

# I Believe in the Future of North Park Theological Seminary

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I am a grateful graduate of North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS). When I think of experiences God used to orient my life's direction, there is no question that my time at NPTS ranks near the top. I needed seminary for biblical and theological foundations; North Park gave me that—and more. It matured my faith and hewed my nascent gifts. It gave me classmates who morphed into colleagues who morphed into lifelong companions. It rooted me in the denomination I love.

All seminaries, including our own, are navigating precarious times. The three-year, full-time residential model of seminary preparation that has been the standard for decades is under pressure at schools of all stripes. In the meantime, some schools are closing and others are consolidating. When I gather with leaders of other denominations, conversations about the future of theological education are common. No one is confident they have “figured it out.” As I distill the complexities that mark our present and future, two broad sets of considerations emerge. One is student-centered, the other is ministry-centered.

Students are more cautious about entering a full-time, multi-year program for a profession with less tangible return on the educational dollar invested—or debt incurred—for a career they are less certain they will be undertaking for their entire vocational life. They perceive the value of a seminary education but carefully “count the cost” of economic, relational/familial, and time investments in plotting if and how to proceed, especially if longer-term vocational direction is not settled.

In previous generations, the general consensus held that a seminary degree was the threshold for entering the ministerial vocation appropri-

ately prepared. If you wanted to be in ministry, you went to seminary, just as you went to law school to be a lawyer or medical school to be a doctor. While this is still broadly true, increasingly churches are calling ministry staff based on observed rather than “projected” effectiveness. In some quarters a seminary education is viewed more like an MBA—a value-added degree to enhance the efficacy of those *already in* ministry rather than the necessary gateway to ensure readiness *prior to* ministry. This is particularly true for special focus positions such as youth, children, worship, and others, which comprise more than half of all ministry positions in the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). The percentage of seminary students already in ministry positions is higher than it has ever been.

In combination, both sets of considerations produce a cumulative effect: in the aggregate, students are taking fewer courses at a time and, if they are in a degree program, are taking longer to complete their studies. This reduces the fulltime equivalents (FTEs), which in turn puts economic pressure on tuition-driven institutions. Despite being embedded in a solid university and tied to a growing denomination, NPTS is in this wobbly megatrend.

Yet even in this era of uncertainty in theological education, I am certain of this: North Park Theological Seminary can be—and must be—a pace-setter among schools preparing leaders in service to the mission of God in the world. My macro view is that the seminaries with meaningful futures will be committed to a particular framing concept—not merely to theological education but to *missional* theological education. A commitment is more than an implicit hope; it is an explicit frame of reference. Consider the individual elements of this commitment:

- Missional: Students know that they are being prepared to make a difference in the serious matter of God’s work in the world.
- Theological: “Missional” does not imply a reduction to pragmatism. Rather, mission is informed and undergirded by rigorous biblical and theological conviction.
- Education: A varied pedagogy incorporates instruction, reflection, experience, and community, leading to greater insight of living with God and for God.

By virtue of our historical identity as missional Pietists, NPTS already tends toward this framing concept. I believe further that the schools that will have the best traction toward being centers of missional theological education are the schools that understand the “power of multi.” Here

too NPTS is already well positioned.

Schools will need to see students as *multi-dimensional* and not merely consumers of biblical and theological content. One “quick fix trap” for schools is to think the answer to future viability will be found simply in varied content delivery channels, such as a mix of online classes, short intensives offered in various locations, and traditional campus-based offerings. This must be done to increase access, but if content delivery is *all* that matters, we may as well secure top lecturers from every seminary to record courses, start an online subscription service, and shut down every brick and mortar school. Intellectual preparation is only one dimension of seminary training. It is never less, but it is always more. Simply figuring out better ways to deliver content is overly simplistic. Even within new content delivery modalities, a comprehensive view of student preparation for ministry must integrate spiritual, character, and skill development. Historically, North Park has had this very posture. It has taken a comprehensive view of the demands of ministry and so too the dimensions of preparation to sustain a person in ministry. Those personal demands are only increasing.

Seminaries will need to be *multi-lateral*. Effective seminaries of the future will provide instruction by partnering scholars and expert practitioners. The incline for ministry is getting steeper. Seminaries that draw on the insights of effective practitioners will extend the classroom. This adds to the value proposition when students select a school. NPTS is taking steps in this direction, particularly in areas of ministry concentrations such as congregational vitality and church planting. Seminary scholars partner with recognized leaders in the field. This partnership brings together theological foundations and applied practice, critical reflection and pragmatic concern. The academy and apostolate in dialogue refine both for the good of the mission.

Finally, seminaries will need to be authentically engaged in *multi-ethnic* realities and opportunities. Most seminaries in the United States and Canada were founded on or largely followed a model of higher education imported from Europe. Furthermore, European immigrant descendants have proportionally been the largest clients of seminaries, both as students and hiring agencies of graduates. Consequently, many seminaries do not have credible engagement and mutuality across the burgeoning demographic mosaic that is both the church and the mission field in which we are situated. To not engage seriously is to become weaker in character and marginalized in mission. This is about more

than connecting to more students and faculty of color. It is about cross-cultural competency. It extends to the dimensions of power, pace-setting, participation, and purposeful common journey. NPTS and the ECC are taking halting steps. We confess we don't always get it right, but that doesn't mean it isn't right. And so we press on to be a fuller expression of God's church in service to God's world.

We live in an increasingly post-Christendom, post-modern, multiethnic, global world. Preparing students to serve effectively in this emerging context is at the center of what is meant by missional theological education. NPTS, by virtue of its heritage of missional Pietism and by its existing "multi" posture, is uniquely situated to become a pace-setter and model. In being smaller we can be nimble, a "controlled experiment" of sorts that can disseminate lessons learned. There is no road map, which means it will not be easy, formulaic, or guaranteed. But I have every hope that NPTS, more than any other seminary, has the compass to step into the future.

As we celebrate North Park's 125th anniversary, we celebrate the inestimable contribution its seminary, our seminary, has made to our mission. Looking ahead, we need an even stronger seminary, not for reasons of institutional survival but because, in the demands of the day, we need an even stronger mission.