

## Dinosaur or Digital Degree?

The State of the Master of Arts degrees in Christian/Religious Education at select member schools of the Association of Theological Schools

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**The Story Behind the Research:** Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education (Union-PSCE) was asked by the Board of Trustees to assess its Master of Arts in Christian Education program with regard to number of students it served and the number of faculty required to adequately prepare students in this degree program. In the course of our exploration with other departments of this degree the question was raised, “What are other theological schools doing with this degree program?” Not having a ready answer, I began this research for our own faculty, but thought that others would welcome my findings as well.

**Research Method:** I began by targeting thirty seminaries and divinity schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools for master’s degrees in Christian or religious education. Of these twenty-eight have responded with enough information to be listed in this study. One of these indicated early on that they were discontinuing their degree (Luther Theological Seminary), and one was changing their degree to a Master of Arts in Church Ministry where educational ministry was one of several options (Christian Theological Seminary). The subsequent research has focused on the remaining twenty-six schools. Twenty-one of these schools were accredited to offer the same degree as Union-PSCE, the Master of Arts in Christian Education (M.A.C.E.). Two were accredited for the Master of Religious Education (M.R.E.). Two offered a Master of Arts in Religious Education (M.A.R.E.), and two awarded a Master of Arts in Educational Ministry (M.A.E.M.). The attempt was made to choose schools representing a variety of theological and denominational traditions. Issues of culture and regional representation were also taken into consideration. A list of these seminaries and their web sites accompanies this paper (Appendix A).

The most pressing need in the initial stages of this research was for a numerical count of students and faculty serving each degree program. The student total enrollment figures from each institution were obtained from the Association of Theological Schools’ website ([www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu)).

The student enrollment figures in each specific degree program were obtained from the registrars of each institution and reflect student enrollment in the spring semester of 2003. Faculty numbers were obtained from web sites and course catalogs of the schools. Only faculty with academic titles in some form of Christian or religious education were noted in the research. It is important to be aware that there are other faculty in departments such as Biblical Studies, Theology, Church History, and Ethics who teach classes for these degree programs, but there was no way to ascertain the amount of Master of Arts courses taught within their faculty workload. The resulting figures can be found in a chart, Appendix B, attached to this paper.

After this initial numerical study of the schools, I returned to an exploration of the degree itself as manifested in each institution. What were the degree requirements? What was the nature of the courses included in the degree programs? Did the schools offer the degree program in

distance education format? Was there any type of laboratory school connected with the degree program that offered hands-on learning with another age group? These questions were explored in two ways. First, the author looked at web sites and catalogs for each school. Mission statements, goals for degree programs, scope and sequence of coursework, and course descriptions/syllabi were collected for each school. Secondly, a specific faculty member from each institution was asked to complete a brief questionnaire on the areas of research and to return it by email. This latter process was hampered by the fact that most of this research happened in the summer months when few faculty were present. As of September 15, 2003, eighteen of the twenty-six school faculty members had responded.

**Findings:** The findings from this study will be summarized in the same categories found on the faculty questionnaire: history and nature of the degree programs, primary vocation of graduates with the degree, participation of other departments/schools and their perception of the degree, and distance/online education. Trends will be noted, and several manifestations of the degree program will be lifted up as unique representations of these particular categories. There are two topics that merit a lengthier discussion than can be accomplished in this paper. The first is a systematic and detailed analysis of the curriculum at each school in these degree programs, and the other is the relationship of the few institutions that have laboratory schools on their grounds for the purpose of learning how to minister to and with children. These offer possibilities for future papers.

*History and Nature of the Degree Programs:* To the surprise of some who may consider these degrees primeval, Master of Arts degrees in the subject area of Christian/religious education are a twentieth century phenomena. One might even say a late twentieth century phenomena. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, claims to be the first to offer credit courses in this subject area. They also had the first endowed chair in religious education by 1906 and the first M.A.R.E. degree in 1953.<sup>1</sup> Most of the other programs that form the basis of this study began their programs in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Some have maintained the same degree program from its inception, perhaps changing from the terminology of religious education to Christian education, but essentially retaining the same type of coursework. (These tend to be the schools with the greater number of currently enrolled students, the Southern Baptist seminaries in the southeast, interdenominational schools like Talbot, and the mainline seminary Union-PSCE.) Others have gone through a series of curriculum and degree changes over the years. (These include many of the United Methodist seminaries, other mainline seminaries like Andover Newton, and some of the smaller denominational seminaries and theological schools.) These changes seem to be related to smaller enrollments, and a desire to meet the needs of the schools' constituencies. A typical example would be Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It began with a Master of Arts in Church Education in 1975 as a modified Master of Divinity program, responded to an expressed desire to link education and missions in 1986 by changing the degree to a Master of

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<sup>1</sup> Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Course Catalog, 94, as posted on [www.sbts.edu](http://www.sbts.edu) and email reply to phone query by Jonathan Richerson, Doctoral Programs Coordinator, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty surveys-question 1

Arts in Education and Missions, and now is expanding its Master of Arts focus to new church development and Christian worship.<sup>3</sup>

Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary is not only changing the name of its degree, but also the number of credits required to obtain it. During this academic year, they are changing their M.A.C.E. degree to a Master of Arts in Educational Leadership. This degree, just approved by A.T.S. this summer will reduce the credits expected for graduation from 66 hours to 49 hours. After a three-year research process, this school ascertained that its constituency was no longer interested in a generalist education degree. Dr. Shera Melick of this school indicates that churches in the West are being more specific in their lay positions, using titles such as “Minister of Small Groups, Minister of Equipping, and Minister of Discipleship.”<sup>4</sup> The new degree program is designed to allow flexible specification of coursework depending upon the student’s call to ministry. Golden Gate, also, has the distinction of having both one of the highest number of credit hours for its previous M.A.C.E. program, and the lowest number of credit hours with its new M.A.E.L. program.<sup>5</sup>

All of the schools required some configuration of courses in the disciplines of biblical studies, theology/ethics, and church history. Many of them had similar course offerings in teaching, curriculum, and age-specific electives. A number of the schools allowed for specification by offering different tracks related to the student’s interests. The majority of these schools offered specialization by children, youth, or adult ministry. Others offered tracks for those wishing to teach or administer in Christian schools, do campus ministry, or family ministry. Some allowed for those interested in urban ministry or cross-cultural education to take classes in these specialties. Ashland Theological Seminary has recently changed their M.A.C.E. degree to a Master of Arts in Practical Theology and merged it with their Master of Arts in Christian Ministries. This has allowed students either to major or minor in Christian education, as well as to explore other options for ministry. They currently have 32 students majoring in Christian education and 15 minors.<sup>6</sup>

Let us turn our attention now to the vocation of graduates from these various degree programs.

*Vocational Pursuits of Graduates from Master of Arts Programs:* Most schools indicated that the majority of their graduates entered some form of parish ministry. Schools in the Southeast most frequently noted that the majority of their graduates had obtained generalist positions in Christian or religious education in local churches. Although this was not entirely confined to the Southeast other regions of the country more frequently noted specialized educational ministry either of a specific age group or a specific nature such as chaplaincy, counseling, or parachurch agencies. A noteworthy exception to this trend was Interdenominational Theological Center that noted a good portion of their students came from public education, legal, and medical realms,

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<sup>3</sup> Faculty Questionnaire from Dr. Robert DeVries, September 3, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Faculty Questionnaire from Dr. Shera Melick, August 21, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary seems to have the largest amount of required hours in their 70-hour M.A.C.E. program, although it is difficult to tell conclusively because some other schools operate on the quarter system.

<sup>6</sup> Faculty Questionnaire from Dr. Eugene Gibbs, August 8, 2003.

and returned to these helping professions with a new focus to their service. A few schools noted that some of their graduates later returned to pursue Master of Divinity degrees.

Several of the institutions remarked on the changing nature of the student body itself, noting older students many of whom were already serving churches. The schools dealt with this reality in varying ways. Erskine Theological Seminary is a part of a consortium of schools offering courses in audio and video format. The student writes papers and takes a final test while doing the course from home. Some campuses offer regional courses in locations near enough to their main campus to allow their full-time faculty to participate. Others offer regional courses at satellite locations with other faculty.

Two distinct programs for inservice educational opportunities are offered here in Virginia. In addition to its residential campus degree programs, Union-PSCE offers the M.A.C.E. program in an extended campus format. Students do part of their coursework at home, then travel to campus for an intensive week of face-to-face participation with a closing paper or project completed at home. Students may take two classes in each of two extended campus semesters.<sup>7</sup> This allows them to complete coursework over a period of five years while continuing their ministry positions. The other program is offered by the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. Their M.A.C.E. degree program is completed during the summer sessions of three years, although students may take electives during the rest of the academic year if they so desire. This form of the program began in 1996. There are currently 10-15 students each summer taking courses. The goal is have twelve students in each phase of the degree program. If the students are full-time, they should be able to complete the degree in three years through this format.<sup>8</sup>

If the above represents some of the adaptations of degree programs to student concerns, how are these degree programs viewed by faculty from departments other than Christian education and what is the participation of these faculty members in the Master of Arts program?

#### *Faculty Participation and Perception from Other Disciplines*

The problem of relying on faculty members from other departments for coursework in the M.A.C.E. program is fairly recent for our campus. The Presbyterian School of Christian Education was the last of the denominational schools of Christian Education that formed a part of theological education through the 1970s and 1980s. These free-standing schools offered an integrated, interdisciplinary education specifically designed for preparing educational leadership in the church. In its federation with Union Theological Seminary, Richmond in 1997, this school joined other theological institutions in negotiating the demands of various degree programs housed within the same institution. In exploring this topic with other institutions, we hoped to learn how this was being done successfully in other places.

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<sup>7</sup> Bethel Theological Seminary has a similar program for its Master of Art in Children's and Family Ministry degree with a distance education component as well.

<sup>8</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Amelia Gearey, July 2, 2003

There are a number of ways that faculty deployment from other departments is handled in Master of Arts programs. Eighteen of the schools in this study share classes in biblical studies, theology/ethics, and church history among other disciplines with students in other degree programs. Of these thirteen programs share these courses with Master of Divinity students, and may have some course requirements tailored to their calling in education. The other six programs that share classes do so with other Master of Arts degree programs in their institution. These schools often have a core set of general classes, then offer students the opportunity to specialize in their disciplines beyond this core. Three schools offer courses specifically designed for Master of Arts students distinct from other degree programs, and five had some combination of shared and distinctive courses. Some schools fulfilled these requirements with designated faculty who taught the same courses on a regular basis. Other schools rotated their faculty deployment within the department so that a number of different faculty members taught the required classes, which included Master of Arts students.

As might be expected the Master of Arts degree at most schools was considered a secondary degree to the Masters of Divinity by many of the faculty members from other departments. Some schools mentioned that although this was the case, it seemed to have the same status as other Masters of Arts programs offered by the school. Several faculty member questionnaires ventured reasons as to why their program might be viewed as a lesser degree by their colleagues. Six schools attributed lower status to the length of study, the M.A. degree being a two-year degree as opposed to the three-year Master of Divinity. Others, looking at these same two degrees, saw the difference being in the language requirement for the M.Div. degree that is absent in the Master of Arts. Even though the disparity in status was acknowledged, most faculty members spoke of collegial relations with members of other departments, many of whom modified class assignments to accommodate those with an interest in education. There were also six schools that reported parity in their degree programs (Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Andover Newton Theological School, Claremont School of Theology, Interdenominational Theological Center, and Western Theological School). Various reasons were given for this attitude. These included the respect for previous faculty members in religious education, the close working relationship of the faculty, and the collective ownership of all degree programs. One school noted that the faculty valued religious education more than the churches in its affiliate denomination.

An unexpected finding coming out of the faculty member questionnaires was the number of professors of Christian or religious education who saw themselves as advocates for the status of their profession with their colleagues. This carried over in advocating for positions for their graduates with area churches who saw educational ministry as a vocation of the past, and in the denomination to which their seminaries were affiliated. This prophetic role is not one that has been stressed in discussions of the vocation of theological educators.

Another way that professors of Christian/religious education can be prophetic to their school is in the area of Distance or Online education.

*Distance/Online Education:* Of the twenty-five schools forming the basis of this study, fifteen currently have or are implementing some form of online education. The majority of these schools have stipulations in their course catalogs that only one-third of credit hours for a Master of Arts program may be fulfilled through online education.<sup>9</sup> Schools that have this stipulation as well as those who have strong philosophical statements against online education (like Duke Divinity School) stress the importance of face-to-face community in the formation of educators and pastors for the church and world.

Some faculty express concern about the increased faculty workload that comes with developing courses in a different media. One school (Ashland Theological Seminary) gives faculty a reduced class schedule each time they teach a new online course for the first time. One questionnaire response from Paul Bramer at North Park Theological Seminary merits quotation in this regard, because it will give the reader a first hand account of a faculty member who teaches both traditional classes and online courses.

*I have to date developed 2 internet-based (SemConnect) courses. I usually teach each one every second year. It is counted as part of my teaching load. The development of the course is much more demanding (I pioneered this form of education for our seminary/university). There are different skills required of both the instructor and student in some respects. I miss not seeing their faces but I often have more interaction with them (via email). It's satisfying in one way (good quality submissions, etc.) but unsatisfying in another.<sup>10</sup>*

Some schools, like Nazarene, Western, Oral Roberts, offer online education for Masters of Divinity students, but not Master of Arts students.<sup>11</sup> Whether this is reflective of core values of an institution and the place of Master of Arts degrees in its educational program, or the demand of the school's constituency based on research is open for question.

Most schools, regardless of their opinion of online education apart from the classroom, offer technological instruction as a component of their campus classes. Some indicated knowledge of Blackboard, or spoke of using PowerPoint presentations in their teaching. Others use email communication or discussion boards for further dialog on issues raised in class. Some post their syllabi on their school's web sites. Others post their lectures for students, colleagues and interested internet surfers to read. Since most of the research and communication for this paper occurred online, it is evident that most institutions and faculty members spend a good bit of their time in front of a computer screen, even with the desire for more face-to-face encounters with students and colleagues.

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<sup>9</sup> The one exception to this would be Asbury Theological Seminary, which allows up to one half of the coursework for the M.A.C.E. to be completed online.

<sup>10</sup> Faculty Questionnaire from Dr. Paul Bramer, July 28, 2003

<sup>11</sup> Oral Roberts offers a Master of Arts in Practical Theology online, but the courses appear to be the same as their MDiv degree.

### *Conclusions*

So, is it a dinosaur or digital degree? It is evident that Master of Arts programs have a rich heritage in scholarly research, the preparation of educators for the church and world, and as prophetic voice for their colleagues and the field of educational ministry. It is also clear from the chart in Appendix B that many schools are struggling with this degree program, having only a handful of students to form a cohort. This challenge has propelled a number of schools to look at this degree in a new way, to struggle with the nature of the degree program- whether to specify or become more general in focus, whether to offer education with new technologies or to form a cohesive face-to-face community.

In concluding the faculty questionnaires I asked colleagues about future initiatives and present challenges that confronted them as they contemplated their particular degree program. Here are some of their voices as they face the future:

*We have been awarded a \$2,000,000 grant for our Youth Hope Builders Academy. It is an integral part of our program and directly related to courses such as youth ministry. Special programs that target issues in our community are brought into the context of the degree program itself. For instance Ecumenical Families Alive targets the issue of grandparents raising children among other issues from the African American community. Our challenge is having adequate faculty and staff to carry out our vision.*

Anne Wimberly, Interdenominational Theological Center<sup>12</sup>

*We are working toward beginning a center for ministry with children that would include research initiatives, training local children's pastors, sponsoring seminars. [Our challenge is] the strong influx of international students into the program, particularly from the Pacific Rim. We have to deal with language difficulties, cultural differences...*

Kevin Lawson, Talbot School of Theology of Biola University<sup>13</sup>

*We continue to seek ways to offer our courses in places and times that will work for people who are already employed. I wish that the ministries and skills which this degree can resource were more visible in the denomination. Our degree prepares people for a wide variety of leadership, things that the UMC(United Methodist Church) needs, but people are stuck in the 'Christian education equals Sunday School' mindset.*

Margaret Crain, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Phone Interview, Dr. Anne Wimberly, September 15, 2003

<sup>13</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Kevin Lawson, August 6, 2003

<sup>14</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Margaret Crain, June 26, 2003

*[Some of our future initiatives are] the ability to offer greater numbers of courses online, the plans to develop outcome assessment models, and the opportunity to utilize a greater number of doctoral teaching assistants in the instruction models...[Our challenges include] selecting and retaining qualified faculty for the varieties of degree plans and concentrations within the degrees, and maintaining student count—the number of students committed to ministry study is dropping faster than anticipated.*

Robert Welch, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary<sup>15</sup>

*Claremont School of Theology will likely move to having only one Master of Arts, and within that general MA, folks can specialize in Religious Education. This will stream-line requirements, advising, and other administrative aspects of the degree...[Our challenge is that] there are a lot of different ways that folks can get theological training in this area of the country (Bible Institutes, Apprenticeships, Course of Study). Many independent church folk find seminary training too expensive and too inconvenient...*

Carol Lakey Hess, Claremont School of Theology<sup>16</sup>

*[We have a] new certificate program with other BTI schools in youth and young adult ministries...[Our challenges include] maintaining the high quality of candidates with reduced commitments to full time educational positions in main line congregations in New England.*

Robert Pazmiño, Andover Newton Theological School<sup>17</sup>

*[I look forward to] the work that is currently underway to make it easier for extension center students to acquire a M.A.C.E. [We also hope for] an increased use of online courses. I have taught at least one online course per semester for the past two years. [Our challenges include] the constant public relations effort in the promotion of the M.A.C.E., or M.A. as a legitimate seminary degree, and the constant need to evaluate the program in light of the needs of the churches within the Southern Baptist Convention.*

Katheryn Webb, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Robert Welch, September 8, 2003

<sup>16</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Carol Lakey Hess, September 6, 2003

<sup>17</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Robert Pazmiño, August 6, 2003

<sup>18</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Katheryn Webb, September 15, 2003

*I have been working to integrate congregational culture and ethnographic methods into classes as a baseline for understanding the educational ecologies of congregations. I think more fully integrating issues of media and postmodern culture is also a growing edge. I keep trying to get people to see teachers as negotiators of difference/contrasts in this regard...Right now our biggest challenge is related to recruitment which is rooted in a 'grow your own' leadership pattern in congregations. Many congregations are hiring staff persons with little or no training in Christian Education...*

Randy Litchfield, Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio<sup>19</sup>

*Developing some distance alternatives is somewhat exciting...also a lot of work. Dealing with the postmodern development in congregational nurture and growth is another exciting challenge. [We look to] prepare persons for churches that currently do not exist in the forms and cultures from which many of our students come.*

Edwin Robinson, Nazarene Theological Seminary<sup>20</sup>

*The future of the program is an open question at the moment. Western has suspended admissions for two years while the continued viability of the program and possible future directions are assessed...The major challenge, of course, is determining whether or not the program should be continued, and if so, what form it should take. That challenge is exciting in that we may discover a fresh pattern for equipping men and women for the church's teaching ministry in this first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

George Brown Jr., Western Theological Seminary<sup>21</sup>

As one can see from this smattering of opinions from colleagues in Christian/religious education, there are both hopeful new signs of God's working in educational ministry and there are some real challenges. I came away from this study with excitement and hope for the future of our discipline. God is working a new thing with an old degree program. It is with fear and trembling that we look to continue the work to which we have been called as prophets and teachers of educational ministry for the church and world.

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<sup>19</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Randy Litchfield, August 12, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. Edwin Robinson, August 11, 2003

<sup>21</sup> Faculty Questionnaire, Dr. George Brown Jr., August 11, 2003

## Appendix A

*Andover Newton Theological School	<a href="http://www.ants.edu">www.ants.edu</a>
Asbury Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.ats.wilmore.ky.us">www.ats.wilmore.ky.us</a>
*Ashland Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.ashland.edu/seminary/">www.ashland.edu/seminary/</a>
Bethel Seminary	<a href="http://www.bethel.edu">www.bethel.edu</a>
*Calvin Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.calvinseminary.edu">www.calvinseminary.edu</a>
Campbell University Divinity School	<a href="http://www.campbell.edu/divinity/">www.campbell.edu/divinity/</a>
*Claremont School of Theology	<a href="http://www.cst.edu">www.cst.edu</a>
*Duke Divinity School	<a href="http://www.divinity.duke.edu">www.divinity.duke.edu</a>
Erskine Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.erskine.edu">www.erskine.edu</a>
*Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.garrett.nwu.edu">www.garrett.nwu.edu</a>
*Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.ggbts.edu">www.ggbts.edu</a>
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.gcts.edu">www.gcts.edu</a>
*Interdenominational Theological Center	<a href="http://www.itc.edu">www.itc.edu</a>
*Methodist Theological Seminary in Ohio	<a href="http://www.mtso.edu">www.mtso.edu</a>
*Nazarene Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.nts.edu">www.nts.edu</a>
*North Park Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.northpark.edu">www.northpark.edu</a>
Oral Roberts University	<a href="http://stm.oru.edu">http://stm.oru.edu</a>
Perkins School of Theology at SMU	<a href="http://www.smu.edu/theology/">www.smu.edu/theology/</a>
Princeton Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.ptsem.edu">www.ptsem.edu</a>
*Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia	<a href="http://www.vts.edu">www.vts.edu</a>
*Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.sebts.edu">www.sebts.edu</a>
*Southern Baptist Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.sbts.edu">www.sbts.edu</a>
*Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.swbts.edu">www.swbts.edu</a>
*Talbot School of Theology at Biola	<a href="http://www.talbot.edu">www.talbot.edu</a>
*Western Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.westernsem.org">www.westernsem.org</a>
Westminster Theological Seminary	<a href="http://www.wts.edu">www.wts.edu</a>

\*Schools that are represented by faculty questionnaires