North American theological schools are grappling with huge changes. Students are struggling with the cost of education and the practicalities of Dublin. But, there may need to adopt a more learner-centered approach. Variations in developing better digital access, boards are grappling with increasing complexity and costs of compliance, administrators are watching enrollment trends, and churches are re-evaluating what is the best setting to train their next generation of leaders. North American church attendance is among the highest in the Western world and theological education is relatively highly regarded. Yet many theological schools are grappling with loss of a sense of mission and struggling to justify their existence. What does the future hold for North American theological schools? And what can the rest of the world learn from the North American experience?

Daniel Aleshire wrote Earthen Vessels as a series of hopeful reflections from his perspective as executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS). He is a warm and respected leader and in this book he offers a fresh perspective on the challenges facing theological education. The book is an attempt to rekindle accreditation for schools across North America. It also engages with the extensive theological education research of the last few years, including: Autumner-Central for the Study of Theological Education, and projects of Lviv: Endowment and the Association of Theological Schools. While recognizing areas they need to improve, throughout the book Aleshire displays his perceptive of theological education and his offer.

Theological schools are called to help the church remember the past, evaluate the present, envision the future, and live faithfully in relationship to all three. Each era of the Christian tradition must identify the honest understanding of the long tradition, the most intellectually faithful Christian witness, and the most honest engagement of the culture and the church. Theological schools provide an ideal context for this kind of intellectual work (23:24).

The book covers three broad areas. Firstly, it articulates a case for theological schools. Critics may suggest theological education is an outdated, party, and elitist. It is not, or not located enough in local churches, but Aleshire argues theological schools have a vital place in equipping leaders and renewing and lifting the church healthy.

Secondly, it delves into learning, teaching and research as integrated acts of scholarship. Aleshire appeals to theological educators to be attentive to the appropriate challenge across tertiary education to be learner-centered, to be attentive to students and what most helps them learn and to be accountable for that. He describes theological education as at its best when its students learn through experimentation. The goal of theological learning is not the acquisition of greater amounts of religious knowledge, it is the transformation of learners into different kinds of Christian believers. (35). Teaching acts best helps students grow in their capacity for interpreting texts, forming habits of attentiveness, contextualizing truth to current realities, and performing ministry skills. Research, at its best, will not be irrelevant or not situated, but focused on things that matter to the church and the world. Aleshire also emphasizes the value of engaged writing in the art and craft of research design and focus, teaching and assessment, and literary architecture and changes for digital access. It affirms the role of the faculty whose teaching is informed by important research and whose passion and purity, as well as depth and substance, rubs off on students.

Thirdly, the final chapters discuss the role and administrators, governing boards and churches. Aleshire affirms the vocation of administrators and the importance of good governance (committing schools have no more without learning, teaching, and research, but have high moral and spiritual standards. And he underscores the importance of school-church relationships and recognizes theological schools often have more work to do on fostering mutual leadership and pastoral imagination for the challenges of contemporary church and mission leadership.

One area Aleshire begins from points. But, where much more work needs to be done, is developing leaders for the missionary challenge of the church in the Western world. He begins to discuss some academy, academy and apostles, a proposition content, like Luther Seminary have explored. But Aleshire knows that the imagination of theological schools is bound up in the importance of teaching and pastoring. Schools see themselves as at their best when designed for teaching and learning and theological schools traditionally focus on preparing leaders to care pastorally for churches. But Christianity is not just a teaching tradition. It is a missionary movement. Churches do not just need functional pastors but people functioning spiritually, orthodoxy, and evangelistic.

The church in the Western world needs training processes for culturing leaders with the imagination of missionaries.

Aleshire writes as an American educational theorist writing largely on his North American context. Yet he is also passionate about and aware of the challenges of theological education in other parts of the world. For example, he reports on how the impact is linked to the increasing international gathering who are warmed to stand to close windows in case of getting shut that is not usually a first world problem, but many of the issues American theological schools face are ones faced in other contexts. Aleshire’s reflections and wisdom make it easier Aleshire’s valuable reading for faculty, administrators, board members, donors, church denominational leaders or anyone concerned with the health and future of theological education.

This review was originally published in Journal of Adult Theological Education 10 (1 May 2018), 82-84.


This review was originally published in Journal of Adult Theological Education 10 (1 May 2018), 82-84.