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# U.S. seminaries consider radical changes

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For more than 200 years, Andover Newton Theological School (ANTS) has trained future pastors to have expertise in biblical studies, pastoral care and preaching.

But in today's world, the nation's oldest school of theology has decided that's no longer enough, and other schools are starting to agree.

Under a recent curriculum overhaul, ANTS students must prove competency in key skills for the 21st-century church, including high-tech communication and interfaith collaboration. They still study theology, but unless they can use it to help others find meaning, they don't graduate.

"This is not a case for fine-tuning the (educational) model," Andover Newton President Nick Carter said at an Oct. 23 regional meeting of the United Church of Christ. "We really have to reinvent it; the profession has totally changed."

Andover Newton's new standards are part of a larger movement to reconsider what future pastors need to learn. Curriculum revisions are under way at about a quarter of the 262 institutions in the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), according to ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire.

A generation ago, seminaries were less eager for curriculum reform as they felt pastors could learn practical skills on the job, Aleshire said. But now, churches increasingly need pastors to arrive ready to tackle a myriad of challenges, from addressing alcoholism and domestic violence to creating access for the disabled.

"A lot of schools are rethinking how they educate religious leaders," Aleshire said. "There is a perception that ministry education is not just the accumulation of courses in the old disciplinary patterns. It has to be something more dynamic."

Around the country, schools are testing new approaches to theological education. In California, Claremont School of Theology will require that would-be Christian pastors will soon take some courses alongside future rabbis and imams at an institution to be named Claremont Lincoln University.

In Illinois, Meadville Lombard Theological School has reformed its curriculum to help students at the Unitarian Universalist seminary get more hands-on ministry experience early in their educations.

In Catholic seminaries, Aleshire noted, curricula have evolved in the last 20 years to help future priests reflect on issues of identity and "celibacy as a way of life and ministry."

"You might not find a course with that title," Aleshire said, "but if you looked at what they did over seven days (in their studies), you'd find a lot of time spent on those issues."

Curriculum reform is rooted in several driving forces, Aleshire said. Since more and more working students are attending seminary part-time, they need courses to be interchangeable and not part of a rigid sequence. And

because churchgoers and seminarians come from ever-more diverse religious backgrounds, pastoral training is evolving to help them engage multiple traditions.

Schools are experimenting to figure out what works. At Andover Newton, students learn "interpretation" in a way that covers more than Christian readings of the Bible, such as studying the Old Testament alongside rabbinic students from nearby Hebrew College.

The broader approach helps prepare future pastors to function effectively in a pluralistic world where Christian assumptions can't be taken for granted, Carter said.

"It actually turned out better rabbis and better Christian ministers when we were able to deal with the difficult texts" from each other's traditions, Carter said.

As training takes new forms, benchmarks are evolving as well. To evaluate curriculum reforms, ANTS administrators plan to contact congregations that are led by ANTS alumni. They'll ask how well pastors are doing in key competency areas, such as "embodiment," which expects pastors to practice what they preach and offer a convincing witness.

Based on what they hear, Carter said the school will continue to tweak the program so that churches get the kinds of ministers they need.

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