsequent years as giving to the Mission and Service Fund continues to decline. Not having a stable and reliable source of funding from the United Church makes intermediate and long-term planning more difficult for the schools.

Meanwhile, staffing, operating, and retrofitting costs continue to escalate, and the call from various quarters of the church and society for the schools to develop innovative, non-traditional educational programs and approaches grows ever louder. Low student enrolment in the basic ministerial programs simply compounds the problem. General Council is attempting to address this issue through the “Creating Cultures of Call” initiative, but even when successful, it will take several years for its effects to be seen in increased enrolments in theological schools.

The difficult reality is that the United Church is spreading its limited funding for education too thinly among too many schools. As the amount of this funding decreases from one year to the next, or even one triennium to the next, the church’s meaningful participation in theological education becomes one of ever-decreasing effectiveness. In trying to fund every school with a little, we will fund no school adequately.

### **New (Future) Partnership**

The United Church of Canada is committed to strengthening the partnership with its theological schools as it moves into a new space of being the church in a post-modern and post-Christendom era. In her report to the Executive of the General Council, “Planning for a Future Grounded in Faith and Action”, General Secretary Nora Sanders observes: “In order for the United Church to continue as a vital, living church, we need to address two urgent challenges: the nurturance and support of various aspects of the church during this time of transition, and the renewal of our leadership in order to identify and respond to new ministry opportunities.” The conversation on funding the theological schools is a significant part of living into this reality.

For its part the church recognizes that there is a significant shift in the culture of theological education and the funding landscape of the church. The resulting crisis of funding provides an opportunity for creative and innovative ministry, and new ways of strengthening partnerships between the church and its schools. As was said previously, the relationship between the schools and the church has been, and will continue to be, a partnership that is about much more than just funding.

To be an effective partner with the schools, the United Church is becoming more clear about its needs and its core commitments:

- It needs new ministers who can engage their context with robust theological thinking.
- It needs strong connexional relationships with its theological schools that affirm the identity and ethos of The United Church of Canada.
- It needs theological schools that offer academic excellence, contextual responsiveness, and flexible program delivery.
- It needs a creative variety of educational opportunities for diverse learners, many with non-traditional callings, to be trained for ministry and mission in the 21st century.
- It needs qualified teachers for its schools, and schools committed to appointing its qualified scholars.

## E. FUNDING FOR THE FUTURE

The current proposal will not solve every issue facing the church and its funding of theological schools, and it is not a one-time final solution. Significant issues will remain, pressure on available funding will continue to increase, and further discussions, consultations, proposals, and decisions will be required in the years ahead. In a post-Christendom and post-modern era it is unrealistic to expect lengthy periods of stability briefly interrupted by moments of re-evaluation and change. Change, transition, and instability are the new norms, and the church must hone its ability to be nimble, flexible, and adaptive while it seeks to be faithful in the 21st century. The schools and the church must learn to dance together in new ways as they seek to stay coupled in a relationship that allows separate freedoms and multiple friendships.

### Decision-Making Criteria

If the only criteria for deciding which schools will receive funding were objective data such as numbers of students and financial strength, it would be a relatively simple exercise in logic. However, as the Basis of Union recognizes, caring for the good of the whole church requires consideration of a complex set of factors. Weighing the relative merits of each of these factors is a matter of subjective judgment requiring informed wisdom and no small amount of prayer.

The following are among the many factors that must be considered in making the decision about which schools will be funded (in no particular order of importance). The significant differences between the Aboriginal schools and the others must also be considered in weighing the factors:

- Will the needs of the different regions of the country be met?
- Will overlap and duplication be reduced?
- Which schools have the deepest culture of openness and innovation?
- Which schools are most deeply expressive of, and responsive to, their social and cultural contexts (including the global context)?
- Which schools have the strongest connection to The United Church of Canada and are attentive to the priorities established by the General Council (e.g., interculturalism, interfaith engagement, right relationship with Aboriginal peoples, equipping youth leadership, empowering congregational ministries, ecumenism)?
- In a time of declining candidates for ministry, which schools have a recent history of attracting the highest percentage of United Church students?
- Which of the schools are accredited by the ATS?
- Which of the schools are the weakest financially in the short to intermediate terms?
- Which of the schools are financially robust enough in the intermediate and long terms that they are less vulnerable if their church funding ceases?
- Which schools are demonstrating a commitment to engaging the United Church constituency with front-line educational initiatives, especially for the laity?
- Which of the schools have a history of hiring United Church scholars to their faculties, especially into entry-level positions?
- Which of the schools have been granted the right to bestow *testamur*?
- What is the size of each school's traditional "catchment area" of United Church membership from which to draw potential students and to raise funds?
- Do the administrative leaders and faculty members make a contribution to the wider life of The United Church of Canada?
- Which of the schools have the highest level of student satisfaction?
- Which of the schools are known for their level of educational excellence—both in terms of scholarship and having an educational program that involves students in meaningful public and community engagement?

As important as all of the above factors are, the most significant cluster around the three core principles previously named by those who framed the Basis of Union in 1925. As mentioned in section C of this document, these three core principles were, and continue to be,

- thoroughly equipping a limited number of schools to provide excellent training for church leadership
- paying “due regard” to the regional needs of the church
- avoiding duplication within those regions

The fact that these three remain so central testifies to the wisdom of the founding leadership of The United Church of Canada, and to the enduring historical continuities of the Canadian context.

---

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sandra Beardsall, “A Brief History of the Church/Theological School Relationship in Canada,” *Toronto Journal of Theology*, vol. 25, suppl. 1 (Dec. 2009), pp. 19–39.

<sup>2</sup> Beardsall, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Beardsall, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Beardsall, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Beardsall, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley E. Porter, “Theological Education in the Twenty-First Century,” *Toronto Journal of Theology*, vol. 25, suppl. 1 (Dec. 2009), pp. 41–53.

<sup>7</sup> Porter, p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Porter, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Porter, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> “‘Testamur’ means the certificate issued upon satisfactory completion of the course of study required for Candidates by the General Council,” *The Manual, 2007*, p. 42.