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“I decided to take a leave from work so that I could study theology and spiritual formation. For me, a Sunday class or Bible study is not enough. I have to learn what it means to be a person of faith in my workplace, or I won't survive.”

That's the perspective of a successful marketing executive who has taken a six-month leave of absence from his work to study theology at Tyndale, not for the purpose of ministerial training, but for the express purpose of becoming more faithful in his living. Over lunch together, he and I shared the challenges of faithful living in the spaces of everyday life—neighborhood and office, hockey game and community gathering. And we wondered about whether seminary education can be a place to address the challenges of the workplace and to foster the passion to be faithful.

This was not an isolated conversation. I have had similar ones over the last two years since beginning my service at Tyndale. These discussions have spurred me to think deeply about what Tyndale ought to be and what our mission is. After all, only about 40 percent of our students are studying for the classic ministry professions—positions once thought to be the norm.

Seminaries used to be about training future clergy and pastoral staff workers. Every so often, we would produce a maverick who moved outside the norm and developed an outside-the-box ministry or mission. But mostly, these initiatives were still within the ministry formation paradigm.

WE MISSING POINT?

*The world has changed,
and the needs are different*

By Gary V. Nelson

Today, something different is taking place. People with no desire to go into classic ministry professions are coming to seminary. Increasingly, we witness students entering theological education with the simple desire to sharpen their minds and form their souls in ways that enable them to navigate and negotiate the real places of their everyday living. Lay leaders, faithful teachers, lawyers, doctors, and others from all walks of life come intrigued and interested as they seek deeper theological formation that will allow them to think critically and theologically about their worlds and the people in them.

Not all of them are taking time off so that they can fully immerse themselves in their studies. In fact, the majority continue in their regular occupations while studying part time. One of our recent graduates, a television news reporter, traveled almost three hours each way so that she could study in our modular master's program on Tuesday nights. She made this six-hour round-trip journey every week for three years.

These kinds of students change the classroom environment. They ask different questions, refusing easy answers offered by those who have not experienced the complex worlds from which they have come. They are leaven for rich conversations and they provide context for their fellow students who do plan to serve pastorally in church contexts.

Much is being written about the declining numbers in seminaries and what appears to be a bleak future. Like a once-thriving company whose product is no longer selling, we look for solutions in mergers or acquisitions. We hope that better marketing and more aggressive recruiting might save the day. I wonder, however, if we are simply missing the point. The world has changed, and the needs are different.

Seminary education specifically, and theological education generally, may thrive only when we realize the implications of these changes.

Put more positively, seminaries have the potential to become so much more. Theological education for the whole people of God can become more than an advertising tag line. Indeed, it's the challenge for the 21st-century "post-Christendom" theological institution.

How does a school embrace the challenges of theological education in this century?

- **Missional ethos.** Theological education needs to weave a missional engagement into its ethos — not because it is a buzzword but because it is the new reality.
- **Increased accessibility.** Theological education needs to become accessible to more people. The use of social media and other forms of technology will become ever more widespread.
- **Curricula for a new paradigm.** More accessibility means that the classic educational rhythms, and the curricula that support them, need to be reframed for a new context. Coursework that engages all people will help future clergy just as much as it helps those who seek to be faithful in secular work.
- **Inward-focused assessment, outward-focused vision.** Theological schools need to assess their own willingness to be something more. Entrenched isolation, though common in the academy, does not provide fertile ground for responsiveness to changing demands. Neither does content territorialism.

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"I have to learn what it means to be a person of faith in my workplace, or I won't survive"—that's the statement from the successful marketing executive that keeps ringing in my ears, and that's the idea that is helping shape Tyndale's future. I'm grateful that he entrusted our institution with his learning goals. I'm excited about becoming an educational institution that will provide educational and spiritual formation to him as a lay person, and to future ministers as well — to the whole people of God. **IT**

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