

Mapping the Ecotone

A Landscape Survey of Lifelong Learning Programs in Theological Schools

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For nearly 75 years, the necessity of lifelong learning for effective ministry practice has been affirmed by theological schools, denominations, and practitioners. As the pace of social and ecclesial change has accelerated, awareness of the critical need for ongoing continuing education to support the work of ministry has grown. However, there has been scant attention by researchers into lifelong learning programs and their leadership.

In winter of 2025, the Association of Leaders in Lifelong Learning for Ministry (ALLLM) conducted a landscape survey of lifelong learning programs in theological schools.¹ Inquiring into the leaders of these efforts, the programs themselves, and institutional support for them, the study provided a longitudinal comparison to ALLLM's 2020–2021 survey, which was the first of its kind in over forty years.²

The two ALLLM studies managed to capture bookends on a period of deep and rapid change in theological education and the work of pastoring. The events of the five years between the two studies read like a checklist for the apocalypse: a global pandemic, momentous elections and deep political division, racial unrest, economic see-sawing, the

so-called “Great Resignation” as masses quit their jobs, the growth of online community, and decline in seminary attendance and congregational life. Tens of millions of dollars supported research into the well-being of clergy, which appeared in many narratives to be in crisis (Austin and Comeau 2022; Campbell-Reed 2022; Coe and Inanoglu 2024; Hartford Institute for Religion Research 2023a). As these phenomena converged and reports proliferated, it was easy to conclude that the times were unprecedented and the news largely terrible.

Yet as the 2020–2021 ALLLM research revealed, the upheaval proved to be a boon to lifelong learning programs. Leaders pivoted, able to respond nimbly to the sudden need for new skills and new ways to gather communities, and all but four programs reported growth. By the time the 2025 survey was completed, lifelong learning programs had firmly established themselves as a singularly reliable growth industry in theological education. While degree program enrollment in seminaries had been on a continuous downward trend for two decades, enrollment in non-degree programs grew 24.2% between 2023 and 2024 (Meinzer 2024). It appeared that lifelong learning programs were rising to the challenge and having a moment.

Looking Back

A wider historical view shows that 2020–2025 has not been the only epoch of major social and ecclesial change. Lifelong learning—or “continuing education,” as it was typically called—came into its own in the 1960s, a time of similarly dramatic and rapid change. The rise of continuing education followed a movement to professionalize education for all practices-based jobs, not just ministry (Cervero 2000). This captured the attention of the American Association of Theological Schools (now ATS) and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Connolly Gamble, director of continuing education at Union Theological Seminary of Virginia, was charged with the task of investigating “the state of Continuing Theological Education Programs for Ministers,” surveying the needs of Protestant ministers and the continuing education available to them—the first such landscape study of lifelong learning for ministry. The results were published in 1960 as *The Continuing Theological Education of the American Minister* (Gamble 1960).

Gamble was the first champion of lifelong learning for ministry, and his sweeping overview defined the field of continuing education for ministry, defended its necessity, and reported on the state of the industry. If professional education is intended to prepare people for the effective practice of their job, then continuously updating skills and knowledge would be necessary to guarantee that efficacy. This logic was accepted as true in medicine, teaching, and other practices-based professions; why not ministry as well? Seminary would never be able to provide comprehensive preparation: “The incessant change in the world and in individuals requires a program of study and theological reflection if the minister is to remain vital,” he urged (Gamble 1960, 12). The industry concurred: he found a “surprising amount” of continuing education offered in 95 seminaries, plus an additional 60 other venues, including other universities, conference centers, and pastoral institutes.³

The rapid proliferation of programs warranted the coordinating efforts of a guild and conversation about best practices. Gamble’s landmark study led to the establishment of the Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education for Ministry (SACEM) in 1969, ALLLM’s antecedent guild; he was named its first president (Reber 2000). Writing at this same time, researcher Alden Kelly noted the rise of theological consortia collaborating to provide continuing education and cited them as the “wave of the future” (Kelley 1969, 8). Echoing Gamble, he cited the need for more practical training for clergy than was offered in traditional MDiv curricula to support the interpretation of faith in contemporary times. Effective clergy, both argued, were self-motivated and self-reflective learners (Gamble 1960; Kelley 1969).

More than three decades before SACEM, the shortcomings of professional clergy training had already been reported and the need for ongoing education prefigured. The 1934 study *The Education of American Ministers* revealed that ministers felt ill-prepared for some of the basic work of ministry (May et al. 1934). May and colleagues concluded that this was due to seminary education overemphasizing traditional theological subjects at the expense of people skills, like pastoral care and administration (May et al. 1934). This is the point at which the historically-minded lifelong learning leader observes that it was ever thus.

A tension in the purposes of lifelong learning / continuing education is present in its origin story. On the one hand, affirming the need to update skills and information for effective practice in ministry is a necessary consequence of a professional education. This observation

tracks with the approach to content-based continuing education, as had been developed in other professions. On the other hand, as Gamble and Kelley pointed out, effective ministers need to *be* lifelong learners—a formational posture rather than technical enhancement: “A theological education which does not lead young men and women to embark on a continuous, ever-incomplete but ever-sustained effort to study and to understand the meaning of their work and of the situation in which they labor is neither theological nor education” (Gamble 1960, 5). Is the primary purpose of lifelong learning for ministry to form participants in their identity and practice as ministers, or to add to the content and skills required of the job? And what is its relationship to the education received in preparation for ministry?

By the early 2000s, the professional approach to ministry education dominating the twentieth century had begun to crack. As seminaries and denominations wrestled with declining enrollments and questions about the relevance of the education they provided, lifelong learning programs felt the impact. Robert Reber noted that “Continuing theological education is still at a real disadvantage in the church’s educational ecology” (Reber 2000, 41). Despite affirming its necessity, neither denominations nor seminaries prioritized its support, and directors of continuing education were “probably the most marginalized group within the institution [of theological higher education] Continuing education for clergy and laity is the least subsidized educational enterprise in all of seminary education and church education in general.” (Reber 2000, 41). This lack of support nearly caused SACEM to shutter multiple times; membership dropped as seminary programs were discontinued and leadership let go.

In the wake of these tensions, researchers simultaneously sounded the alarm concerning the baseline well-being of clergy. In their benchmark study, Austin and Comeau (2022) named lifelong learning as one of the five pillars of support available to clergy, even as they lamented the decline of pastors’ emotional, vocational, physical, and financial health. Like the clergy they intended to serve, leaders in lifelong learning appeared to be subject to larger forces and unable to anchor amidst rapid social, ecclesial, and educational shifts. And as pandemic-era research revealed, the situation appeared to worsen.

The conversation about a post-professional approach to clergy education began to gain traction with the publication of the Theological Education Between the Times series by Eerdmans (see, for example, Aleshire 2021b). The time was ripe to revisit new ways of supporting ministers in their preparation and practice, and lifelong learning

programs found themselves once again growing amidst a time of social and ecclesial unrest. The ALLLM studies revealed a snapshot of an industry at a moment of deep transition and tipping point.

Capturing the Present Moment

In 2019, ALLLM leadership committed to conducting the long-awaited research project. At the time, the research team had no idea what would unfold the following year. The first inquiry was launched within the first months of the pandemic; the second was launched five tumultuous years later to see its impact on the industry. The decision was made to focus on the leaders and their programs rather than to conduct a needs assessment of clergy, due to ALLLM's commitment to support the leadership of the programs rather than clergy themselves.

The primary research tool consisted of an online survey distributed to all leaders of lifelong learning in ATS member schools. In 2020, a scan of 273 ATS member websites showed 84 programs. Surveys were emailed to program leaders between November 2020 and May 2021, and 41 usable responses were received. The same survey with minor edits was distributed again between November 2024 and March 2025. At this time, 138 programs in 289 schools were identified, and 57 usable responses were received. Additionally, interviews were conducted with 15% of the respondents during the summer of 2025. Surveys collected both qualitative and quantitative data about the backgrounds and perceptions of the leaders; the content and structure of their programs; and levels of institutional support. Interviewees self-selected for participation by emailing their interest to the researchers. What follows is a discussion of the 2025 findings, with reference to the earlier study when warranted.

Overview

One of the most striking data points between the 2020–2021 and 2024–2025 surveys was the growth in the number of lifelong learning programs in theological schools. In roughly four years, the number increased 60%. ATS tracking of non-degree enrollees in theological schools has mapped the effect of this rapid growth, too, naming it “the most promising enrollment trend” in theological education (Meinzer 2024).⁴

Beyond the dramatic shift in numbers, however, there was little significant difference between the data generated by the two surveys. Both surveys show evidence of committed program leaders, robust programs, and an awareness of their crucial contribution to the work of theological education; they also reveal staff spread thinly, problematic economic models, and concerns about institutional support and affirmation of this work.

Program Leadership

Data revealed a cohort of highly qualified and committed program leaders. In 2025, nearly 70% of the respondents held a doctoral degree, 51% of those a PhD or ThD, a credential that would qualify them for any senior level administrative or faculty position. All signs pointed to these professionals choosing to work in this field rather than in more traditional academic jobs. One interviewee left a tenured position to build a lifelong learning program: “I [wanted to] do a little bit more building and thinking about equipping ministers” rather than support a traditional curriculum. Another articulated a vocation found in supporting others’ vocations. While motivations differed slightly, interviewees expressed appreciation for the comparable creativity and freedom they felt in this work as compared to other institutional positions, and they felt they were using their full educational and experiential bandwidth. Among survey respondents, 91% affirmed vocational fit, and 96% expressed satisfaction with their work. Additionally, a third of the respondents had been leading their program for six or more years, a benchmark for seniority in the field, and 42% had been in their positions for three or fewer years, supporting the hunch that grant funding had contributed to the sudden rapid growth in the number of programs.

Program Content

What subject areas do these programs address? The content areas taught remained consistent among the two surveys: 85% provided instruction in theology, spirituality, and leadership; biblical interpretation and pastoral counseling were counted among nearly 75% of the programs. When asked which areas comprised the majority of their offerings, respondents named theology most frequently. Even though

practical theological topics like pastoral counseling and spirituality were offered, they comprised a smaller portion of the overall lifelong learning portfolio. The only outlier was leadership studies, named among the top three most frequently offered topics in both surveys.

Broadly speaking, the content of lifelong learning programs largely mirrors that of seminary degree program curricula, with the prominence of leadership studies as the exception. With 86% of the program leaders reporting the use of seminary faculty for instructional leadership, and with all respondents reporting that their programs are housed within the office of academic affairs, this is not surprising. For the most part, seminary-based programs appear to offer “more of the same,” packaged in short courses, lectures, online classes, and stackable modules that privilege the expert content already available within the institution.

Looking back on the origin of lifelong learning for ministry, however, one sees a disconnect. One rationale behind continuing professional education was to respond to pastors’ emerging needs in the field and “fill the gaps” in seminary education—as early as 1934, the mismatch between curricula and professional duties had been identified (May et al. 1934). In their review of what the religious workforce needs and what theological schools offer, Gin et al. (2025) provided a contemporary underscore to what has been observed by researchers for nearly a century: that there is misalignment between what graduate theological curricula provide and what graduates need for effective ministry practice. Observing the close alignment between course offerings and faculty interests rather than alumni needs, Gin and colleagues wrote, “It is likely that what schools offer is more closely determined by the structure of faculty than what the workforce currently needs” (Gin et al. 2025, 169).

This supposition raises crucial questions for the relevance and institutional location of lifelong learning programs in seminaries. As with the degree program curricula, to what degree are lifelong learning offerings driven by the actual needs of the constituents served? What is the program’s actual relationship to the primary degree-granting work of the seminary? And how does the seminary administration perceive the function of lifelong learning within the institution and in its relation to the mission of the school? Additional potential for misalignment exists between program offerings and the innovative leanings and creative energy of the program directors as well as the espoused mission to support ministry practitioners. A look at the data on institutional support raises further questions.

Institutional Support

Survey respondents were asked about staffing, program output, and economic models to provide quantitative data about levels of institutional support. They were also asked to describe perceptions of that support and what they needed to thrive professionally. Overall, it is not an overstatement to say that lifelong learning programs are highly productive and provide a level of service that far exceeds the staff and resources they have.

Take, for example, the ratio of staff to constituents served. The median staff consists of the equivalent of two full-time employees, and 75% of the respondents reported having significant additional responsibilities, including directorship of other programs, administrative duties, or teaching. In other words, most offices have multiple part-time staff. Yet nearly 40% of the programs reported serving more than 500 participants per year.

A look at the economic models supporting these programs is similarly telling. More than 60% of the programs were expected to generate revenue to cover salary and benefits for staff, 91% of the programs rely on participant fees, and 67% on grant money. Indeed, some interviewees reported having to generate income to compensate for steep declines in degree programs. By contrast, the median number of full-time faculty at theological schools is 11, serving a median student headcount of 139, or 79 full-time equivalent (Chris Meinzer, personal communication, 20 October 2025).

Of course, lifelong learning participants and degree-seeking students do not require equivalent levels of support from a theological school. Nonetheless, these numbers provide a helpful metric. They point to schools perceiving these efforts as a support for the degree programs and institutional solvency rather than contributing to the educational mission in their own right. Requiring lifelong learning to be self-sustaining and subject to drastically different staffing and economic expectations than the other educational programs of the institution underscores this double standard. As one survey respondent commented, “Is there a pill to open the eyes of the administration to the importance of lifelong learning?” Unsurprisingly, when asked what they need to thrive in their positions, directors universally reported staff, time, financial resources, and—crucially—institutional buy-in. When asked what would need to change at their institution if lifelong learning were to be more centered, interviewees struggled. Eventually many admitted that such a move would require a seismic

culture shift, along with a radical realigning of seminary resources, staff, and priorities.

Looking Ahead: Lifelong Learning for What?

We end, in many ways, where we began. Lifelong learning in theological schools is growing rapidly, with the number of programs on a sharp upward trend. Efforts are led by committed and creative professionals hosting educational events that reach far beyond degree programs. They report deep vocational satisfaction in their work, and most identify it as a crucial part of the future of theological education. Is this the turning point for lifelong learning? Will it finally anchor and come into its own, recognized as a necessary component of ministry sustainability and supported in kind? Or will it continue to vacillate as it has for its 70-year history, subject to larger social, ecclesial, and institutional trends? Contemporary conversations about the limits of mainstream approaches to graduate theological education have generated a new moment; accreditation has recognized the importance of lifelong learning (ATS 2020, §3.5), and a turn towards a “formational” rather than professional approach to ministry education has entered the discourse (Aleshire 2021a). All of this suggests that this time could be different.

However, a more established future for lifelong learning is not guaranteed, as these data show. Directors continue to experience a lack of material support for their work and the prevailing culture in their host institutions is slow to change. Staff are spread thinly. The dominant model for programming continues to be informed by seminary curricula and available resources, rather than constituent needs. Heavy reliance on grant funding and participant fees, rather than weaving this work equitably into the overall educational mission of the school, is potentially unsustainable. Overall, administrators turn to lifelong learning to support the institution’s prevailing practices rather than as a way to discern a new future. Lifelong learning has experienced flush times in the past, most notably in conjunction with large grant-funded initiatives, only to wane when the grants sunset. One would not be faulted to temper the hope that this “bright spot in theological education” (Meinzer, 2024) could simply be yet another bubble in the tumultuous history of lifelong learning, headed to another downturn. What will it take for these times to be different?

As leaders on the edges of their institutions, program directors of lifelong learning have a unique perspective: they have one foot in the school and one foot in the communities served by ministry leaders. This location, on the edge, can be both a vulnerability and a superpower. While edge efforts have challenges influencing centers of institutional power, they are the place where growth takes place. Furthermore, this edge serves as an “ecotone”—a biologically rich area of transition between two established environments. Ecotones are not just confluences; they are filled with resources and species from contributing ecosystems both feed and breed in these regions. Similarly, lifelong learning programs serve and benefit both communities and schools. For participants, they provide opportunities and access to resources that facilitate ongoing reflection and formation as ministers in a rapidly changing context. As Dan Aleshire observed, “The times, however, are changing, and the professional model of theological education will not be as good in the next century as it was in the last one. Theological education, if it is to be as good for the future as past versions were for an earlier day, must change” (Aleshire 2021b, 27). Less restricted by some of the requirements to which formal degree programs must conform, directors can pivot and respond to emergent needs more nimbly than their institutional counterparts.

For schools, lifelong learning programs can provide crucial insight into the needs and contexts of the professionals they intend to prepare for ministry. A school cannot change the prevailing social and educational forces that impact its work, but leadership can still attend to these forces and imagine how to do its work in new and more relevant ways given the circumstances—a commitment lifelong learning leaders already embrace. Schools can choose to use these programs reactively to compensate for challenges and deficits within the model of business as usual, or they can help lead a strategic way forward, informed by the living connection they provide between the school and working ministers.

The present cultural moment calls for new ways of approaching the support of ministers throughout the arcs of their vocations—ways that center their experiences, needs, and ways of learning. To this end, theological schools concerned about their relevance and effectiveness would do well to listen to, even center, the insights and work of their colleagues in the ecotone of lifelong learning.

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Notes

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- 2 In his chapter “From Yesterday to Today in Continuing Education,” Mark Rouch argued for the need to conduct a landscape study of the programs that provide this education. The ALLLM study was the first such survey since 1984 (Rouch 2000, 27). A flurry of studies on lifelong learning for ministry appeared in the 1960s and early 1970s; the Society for Continuing Education in Ministry (SACEM) conducted the last such study in 1984 to assess continuing education needs among clergy (Rouch 2000, 27).
- 3 In 1960, the American Association of Theological Schools had 82 accredited and 42 associate member schools, 93 (75%) of which had provisions for continuing education. As Gamble observed, this was a staggering amount of continuing education on offer, and none of the efforts were coordinated (Gamble 1960, 21).
- 4 In 2025, The Lilly Endowment, Inc. announced that another 58 schools received grants of at least \$1 million in the second round of Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative funding; the first such round of funding in 2021–2022 provided grants to 105 institutions. A scan of proposed grant projects shows that the majority of recipients intend to offer non-degree education as a significant part of their project portfolio.

