



HOW TO CHOOSE A SEMINARY

Where Is God Calling You?

 FULLER

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If you are considering a seminary education, the choices before you might seem almost dizzying. In the US alone you'll find more than 200 seminaries, with many more than that around the world. They offer programs that range from master's degrees and certificates to PhDs and other advanced degrees—in a

diversity of theologically centered disciplines.

You may have a clear idea of your calling and the educational track you'd like to pursue to get there. Or perhaps you sense God's call to take a new step in deepening your discipleship and theological preparedness, but need guidance in discerning what form that might take.

Wherever you are in your faith and vocational journey, you'll want to choose a seminary that fits you: your values, your goals, and, especially, your emerging sense of what God may be calling you to do in the world. I think you'll find the following information helpful—it's adapted from an excellent document written by my predecessor, former president Richard J. Mouw, that reviews many of the factors you'll want to weigh as you consider this important step. It's a significant life decision indeed.

Mark Labberton, President





THREE TYPES OF SEMINARIES

Most seminaries fall into one of three categories: denominational, university-based, and independent. The category you select will make a significant difference in the type of learning experience you will have.

Denominational schools exist primarily to serve the needs of a particular religious group, training their clergy and other church leaders. The theology and agenda of that denomination dominate the life of the school.

By contrast, university-related theological or divinity schools are often finely tuned with the larger culture of the institution. They exist alongside other professional schools, such as law and medicine. You'll probably hear more about what's being debated by the deconstructionists in the university's English department than about what will be voted at a denominational synod or convention.

Freestanding, independent seminaries usually exist to serve a movement. Often they are founded because of dissatisfaction with both denominational and university-related schools. The largest number of such seminaries are part of the evangelical movement in American Christianity.

In selecting between the three types of schools, it's important to keep your career pathway in mind. Certain denominations require that their candidates for ministry attend their own seminaries. Students for whom that is not a factor may benefit from the broader educational perspective that may be found at a university-based or independent school.

DIFFERENT EMPHASES

While every seminary exists to prepare people for ministry, seminaries differ in their emphasis. At seminaries focusing primarily on rigorous academics, the professors may be world-class scholars who are given plenty of time for research and publication. The worshiping life may be optional, something students experience as part of a local church. Individual professors, especially in seminaries embedded in university settings, may see themselves as scholars of religion, but may not necessarily profess a personal religious commitment.

Seminaries emphasizing spiritual formation over academics may provide community worship experiences every day of the week. Professors may be selected not only on the basis of scholarship, but on the basis of what they personally espouse and live. These seminaries put more of their focus on instruction in the practices and skills for ministry.

A third category includes seminaries that seek to strike a balance between academic and broader kinds of formation. They espouse the view that one doesn't need to be sacrificed for the sake of the other. This kind of seminary emphasizes what might be called "whole life formation," putting a priority on intellectual engagement as well as offering programs to form the student spiritually, personally, and vocationally. Integration of learning across courses and outside-of-class experiences is important with this approach as well.

PROGRAMS OF STUDY IN A CHANGING WORLD

Until recently most seminaries existed primarily to train future pastors. Students, who were predominantly young men fresh out of college, enrolled in a Bachelor of Divinity (now renamed the Master of Divinity) degree program. Three years later, they graduated and took their places in the ordained ministry of their denominations. So typical was this pattern that many schools offered no other degrees.

Today, some seminaries still emphasize the MDiv, while larger seminaries may offer a dozen or more different programs at the master's and doctoral levels. Less than half of the students at some schools may be planning a career in pastoral ministry. Seminaries prepare cross-cultural workers, marriage and family therapists, church planters, clinical psychologists, consultants, parachurch leaders, professors, artists, and businesspersons as well as parish pastors.



For those who do want to enter the pastorate, the basic degree is still the Master of Divinity. Increasingly, however, those with no plans for traditional ministry—who want rather to be theologically astute bankers, scientists, social workers—also find what they are looking for in the MDiv, or perhaps a Master of Arts in Theology. Some of these programs incorporate courses that assist students with vocational discernment, which may be of particular interest to students who want theological enrichment but haven't yet ascertained what shape their call might take.

With such a broad array of opportunities, prospective students can probably find a program well suited to their needs. A key is to explore not only seminary websites and degree descriptions, but the students' own vocational aspirations as well.

A MOVEMENT TOWARD BALANCE

Seminary education used to be a rather uneven thing. Various religious traditions had developed different approaches and standards in their educational programs. Degrees carrying the same nomenclature involved very different preparation.

In recent decades, accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools has become the norm. Today, very few are not at least eyeing accreditation, which guarantees minimum standards and relative uniformity of program and curriculum.

Much of this has to do with a developing sense of what goes into the training of a person for ministry of any kind. Whether schools are conservative or liberal, Catholic

or Protestant, denominational, university-based, or independent, they have moved toward consensus about overall academic requirements for theological education. Programs, in general, are aimed at a balanced, well-rounded curriculum, including the historical, systematic, biblical, and practical.

This balance is vital, because all kinds of evidence exists that religion and arrogance too frequently go hand in hand. Some of the most arrogant people on earth are those who think they understand God and what God wants for everybody else.

Theological education is a humbling process, because it introduces us to the nuances, the complexities, the legitimate areas of difference between people. It should be impossible to go through a well-rounded program of theological education and come out with all your preconceived ideas intact.

Those of us involved in theological education want people to come out of the process with conviction, but not with overconfident, simplistic views. To be right is not just to have correct ideas, but to have a loving spirit and attitude toward other people. Humility, flexibility, a self-critical posture, a readiness to hear and serve others—that is what a good theological education reinforces.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several practical considerations come into play in choosing the seminary that is right for you. What geographical location do you prefer? This is not just a matter of north, south, east, or west, near or far from your current locale. It also implies a decision about a rural or urban setting. Some people's ministry is enhanced by separation from the hustle and bustle of life. The best seminary for them might constitute a "wilderness experience," like Paul's in the Arabian Desert. For others, immersion in study also means connection to the diverse people who live in a large city. Their ministry is expanded by the living laboratory such an urban setting can provide.

Still another option today is to study online. Most seminaries offer at least some online courses these days, and many offer degree programs that can be earned either fully online, or primarily online with just a few on-campus courses. The online format can be a good choice for those who want to pursue a degree while continuing to serve in their current context and staying connected to their current community.

Prospective students often wonder if online study means a loss of community, but often quite the opposite is true. Discussion boards and other forms of virtual communication allow for a vibrant, ongoing exchange of ideas and experiences.



As students share on-the-ground ministry applications of what they're learning in their various contexts, all are enriched.

Whether online or on-campus, you'll want to look closely at the seminary community you'll be joining. Most students benefit from a learning environment that draws individuals from a diversity of settings and traditions. It's not just the books you read that make a difference, but the people you sit next to, have coffee with, or chat with virtually outside of class time. People from varying backgrounds and life experiences ask different questions and offer new perspectives. The kind of theological reflection you engage in as part of a community of scholars has a lot to do with how diverse that community is.

VALUE VERSUS COST

No matter what the seminary, the cost of an education is always significant in time as well as in money. In fact, dollars and cents may not be the best way to put a value on an educational program, though a prospective student must, of course, compare costs. There are very expensive theological programs that aren't very good, and financially inexpensive programs that are excellent.

Cost is not necessarily indicative of value. Value has to do with how well a program prepares people for the kind of work to which they are called. A degree program that not only provides job-entering credentials but also shapes your mind in important new directions is worth whatever price it may require.

GOD'S CALL

And that leads to a final consideration: Where is God calling you?

God doesn't call everyone to seminary. But God does call some to a time of intense study that seminary can provide. If you are one of those, listen to God's voice. There is room for people with all kinds of motivations: to get the credentials to enter full-time ministry; to satisfy intellectual curiosity; to test out a call; to find out more of what it means to be a human being.

If you're considering seminary, do your research. Look carefully at seminary websites. Explore their class listings. Dive into the bios of faculty whose subject areas interest you. Read the stories and testimonials of their students and alumni. Watch videos of their chapels and lectures. Follow the seminaries that most interest you on social media.

If you can, pay a campus visit. Talk with current students and faculty members, and don't hesitate to ask questions. What's day-to-day life like for a student? Where are the best study spaces? How is the library? What forms of academic advising can you expect to receive? What kinds of spiritual, personal, and vocational formation is offered, and are there programs and staffing to back it up? What kinds of services and support will the seminary provide once you've graduated?

Theology—studying about God—cuts close to the bone of our humanness. To study the God who made us is a very intimate investigation. The person who studies theology is more likely to be engaged in self-examination than a person who, for example, studies chemistry. Out of that self-examination can come a passion for ministry that can carry over into whatever vocation you pursue.

We encourage you to consider God's call in your life. As you do so, with prayer and thought and investigation, God will lead you to the place that is best for you, where you can rejoice in his unfolding plan for your life.

CAMPUSES

Main Campus/Pasadena

Fuller Online

Fuller Arizona

Fuller Bay Area

Fuller Colorado

Fuller Northwest

Fuller Orange County

Fuller Sacramento

Fuller Texas

Fuller Atlanta (Learning Center)

MORE ABOUT CALL AND DISCERNMENT

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