

ASPIRING THEOLOGIANS HAVE OPTIONS SOUTH FLORIDA AREA IS HOME TO MANY SEMINARY SCHOOLS

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

South Florida's urban, multi-cultural setting appears to be a strong attraction for theological students preparing for religious service.

Nearly a dozen seminaries dot Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties offering ministerial training and academic degrees to local residents and students who arrive from distant points in the U.S. and overseas.

Some of them are approved or are seeking recognition by the major accrediting agencies, while others operate independently and eschew any outside control or direction.

"Studying here enables me to put into practice what I am learning," said Aaron DeLine of Fort Lauderdale who brought his wife and three children from Michigan while he studies at John Knox Seminary, a Presbyterian school located in Fort Lauderdale. "It's good not to be sheltered from the secular society (of south Florida)."

DeLine is 30 years old and says that he is on the younger side of the average seminary population which is generally in the mid-30s.

"I came here for two reasons," explained DeLine who is preparing to serve as a pastor. "I liked the theological soundness of the seminary and the professors and I appreciated their emphasis on the practical side of evangelism and missions."

Knox Seminary is affiliated with the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, a member of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

"Most of our students are on a pastoral track," said Dr. Fowler White, the seminary's Dean of Administration and Dean of the Faculty. "However, others are preparing for missionary work or evangelism ministries."

White said that the majority of students at his seminary are from South Florida. "Convenience is a big factor in students choosing where to go," he reflected. "They tend to go where it is the least disruptive."

In addition, Knox has not had the national exposure that other seminaries have, so tends to attract a higher proportion of local students.

To the south, the Miami International Seminary (MINTS) is also a PCA seminary, but serves a much different clientele.

"Of our 1,100 students, only 100 of them are in Miami," explained MINTS Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Neal Hegeman. "The rest are in 18 different countries

including 15 in Latin America, Turkey and Canada. We teach them through visiting professors and local teachers trained by MINTS.”

Hegeman said that MINTS is unique in that it trains church leaders who are unable to attend a resident school but want to advance their education.

The Miami school does not maintain a central campus, but teaches courses in Spanish and English at churches throughout the county as well as overseas. The seminary maintains an office at Old Cutler Presbyterian Church.

“We go where people ask us to go,” Hegeman explained. “We only need five to eight students to do a course.”

While the two Presbyterian schools operated independently from denominational control, the Boynton Beach based St. Vincent DePaul Seminary is a Roman Catholic institution owned by the Archbishops of Florida and serves as a regional institution.

“We provide formation in four areas as mandated by the Bishop’s Conference,” explained Campus Administrator, Fr. Michael Muhr, citing academic, human, spiritual and pastoral formation.

The Catholic seminary is working toward regional accreditation. “That will help us to attract a better quality professor, give us more precise pastoral programs and help our spiritual programs to grow,” he said.

The seminary currently educates between 70 and 90 students. “Some of them are Protestant pre-theology students,” Muhr said, explaining that “they are people who have no conflict with Catholic theology.”

In Deerfield Beach, the Christian Love Fellowship, a non-denominational church, has established a seminary that serves 250 students from many denominational backgrounds.

“We draw a lot of Southern Baptists as well as members of the Church of God, Moravian churches and Lutherans,” said Mary Drabik, the Dean of Admission at the church’s South Florida Bible College and Seminary. “We have a real mix in the classroom.”

Many of the school’s students are preparing for services as pastors or in religious education. “Most of our students are older and only go to school part-time,” she explained. “Many of them also work a full-time job.”

While most of the students attend college at the Deerfield Beach campus, others study through distant learning courses. “Many of them do a combination of on-campus and off-campus studies,” Drabik explained.

Unlike other area seminaries that teach in either English or Spanish or a combination of the two languages, South Florida Seminary offers courses in English and Portuguese. “We have a good number of Brazilian students,” Drabik said.

A south Florida school with a growing regional identity is the Florida Center for Theological Studies, an interdenominational seminary formed in 1980 that recently opened an extension center in Orlando.

“We are open to people from all denominations,” said Dr. David Gasperson, the school’s Academic Dean. “We are unique in that we teach theological education in a multi-cultural, multi-denominational context,” he said.

“We are not connected with any denomination,” Gasperson said, adding that he is from a Southern Baptist background, the president of the seminary is a Roman Catholic priest, and the school receives strong support from denominations such as the United Church of Christ.

Located in a building in downtown Miami, Gasperson said that the school draws students who “are in midlife, second careers.”

Most of those students are headed to the pastorate or into chaplaincy roles in hospitals or other institutions.

Whether local or from afar, students and faculty praise both the diversity and the needs of south Florida as a constructive context in which to study.

“South Florida and Knox Seminary is where I was led to study,” said Alvin Wilkerson of Fort Lauderdale. “This area is in need of the Gospel. It was a wonderful choice to come here.”

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