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Sowing Seeds of Sustainability

The commitment of our churches offsets these decadal changes in Christian higher education

BY GEORGE DURANCE

Twelve years ago I was invited to become the president of Canadian Bible College/Canadian Theological Seminary (CBC/CTS), our Alliance schools. Our family arrived in Regina, tired from an overseas move, but filled with a sense of anticipation. Because I was not a graduate of the schools, everyone and everything appeared new and strange. The first person I met (Velma Warnock) walked me down the hall, opened a door, and pointed to a desk in the middle of the room. "That's your desk," she said matter-of-factly.

As I sat down in the large, presidential chair, I noted there was nothing cluttering the cherry stained desk in front of me and, when I pulled open a few drawers, I was nonplussed to discover they were empty. "Now what?" I thought to myself. Twelve years later, with a great deal of work still to be done and my departure from Ambrose imminent, the drawers are full, the desk covered, and I am still asking what can be done to strengthen our school and Christian higher education in Canada.

The educational landscape looks very different today than it did on that warm July day in 1997 when we moved to Regina. On our Canadian campuses today there is a greater likelihood students will be carrying debt and working part-time; there is a heightened concern for institutional assessment and accountability; there is an increased need for schools to provide second language and remedial learning services; there is a more utilitarian attitude amongst students that focuses attention on education's vocational ends; and there is less emphasis on learning for personal development. All of these are significant trends, but another one is even more important than the ones noted above. I am referring to the general decline of Christian higher education in our country.

The Association of Theological Schools recently circulated a bulletin that states, "For the first time in several decades, the head count enrollment reported by member schools of The Association of Theological Schools ... declined [2007]." The report went on to say, "The decline was more pronounced in Canadian schools (6 percent) than U.S. schools (2.1 percent)."

When I entered my first term as president, many schools were reporting growth, particularly those that had migrated to a university platform or otherwise adapted to the changing needs and aspirations of the traditional Christian market. Now enrolment trends are generally negative from Halifax to Vancouver.

In 1999, we circulated a letter to Christian higher educational institutions in the Calgary region inviting them to help us create a centre for Christian higher education. Nine years later, three of those schools have closed and a fourth will shut its doors in April. Explanations for this decline range from unstable currency exchange rates to cyclical demographic factors.

The problem with these explanations is that they





reference recognized facts but they obscure more fundamental concerns and they leave schools poorly equipped to cope with reality. Two catalysts of change suggest to me that prospects for improvement are mixed.

The first catalyst is technological innovation, and it is a double-edged sword. Today we have an ability to deliver services in ways we could only dream about when I arrived in Regina. At that time, we had unrealistic expectations of the emerging internet platform. Five years ago there was retrenchment, as many institutions found the experiment expensive and ineffective. Today, pedagogically more satisfying models exist.

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Consequently, over the last year, we at Ambrose have gathered personnel and infrastructure which will enable us to deliver services in a timely, convenient manner to individuals anywhere. The first fruits of this investment will be available later this year. All this comes with a price, of course. Entire rooms and even buildings in large universities are now needed just to cool the servers. Add to this software, hardware, and maintenance costs and you have a perfect financial storm.

We endure this financial strain because technological innovation delivers genuine benefits for the student. For example, all our new classrooms have the latest smart technology which makes every classroom a dynamic learning environment. Our library offers 55,000 full text titles in a database, which is 1000 times the number we had in 1999. This means our library is better resourced in this area than many

larger public libraries were a few years ago.

However, the explosion of information made possible by technological innovation makes specialization and compartmentalization inevitable. We appreciate this when we are undergoing brain surgery, but in the world of higher education it leaves small schools with their generalized curricula less attractive, even though students (and parents) appreciate the warm collegiality on campus and the spiritual tone.

The fact of the matter is that small schools are increasingly unable to meet the expectations of the market. That is why CBC/CTS and the Nazarene University College chose to merge and that is why we continue to ask other schools to work together to collaborate with us. Partnerships and mergers will enable schools to acquire 'critical mass,' but few appear willing to accept the sacrifice this entails. As a consequence, schools disappear and a century of sacrificial giving and godly vision is relegated to the dustbin.

The second catalyst of change has been the degrading of a cluster of values in the Canadian evangelical church. A few statistics illustrate the impact of the change without actually defining the cause. In a recent study (2007) undertaken by Ipsos Reid, we discovered that only about 6 percent of Canadians are able to name a school in the category of Christian higher education and only 47 percent of evangelicals can name such a school.

Furthermore, all target audiences in the survey, including evangelicals, rated non-Christian institutions more highly than Christian. Our sector still scored top marks in areas such as class size, the mentoring role of teachers, and the presence of faith in the learning process. But, the sum of it is that Christian higher education is relatively unknown today and, if it is known, it is misunderstood.



How did we get here? Obviously this is not a decadal trend. Sixty years ago Christian higher education was an integral part of a vibrant evangelical community. In those days, when Canada was a quasi-Christian culture, students, with parental blessing, streamed to our schools to study God's Word and 'to find themselves,' to use a completely anachronistic phrase to make the point. They thought it was essential to know God's Word and to find his will if they were going to 'find themselves.'

Today, in a noticeably less Christian culture, Canadian Christians have decided Christian higher education, with its emphasis on knowing God and his will, is not as important as it was in an earlier 'Christian' day. When these values are no longer paramount in our lives, a series of unintended consequences results, including, I would argue, a diminished view of Christian higher education.

Thankfully, exceptions exist and Ambrose is part of a denomination that values and nourishes its school and encourages it to work collaboratively with others while developing new programs in Arts and Sciences as well as in Theology and Ministry. This means students in our school, regardless of their vocational interests and objectives, are challenged to think about God's will for their lives and to pursue a personal knowledge of him and his handiwork in creation.

I am grateful the general decline in Christian higher education has not extended to our school. The credit goes to the churches of The Christian and Missionary Alliance which, together with those of The Church of the Nazarene, made a courageous, strategic decision to re-launch their school as Ambrose University College and invest it with new resources and support.

Recently Bernie Van De Walle, one of our professors, commented to me that we have an outstanding

group of students this year: "They are as spiritually motivated as any we have had." Given the quality of students on our campus today and the determination of our churches to see renewal happen, I believe the seeds of positive change have already been sown.

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