



Leadership in a Post-Christendom World

June 8, 2018—Vol. 12, No. 23

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." Alvin Toffler

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The weekly eNews is provided by CGGC Executive Director Lance Finley



I don't know how much you follow the latest news of evangelicalism, but this headline caught my attention in recent weeks: **Fuller Seminary to Leave Pasadena Campus: A challenging new landscape for Christian graduate education forces major moves** (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/may/fuller-seminary-to-leave-pasadena-campus.html>).

The article caught my eye for a number of reasons. First of all, our own seminary, Winebrenner Theological Seminary (WTS), recently made a similar decision (reasons and outcomes) regarding its current campus in Findlay. Secondly, the fact that a school of Fuller's stature was making this kind of decision signals that there are some major shifts taking place in our culture. Fuller is one of the largest seminaries in North America and, in many minds, the paramount seminary in the U.S. They have wielded major influence across the landscape of the evangelical church. I know that they are not the only major seminary facing these kinds of challenging decisions.

Couple this with the fact that I took two phone calls right out of the gate on Monday morning from two different congregations who are entering into pastoral transitions and looking for potential leaders. Each of these situations were significantly different from one another (different sizes of churches, different areas of the country, different timelines, etc.), but there was a consistent concern present in each phone call: "are we going to be able to find the right leader for this next season of ministry in our church?" Phone calls like these are becoming more and more typical for me.

The world of Christendom had a long and arduous runway for those wishing to serve in some type of ministry leadership role – particularly pastoral leadership roles. My call came at the age of 17, right before my senior year of high school. I went to college for four years to earn my bachelor's degree in business. Upon graduation, I picked up and moved to Findlay to begin my pursuit of the Master of Divinity degree (M.Div.) at WTS. I took the slow route to an M.Div by adding an extra year to a three-year program. Most of my classmates we like me in that we came to school to earn a particular degree that would enable us to be credentialed with our particular church body to serve as a pastor or minister. I was fortunate in that my home conference and congregation covered the lion's share of my seminary tuition and fees and I was able to work part-time to pay my living expenses. I had the benefit of doing

all of this as a single young man, with limited expenses and risk. Many of my classmates had uprooted families and placed much more on the line to follow their call. On top of the education came all of the various denominational hoops required to prove one's readiness for Gospel ministry: ordination examinations, interviews, and other instruments designed to determine whether one was fit to serve. Those all happened a long time ago for me, but it certainly seems like they focused primarily on doctrinal knowledge and compatibility (which are important) as opposed to character and competency (which also prove to be fairly important).

Things have changed. Fewer students are moving to another location to pursue their education. As noted in the Fuller article as well as recent conversations with my friends at WTS, fewer students are coming to seminary with the goal of earning a particular degree. They want trained and equipped for ministry but are less motivated by the degree itself. Ask some recent seminary graduates about the student loan burden they carry: it's not uncommon to hear numbers in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range between an undergraduate and graduate degree. Most of our congregations do not pay at a level to realistically support that kind of student loan debt.

Add to this the age old question of what kind of churches are you training pastors for at the seminary? For some, seminaries are too future focused and train for a church culture that does not exist yet except for perhaps a few outlying exceptions to the rule. This might be heard in comments like "you seem to be training church planters instead of preparing pastors for traditional churches like ours." For other congregations, seminaries aren't doing enough to train leaders for the church of today and tomorrow: "You keep training folks perfectly for the church of 1950 and if it ever comes back, we're all set. We can't use the folks you're producing."

There's a lot of difficult work in front of us, particularly the work of unlearning and relearning. This issue of leadership in a post-Christendom world will require us to unlearn and relearn a lot of different things. It's going to change the way we do seminary education. It's going to change the way we handle credentialing. It's going to change the way a lot of congregations look at bi-vocational ministry. One ministry leader friend of mine talks about the reality that a good seminary education only provides 20% of the training that quality leaders need today and the overwhelming need to help create viable options to provide the 80% that doesn't get delivered through a traditional seminary education.

The methods and models for preparing leaders for Christendom will not adequately prepare today's leaders for a post-Christendom world! We're going to have to change and adapt and do so quickly.

Christ's Peace,

Lance