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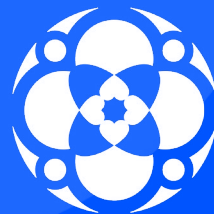
Executive Turnover in Theological Education

Authors
The Very Rev. Michael DeLashmutt, Ph.D.
Rev. Patrick B. Reyes, Ph.D. (Auburn Theological Seminary)

Auburn
Theological
Seminary

Auburn Theological Seminary is a visionary place of learning and leadership, with storied roots stretching ten generations into the past, and a mission to heal the world reaching ten generations into the future.

Active across the nation, Auburn offers transformative, accessible education that goes beyond degrees, focusing on practical skills for emerging and established leaders of all faiths. Our programs in leadership development, research, and narrative change equip leaders to foster justice, bridge divides, and inspire healing in their communities.

At Auburn, we believe in the power of education to bring about a healed world. We cultivate an inclusive space where every voice is heard, respected, and empowered. We recognize that in order to be an influential leader, one must also be a lifetime learner. We view differences as opportunities to expand our understanding—not drift further apart. And together, we work to build a future where everyone leads with love.

In loving memory of Barbara G. Wheeler

Barbara served as president of Auburn for 30 years and was the first woman to serve in that role. She led the organization from 1979 until 2009, and she embodied the spirit and legacy of Auburn Theological Seminary. Her work across theological education, including her founding the Center for the Study of Theological Education (CSTE) helped leaders see a shifting landscape in the field. From leadership transitions and changing demographics of the student body, President Wheeler was, and her reports continue to be, the most trusted voice in the field.

She was committed to advancing the work within the Presbyterian Church (USA) serving on national boards and in her local congregation. From research to leadership development, President Wheeler cared deeply about the direction and shape of the church. She dedicated her time and service to helping the church become a more just and loving institution.

She was a beloved colleague and mentor to many across both the church and theological education. She will be missed by us at Auburn and the many people who were loved and supported by her.

Theological Education—
Love is the Call

"Wherever you look at human judgements, you are likely to find noise. To improve the quality of our judgements, we need to overcome noise as well as bias."

Daniel Kahneman, *Noise*

When I was young, we lived near a busy intersection that had no lights or signage. People would drive through without stopping, endangering themselves, other drivers, and most importantly, the children who approached the intersection like a game of real-life frogger. Every morning, I would say a little prayer before sprinting across the intersection.

Commuters, walkers, and the broader community all understood that this intersection was not safe. The community advocated for and eventually installed stop signs. This slowed traffic, but did not fix the problem. Drivers saw the stop signs, but the daily commuters had become so accustomed to the "sort of stop, but really keep going" habit of driving that the intersection continued to be a precarious space.

A fifth-grade teacher at our elementary school decided to do something about the intersection. It was unsafe, but it also seemed predictable and known. Everyone, from the daily commuters to students, knew this intersection was treacherous.

For one week, his class met at the intersection. With their black and white notebooks, he asked the class to count the number of cars that ran the stop sign. On Monday, nearly every car ran through the intersection. On Tuesday, the cars began to slow to look at these young people writing something in their journal but mostly rolled through the stop sign. On Wednesday, one driver rolled down their window and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Studying how many people ignore the stop sign," a young voice yelled back.

On Thursday, that same driver stopped, waved at the children, stuck his head out the window to tell the driver behind them to slow down. A good sign, but one driver changing their behavior is not a trend. By Friday, cars were slowing down to see the children and wave.

The following Monday, with no one to observe them, the drivers went back to their usual ways. During that week, the children wrote up their findings. The data did not signal anything good. Driver behavior did not change enough to declare the intersection safe, even when some of the drivers became aware that they were both being watched and agreed that the intersection was not safe for children.

The teacher asked the class what they wanted to do with what they learned.

Solutions to the intersection problem were creative and imaginative from land bridges over the intersection to redirecting traffic. Then one student suggested the class should write about it for the paper, which the class did. I do not remember what the headline was, but the article outlined what the class had found. First, it gave a longer history of change in the community and when the intersection was built, noting that at the time of construction the community was less dense and less complicated. The article concluded with a simple question: Could the intersection become safe? Not, "is it safe?" But with this new understanding, could we change?

When the article ran, the students handed out the paper at the same intersection, getting to know many of the drivers. Later in the year, the same class repeated their observations. Nearly every driver stopped. The community also invested in a walking path to the school, two other crossings along the busy road, and community volunteers served as crossing guards.

Change happened because a small group of fifth graders provided better data and a question to the community.

Auburn Studies and the Center for Study of Theological Education

Theological Education is going through incredible change. To be faithful to an institution's mission these days, when theological and higher education seem to be in major flux, is to be standing at that same intersection I knew as a kid.

I continue to find myself in rooms where the "noise" about the challenges, solutions, innovations, and future of theological education is overwhelming. Borrowing the term from the late Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman, the noise in our field is so overwhelming with leaders making predications and selling solutions as if they can see the future. And yet, changing behavior, despite the signs around us, feels nearly impossible. We intuitively know the intersection of Theological Education as a crossing between institutions, religious communities, students, faculty, boards, higher education, and the broader non-profit sector. It feels as unstable as that intersection growing up and it seems we all know it.

And yet, there is hope for those drivers of institutions. With better data, they might consider how they drive their institution through the intersection. It is so easy to drive as we always have.

Since the late 1960s, Auburn has provided groundbreaking research that helps the field of theological education see trends and gain insights. Auburn approached its research mandate providing cutting edge theological research by collaborating with the Association of Theological Schools and broader ecumenical partners. The Center for the Study of Theological Education at Auburn was dedicated to the promotion and flourishing of theological education. The Center's publication, *Auburn Studies*, was established in 1993. The Center itself was later endowed by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. (LEI) and other partners in 2007 to pursue a research agenda related to the field of theological education.

Pioneered and championed by Auburn's former President, the late Barbara Wheeler, Auburn produced research on trends and data for theological executives and faculties. These reports included analysis of student debt, continuing education and life-long learning, giving trends, trustee engagement, and bright spots in theological education. President Wheeler working with researchers such as Anthony Ruger, Helen Blier, and Sharon Miller provided the field

with reports to help decision makers.

After a brief hiatus, *Auburn Studies* remains indexed with Atla, America Theological Libraries Association. We are continuing the Center's mandate and relaunching *Auburn Studies*, providing relevant research reports for the field. What distinguishes Auburn's center from other centers of excellence or research institutes, is a complete bias in our aims and desires. We are not neutral.

Theological Education is our *call to action*.

We believe that theological education – the training and equipping of religious leaders – is necessary to heal this world. Like the intersection from my childhood, it feels perilous right now to be leading at this intersection. Connecting faith communities, educational institutions, leaders, and future leaders, theological education needs opportunities to slow down and see itself better – to not only change behavior, but to design better and more lifegiving pathways to ministry formation and education.

Returning to Kahneman, it is our hope *Auburn Studies* will reduce the noise for leaders, helping them focus on the data and trends that matter to them, their institutions, and the communities they serve.

Research is an Expression of Love
Ted Smith's Theological Education Between the Times (TEBT) initiative and his work, *The End of Theological Education* (Eerdmans 2023) identifies that the current model of theological education in the United States is coming to an end. He is also clear that there is something new being born. Curating a series of books written by authors from across the diversity of theological education, the TEBT series is a small gesture toward that more hopeful future. At the same time these luminaries theorized (and some led
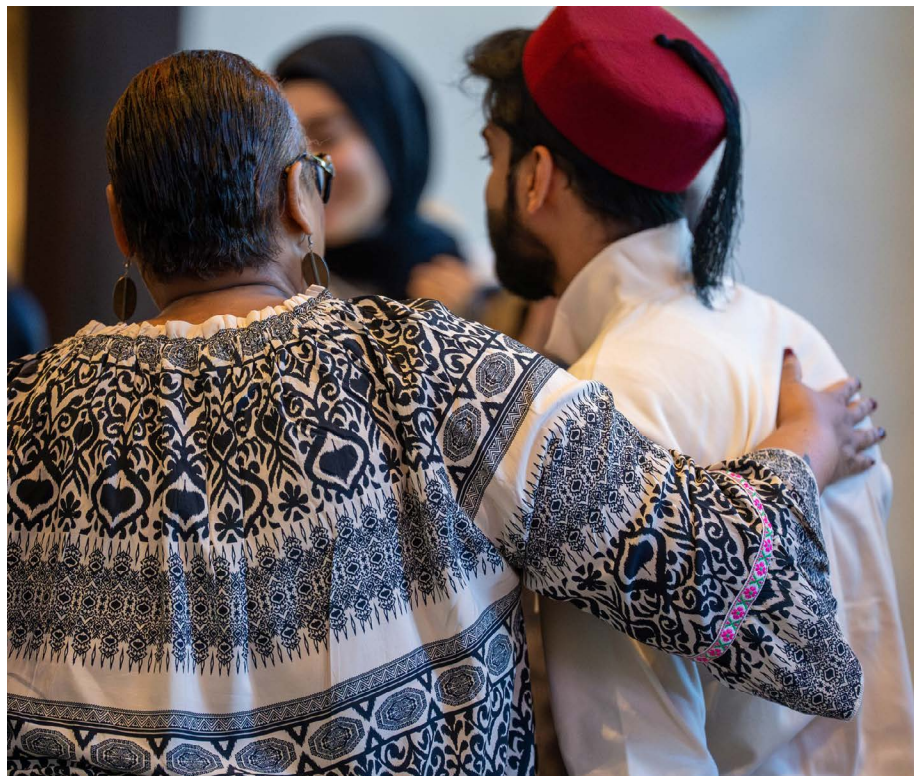
their institutions), there was a tectonic shift taking place in leadership across the field.

Change, transformation, transition – all are insufficient terms to describe the turnover in executive leadership in the field, a transition that is nearing 600 executive level transitions (if it has not passed this figure by the time of publication) in less than half a decade. When you look at the field – 270+ member schools and affiliates – that number signals a profound shift in who will determine what that future of theological education will be.

For the relaunch of *Auburn Studies*, Auburn has partnered with the Very Rev. Michael DeLashmutt, Ph.D., to better understand this shift in theological education. What sets this study apart from other leadership studies is his exploration of those leaders who have transitioned out of their roles in the last few years. DeLashmutt provides case studies for leaders in an effort for the field to hear and see their own context and explore insights from these leaders about how to navigate institutional change. By

looking at past studies of leadership transition and exploring the vocations of those who transitioned, the report provides central findings on the role of theological executives.

This is an act of love. We are in a period when a new generation of institutional leaders are going to be relying on the examples and mentorship of those who came before. Exploring the stories and questions that mattered to those who recently transitioned out, we have to ask ourselves how we are preparing and supporting leaders to heal broken institutions? From the embedded R1 institutions to the emerging free-standing institution and across affiliations, the leaders who have transitioned out of these roles have something to teach the field about what is happening inside.

This question was born out of love. Leadership transition is a process of grief, loss, trauma, joy, celebration, and love. What the study signifies is that theological education, different from executive leadership in strictly non-profit or higher education sectors, is we can name themes

such as "faithfulness," or "spiritual discipline and practice," as critical to one's experience of leading. A 2024 report by Drs. Jorge Burmicky and Kevin R. McClure for Academic Search, American Academic Leadership Institute, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the Council of Independent Colleges and Universities, titled "Competencies for the College Presidency: A National Study of Effective Leadership in Higher Education," explored the current changes in higher education. The report outlined key findings for effective leadership, such as trust-building, resilience, communication savvy, emotional intelligence, leading with courage, data acumen and resource management. These are skills and qualities that are necessary for theological executives. And yet, they do not attend to the spiritual, religious, or social well-being of leaders.

DeLashmutt offers different insights for the theological executive that reflects the faith-based values and uniqueness of this sacred work. For theological education, DeLashmutt found that effective leaders approach their work in the following ways to be effective:

1.
It is a relay race, not a marathon.

2.
Be human-centered. Care for the people under their care from staff to students to the broader public.

3.
Curate relationships.

4.
Practice spiritual formation.

These insights are guided and shaped by the values of our traditions and cultures. Theological executives, as opposed to the

executive at a college or university, are tending to the souls and lives of a spiritual community. Not to give too much away from the report, DeLashmutt finds that effective executive leadership in theological education denies longevity and ability to lead as a "savior" as markers of effective leadership. Instead, he offers that succession planning, intergenerational leadership development, and team-based approaches to leadership are not only most effective in this moment of change, but perhaps most critically, faithful to the missions of our institutions.

For more insights, you will have to read DeLashmutt's full report.

Auburn is grateful to honor President Barbara Wheeler's legacy with the relaunch of this issue of *Auburn Studies*, providing the necessary data for decision makers in the field to make faithful and informed decisions as they navigate this intersection of change. Our only regret is not completing it before her passing.

In future issues, you will see mixed-method studies that provide analysis of data trends and movements in the field. Auburn will continue to explore case study method as a critical tool for leaders to think through the challenges that they are facing. Auburn will also return to past research questions, updating findings about current trends in student debt, board governance, faculty diversity, degree pathways, etc., and we will add new studies that help the field to explore the future with job and skill studies, connections between young people and the future of the field, and exploring the relationship between theological education and religious communities, denominations, and churches.

Auburn Studies is for and about theological education and its leaders. In every issue, Auburn will
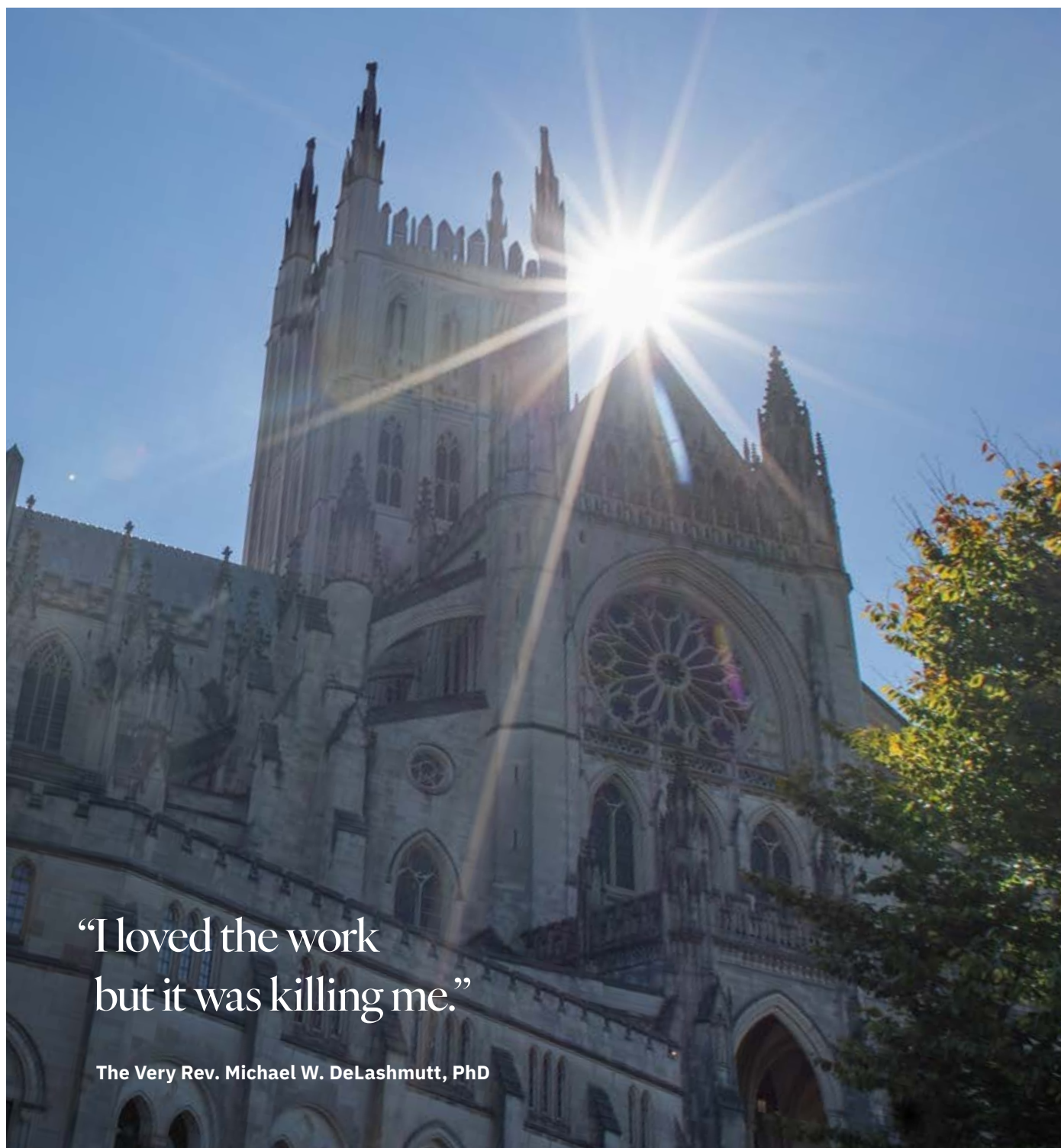
pursue questions rooted in love and healing. The world needs theological education. It needs faithful leaders.

More than anything, the world needs leaders who know how to **Lead with Love.**

Rev. Patrick B. Reyes, Ph.D.
Dean

Executive Turnover in *Theological Education*

"I loved the work
but it was killing me."

The Very Rev. Michael W. DeLashmutt, PhD

Executive Summary

Theological education in North America is experiencing an unusually high turnover of chief executive officers (CEOs) in accredited theological schools. This report examines the significant challenges contributing to this leadership turnover and concludes with practical recommendations to foster resilience for both institutions and their leaders.[†]

The research identifies five characteristics that impact theological school leadership:

Institutional Fragility and Leadership Strain
Most ATS-accredited schools are small, facing declining enrollments and financial challenges. These pressures intensify the strain on leaders, often leading to exhaustion and, in some cases, early departure.

Burnout and Leadership Longevity
Research indicates frequent experiences of burnout, driven by overwhelming responsibilities and limited resources. While some leaders thrive, many report significant personal and professional sacrifices, including physical and emotional harm.

Inadequate Board Support
Robust governance is essential, yet some leaders express concerns about insufficient board engagement and a lack of strategic guidance or awareness of the evolving landscape in theological education.

Complexity of the CEO Role
The CEO role in theological schools is uniquely complex, requiring leaders to navigate competing demands from the academy, the church, and broader societal expectations. This dynamic contributes to high turnover rates and complicates the path to effective leadership.

Diverging Experiences Among Leaders
Despite the exhausting nature of the work, many leaders find fulfillment in their roles. Traits common among such leaders include

Addressing these leadership challenges calls for an approach more akin to "palliative" than "curative" care. Rather than viewing these challenges as issues to be "fixed" by hiring a silver-bullet leader, the shifting religious landscape in North America requires responses rooted in compassion, creativity, community, and care.

In light of this, the report suggests the following four guideposts for resilient executive leadership in a time of transition:

Leadership as a Relay Race, Not a Marathon

Institutions should prioritize leaders who advance the institution's mission, not through personal legacy or decade-long tenures, but by participating in an iterative phase of leadership mindful of what has come before and what will follow after their tenure.

Human-Centered Leadership

The broad roles covered by many executive leaders range from external relations and strategic oversight to pastoral care and liturgical service. For leaders to thrive, their responsibilities must align with the organization's size and available support structures.

Leadership as Relationship Curation

Leaders are situated within a complex web of relationships with diverse stakeholder groups both inside and outside the institution. Attention to these relationships, thoughtful selection of an effective executive team, and discernment in prioritizing or delegating relationships are essential.

Leadership and Spiritual Formation

It is essential for leaders of theological schools to cultivate spiritual practices and dispositions that anchor their leadership within their theological commitments.

This report envisions resilient, compassionate, and adaptable leadership as a response to the evolving challenges in theological education, emphasizing that the path forward is relational and community oriented.

Introduction

There is no small risk for a theological school leader to write about theological school leadership—which is why this project is grounded in the stories and experiences of dozens of other CEOs across the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) ecosystem. Many of these insights are drawn from the impactful work reflected in two recent ATS leadership surveys: Gin and Wong's ATS Leadership Studies Survey of Presidents (2020) and Lizardy-Hajbi's ATS Leadership Education Studies Project: CEO Interview Report (2021). Building upon these extraordinary pieces of research, along with Auburn's groundbreaking Leadership that Works (2010), this project seeks to capture the lived experiences of theological school executive leaders navigating an era of accelerated transition.

Nearly 20 years ago, I began my career teaching theology at a research university in the United Kingdom. Since then, I have held senior leadership roles on both sides of the Atlantic, including positions at a faith-based liberal arts college and two mainline seminaries. In the dozen years since returning to the U.S., I've served in three higher education institutions and in this relatively short period of time, I have led through no fewer than five CEO transitions (including one of my own).

A generation or more ago, the office of President or CEO seemed to serve as the very embodiment of the stability of an institution's life and mission. Many of us recall walking through "halls of presidents," where large oil portraits were hung in succession—often with one leader representing every decade or two of a school's history. These portraits honored past saints in what felt like a kind of academic iconostasis; they were physical reminders of continuity, mission, and institutional legacy. In those past generations, such long-serving CEOs were not merely administrators; they were seen as the primary bearers of culture, values, and mission—a mantle that carried demands beyond what any single individual might reasonably sustain.

Now, it feels as though the last of these portraits may have been painted. Increasingly, when I visit seminaries, there is a growing gap between the final painting in a series and the latest office holders, if the paintings are still on the walls, at all. At my own institution—which, at the time of writing, is preparing to move our operations from a campus the size of a city block to a few offices surrounding our historic chapel—the portraits are going into long-term storage, and it will likely be my own successor who will have to decide what to do with them (for what it's worth, neither I nor three of my predecessors are included in the set).

As I reflect on my own journey, the data and literature in this report, and most importantly, conversations with fellow leaders who recently exited the CEO's office, this increase in turnover will reshape how we understand theological school leadership. For future generations, perhaps the measure of a successful seminary president will not be longevity but rather resilience, adaptability, and the readiness to steward institutions through swift and sometimes disruptive changes. As we navigate this new terrain, the call may not be to resist the accelerated transitions in the CEO's office, but to rethink what successful tenure looks like—not measured by duration but by impact and by the leader's capacity to meet the institution's needs in a pivotal season of change.

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Understanding "The Great Resignation"

Theological schools are experiencing an unprecedented wave of leadership transitions, particularly among chief executive officers (CEOs) and chief academic officers (CAOs). ATS Executive Director Frank Yamada describes this phenomenon as the "Great Resignation," noting that leadership turnover has surged by 200% over the past seven years, with the pandemic significantly accelerating this trend (Yamada, "Unprecedented number of changes occurring among ATS school leaders," 2023).

The high turnover rates of theological school executives need to be placed in the context of broader employment trends in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, overall job turnover rates have actually decreased since the 1990s. Research indicates that job-to-job transition rates dropped significantly, by about 11% to 53% between 1998 and 2010, a trend that has continued into the 2020s (BLS). While the COVID-19 pandemic caused temporary disruptions with elevated transitions, this was largely short-term; post-pandemic data shows a return to decreased turnover. For instance, the U.S. quit rate, measuring voluntary departures, peaked at 3% in 2022 but has since declined to around 2.2% by early 2024, further indicating stabilization in job mobility (Barrons).

However, not every industry has followed this downward trend in turnover. Certain sectors and roles consistently experience higher turnover due to job nature, stress levels, and industry-specific challenges. In the accommodation and food services industry, high turnover is driven by seasonal employment, part-time roles, and entry-level positions. Similarly, the retail sector experiences elevated turnover due to a workforce largely composed of part-time and temporary workers (BuiltIn). The healthcare sector has also seen heightened turnover, especially among nursing staff, driven by high-stress working conditions and burnout, with national hospital turnover rates reaching 22.7% in 2022 (Hubstaff). In addition, sales and customer service positions, as well as hospitality and food service roles, are marked by high turnover rates due to factors like low wages, limited career growth opportunities, and physically demanding conditions.

Another volatile segment of the workforce is the nonprofit sector, particularly in leadership roles. Nonprofits face unique challenges in maintaining staff, leading to higher turnover rates compared to other industries. For instance, the voluntary annual turnover rate in the nonprofit sector was reported at 19%, surpassing the all-industry average of 12% (Winkler Group). Key factors contributing to this high turnover include the sector's often limited ability to offer competitive salaries, which 72.2% of nonprofits identified as a major retention barrier (Council of Nonprofits). Furthermore, burnout is a persistent issue, with 30% of nonprofit employees reporting burnout and an additional 20% at risk for burnout (GiveButter). Nonprofits also tend to offer fewer opportunities for career advancement, which often prompts employees to seek growth outside the organization. According to The Chronicle of Philanthropy, turnover among nonprofit executives has also surged in recent years, with nearly 70% of leaders planning to leave their roles within the next five years. This trend, often attributed to burnout, financial stress, and the increasing complexity of nonprofit management, mirrors similar pressures faced in theological schools. Both sectors are facing calls for adaptability, financial sustainability, and leadership models that balance mission with operational demands, contributing to a leadership landscape marked by rapid transition (The Chronicle of Philanthropy). This high turnover impacts nonprofit operations by increasing service disruptions, as staff shortages lead to longer waiting lists and reduced service capacities; 28.1% of nonprofits reported facing extended waiting periods due to staffing issues (Council of Nonprofits). Addressing these workforce retention challenges is essential for nonprofits to sustain their missions and operations.

Nearer to the employment context of theological schools, College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) indicate that in the 2022–23 academic year, voluntary turnover for higher education staff reached its highest point since tracking began in 2017–18. Specifically, exempt staff experienced a turnover rate of 14.3%, and non-exempt staff had a rate of 15.2%, both up from 7.9% and 9.4%, respectively, in 2020–21 (HigherEdJobs).

Several factors contribute to this increased turnover in higher education:

Compensation Challenges

Many institutions struggle to offer competitive salaries, leading employees to seek better-paying opportunities elsewhere. A survey found that 76% of higher education employees considering leaving cited the desire for a pay increase as a primary reason (CUPA-HR).

Work-Life Balance and Burnout

The demanding nature of academic roles, coupled with additional responsibilities taken on during the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to increased burnout. Approximately 67% of full-time higher education employees reported working more hours each week than what is considered full-time (CUPA-HR).

Limited Advancement Opportunities

The hierarchical structure of many academic institutions can result in fewer opportunities for career progression, prompting employees to seek growth elsewhere.

With respect to executive leaders, Yamada cites research by Higher Education Publications, Inc. that details turnover rates for college administrators in the U.S. from 2018 to 2021, revealing significant turnover in top positions, especially among provosts, deans, and directors. Provosts had the highest turnover rate at 50%, followed by roles like Dean of Education and Director of Branch Campus (both at 42%). Their research cites factors like financial pressures, COVID-19, and institutional challenges as contributing to this trend, making long-standing leaders increasingly rare among Higher Education institutions (HEP).

"The Churn"

Researching the scope of executive leadership transitions in non-profit and educational sectors brings to mind a phrase from James S.A. Corey's Expanse series: "the churn." This term, often associated with the character Amos Burton, captures the relentless cycle of upheaval and adaptation in a harsh environment. For Burton, the churn is a brutal reality—a reminder that change often disrupts without regard for stability or fairness. Similarly, in higher education, particularly in theological schools, the turnover of leadership may evoke similar feelings of disruption and challenge.

As those dedicated to the flourishing of theological institutions, grounded in a vision of God's desire for all creation to flourish, we may feel compelled to resist this churn. However, like Burton, who learns to survive not by resisting chaos but by adapting to it, theological schools

may benefit from embracing adaptability and resilience. Rather than attempting to resist the complex realities of leadership transition, these institutions might find strength in reimagining their responses, transforming these cycles of change into opportunities for renewal in alignment with their mission.

In most contexts, the churn in leadership turnover is viewed as a problem to be prevented, and stability in leadership is considered essential for maintaining organizational resilience and institutional knowledge. It is well known that executive turnover in nonprofits can be highly disruptive and challenging to manage, often creating instability that affects both staff morale and organizational continuity. Perhaps most worryingly, nonprofits often lack internal leadership pipelines, relying instead on external hires, which can lead to challenges in maintaining stability. Stewart notes that it us often inadequate board involvement and poorly managed transitions frequently exacerbate turnover's negative impact, underscoring the need for proactive, well-structured transition processes to ensure resilience (Stewart, 2016).

> ## What may be emerging is not a pandemic of resignations, but the emergence of a different and more iterative pattern of executive leadership.

Our desire for long tenured CEOs and robust succession planning that supports well-managed transitions is intended to mitigate the risk caused by a disruption in the multi-faceted roles and relationships sustained by the CEOs office, in addition to the CEO's symbolic function as a representative of institutional mission and identity. Because of this, executive leadership turnover is identified by the Nonprofit Risk Management Center as one of the top risks impacting nonprofit organizations, alongside fraud, infrastructure failure, or loss of compliance or accreditation (Nonprofit Risk Management Center).

It is tempting to treat executive turnover as a malady that erodes institutional stability or a liability that hampers institutional flourishing. However, given the widespread acceleration of leadership transitions, what may be emerging is not a pandemic of resignations, but the emergence of a different and more iterative pattern of executive leadership—one that diverges from the legacy-building tenures of previous generations and reflects a larger

employment culture marked by frequent change and turnover.

Moreover, accelerated transitions are but one of many external pressures reshaping the broader seminary ecology, as noted below. Seen not as an internal ailment but as an external force to be navigated, this shift invites theological institutions to evaluate expectations for the chief executive's role and to advocate for leadership practices that anchor executive work in life-giving relationships supporting both institutional and personal well-being.

Rather than attempting to resist these forces, this report encourages theological schools to reconsider what constitutes a successful executive tenure. Success may need to be defined not by the duration of leadership but by the leader's adaptability, their ability to guide the institution through critical moments, and the quality of relationships built during their tenure. Traditionally, executive leadership has been envisioned as a "marathon," sustained over long, legacy-making terms—a concept reflected in institutional customs such as board-commissioned portraits, installation ceremonies, and lecture series honoring each new executive. However, if the tenure of theological CEOs is now measured in shorter terms, it may be more accurate to envision leadership as a "relay race." Each leader advances the institution for a time before passing the baton to the next, with continuity derived from collective efforts rather than individual endurance.

This evolving view also calls for a relational model of leadership, one that fosters deep connections with stakeholders and is rooted in the leader's spiritual life. This approach recognizes that effective leadership both entails managing external demands and nurturing a connection with the divine, ensuring that work remains centered in core theological commitments. In short, the current moment demands a response that is less about prevention or quick solutions and more akin to palliative care—a compassionate approach to support leaders amid inevitable transitions.

This report builds upon several foundational sources, including Leadership That Works (2010) and two recent (and significant) ATS leadership surveys: Gin and Wong's ATS Leadership Studies Survey of Presidents (2020) and Lizardy-Hajbi's ATS Leadership Education Studies Project: CEO Interview Report (2021). Leadership That Works, created by leading experts in theological education, provided an in-depth analysis of leadership health that continues to guide theological schools and their boards. Building on this groundwork, Gin and Wong's survey engaged 127 current ATS presidents, while Lizardy-Hajbi's structured interviews with 30 CEOs added valuable insights from those at the helm of theological institutions.

My own research expands on these studies through ten in-depth interviews with former ATS CEOs who exited their roles post-2022, complemented by a literature review on recent trends in nonprofit and higher education leadership. This research highlights common issues such as burnout and turnover while underscoring the unique pressures facing executive leaders in theological schools amid broader religious shifts in North America.

In the following sections, I will share key insights from Leadership That Works, explore trends from the two ATS leadership studies, and examine case studies of former executive leaders. This report concludes with an analysis of leadership turnover and offers recommendations for how theological schools, their boards, and their leaders might better support executive leadership during this period of extraordinary change.

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Leadership *That Works*

The immediate predecessor to this report, Leadership That Works: A Study of Theological School Presidents was published in December 2010 by Auburn Theological Seminary. Stemming from the efforts of Barbara G. Wheeler, G. Douglass Lewis, Sharon L. Miller, Anthony T. Ruger, and David L. Tiede, the study sought to examine the effectiveness of leadership within theological schools, particularly focusing on seminary presidents.

The report was undertaken to understand the qualities and practices that lead to successful leadership in theological schools, identifying leadership characteristics that contributed to institutional stability and vision, as well as those patterns of leadership that fail to work. The report was intended to provide practical guidance for presidents, boards, and search committees in their selection and support of seminary leaders.

This was an ambitious project which spanned four years and involved multiple methodologies:

- **Surveys** were distributed to seminary presidents, academic deans, and financial officers to gather quantitative data on leadership characteristics and institutional performance.

- **Interviews** were conducted with ten presidents over the first three years of their tenure to observe the development of their leadership style and its impact on their institutions.

- **Case studies** were performed on six campuses known for their effective leadership and administrative teams. These schools varied in denomination, size, and financial health, offering a diverse set of examples.

As a result, eight principal findings surfaced from the work, which we explore on the following pages.

1 Character Over Credentials

The study revealed that a president's character traits—such as personal strength, humility, and interpersonal skills—are better predictors of success than formal credentials or prior experience, arguing that "there is no correlation between résumé and presidential success" ("Leadership that Works," 3). Presidents with varied backgrounds, including those from academia and ministry, performed well if they possessed the necessary leadership traits.

2 Importance of Team Building

Effective presidents focus on building strong senior teams by retaining capable staff and hiring key new appointees. This balance between continuity and change was found to be a key element of successful leadership. One president emphasized the importance of allowing team members to "work to their strengths," ensuring that the team vision aligned with institutional goals ("Leadership that Works," 13).

3 Faculty Relations

Mutual respect between presidents and faculty is crucial. The report highlighted that successful presidents fostered strong relationships with faculty, even when difficult decisions had to be made. One president noted, "You may think you're doing well if you've got board support, but if you have lost faculty support, then your goose is cooked as a leader" ("Leadership that Works," 15).

4 Fiscal Responsibility

Fiscal discipline is a hallmark of strong leadership. The best presidents imposed fiscal discipline early in their tenure, ensuring balanced budgets and financial sustainability. The report found that schools with strong financial practices had higher faculty and staff confidence and institutional credibility ("Leadership that Works," 17).

5 Fundraising and Advancement

Although most presidents lacked confidence in fundraising initially, it was a critical part of their role. The study emphasized that effective fundraising is often "president-dependent," meaning that the personal involvement of the president is key to securing significant gifts. Presidents needed to develop their fundraising skills and spend considerable time cultivating donor relationships ("Leadership that Works," 22).

6 Visionary Leadership

Vision ties together all other leadership functions. Effective presidents were able to articulate a vision rooted in the school's history, addressing both its present needs and future aspirations. Visionary leaders motivated others to work toward the institution's highest goals. However, the report warned that a president's vision must align with the institution's traditions and values to be successful ("Leadership that Works," 23).

7 Self-Care

The study stressed the importance of self-care for presidents, noting that leadership is often isolating and demanding. Effective presidents found ways to balance their personal lives with their professional responsibilities. Those who failed to maintain this balance risked burnout and reduced effectiveness ("Leadership that Works," 24).

8 Inadequate Guidance from Boards

A sobering finding was that many seminary presidents received insufficient guidance and oversight from their boards or university administrators. Most new presidents reported that no strategic direction had been set for them when they started, and many felt isolated without adequate support ("Leadership that Works," 25).

The report's recommendations were aimed at fostering long-term success for presidents of theological schools, which were intended to be aided by the identification of common traits of successful leadership, with particular emphasis on the importance of character, team-building, financial discipline, and visionary leadership.

Leadership *That Works— Fourteen Years Later*

While 2007–2010 was hardly the "glory days" of theological education, the research underpinning "Leadership That Works" emerged shortly after enrollment across the ATS ecosystem peaked in 2006. Across the ATS membership, 34,935 students were enrolled in MDiv programs. By the time "Leadership That Works" was published in 2010, enrollment had already declined by nearly 6%. Now, fourteen years later in 2024, MDiv enrollment has decreased by 20%, with just 26,198 students pursuing the degree. While the MDiv is only one degree and enrollment is just one measure of institutional vitality, it is difficult to argue that the theological education ecosystem has not undergone remarkable transformation over the last decade and a half.

In 2021, Tom Tanner, then ATS Director of Accreditation, regularly addressed this transformation, attributing it to several disruptive forces: the 2008 "Great Recession," the "Big Transition" (an 8% drop in undergraduate enrollment from 2011 to 2019), and the "Mainline Decline" (reflecting an estimated 18% reduction in mainline church members from 2007 to 2014). Together, these trends have led to over 50 combinations or closures of theological schools in the U.S. since 2010, with a notable acceleration over the past five years. From 2010 to 2016, an average of one combination occurred every four months. From 2017, the rate has increased to one every two months.

Key factors driving these changes include financial stress, exacerbated by the Great Recession, a substantial drop in enrollments, and shifts in educational delivery methods, with online education increasing from 16% of enrollment in 2010 to over 90% by 2021. Mainline denominations have been especially impacted, as many closures and mergers occurred in institutions connected to these traditions. In short, the landscape of executive leadership in theological education has undergone an unimaginable shift since the publication of the original 2010 report. The post-pandemic era has amplified these shifts, and today's challenges necessitate a fresh examination of what truly constitutes effective leadership in theological education.

In the writing on theological executive leadership since the publication of "Leadership That Works," the role and expectations of theological school leadership have continued to shift and expand in response to evolving cultural, financial, and social challenges. Leaders are increasingly adopting adaptive and collaborative models that allow their institutions to remain resilient while staying true to their missions. These shifts reflect the need for theological education to maintain relevance, adaptability, and resilience in an era of rapid change, positioning leaders as both stewards of their institutions and active participants in the public and spiritual life of their communities.

This dual role complexifies what has always been a challenging and multifaceted position, adding new dimensions to the leader's charge.

A growing emphasis on public engagement and social justice is evident in the leadership and missions of contemporary theological institutions. Louise Johnson's innovations at Wartburg Seminary, as told in an interview by Martin Lohrmann, highlight the increasing imperative for theological schools to address urgent societal needs. Her development of the Collaborative Learning program, which allows students to engage in practical ministry while earning academic credentials, illustrates how theological education can foster hands-on experience that supports community engagement and deepens students' vocational formation (Lohrman, 2019).

Theological school leaders are tasked with balancing adaptive strategies with the preservation of institutional identity and legacy. As institutions evolve, maintaining a connection to their foundational mission is critical to prevent mission drift and sustain continuity. Reflecting on her leadership at Montreal Diocesan Theological College, Jesse Zink emphasizes the importance of "honoring the inheritance" of theological schools, even as they strategically reimagine their purposes to meet contemporary needs (Zink, 2019). Zink's approach illustrates how adaptive leadership can thoughtfully integrate legacy with renewal, underscoring the balance theological leaders must strike between innovation and tradition.

The shift toward innovative program delivery and curriculum design has been significantly accelerated by technological advances and the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years, institutions have widely adopted online and hybrid models, making theological education accessible to students from diverse backgrounds. Jos de Kock observes that the pandemic compelled theological schools to rapidly transition to digital platforms, challenging leaders to balance educational quality with the need for virtual community support (de Kock, 2023). This transition illustrates the flexibility and resilience required of leaders today as they reimagine traditional educational formats, ensuring theological education remains responsive to individual and communal needs. Leaders in theological education are thus exploring ways to engage students that are both practical and theologically robust, adapting curricula to meet the demands of a changing world.

It is worth noting that in response to the shifting demands of theological school leadership, two significant resources stand out: the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the In Trust Center for Theological Schools. ATS has

been instrumental in shaping the landscape of theological leadership through initiatives like its "communities of practice" model, which Graham highlights as fostering peer-directed learning among presidents, chief academic officers, and other executive roles within theological institutions (Graham, 2018). Supported in part by Lilly Endowment Inc. grants, ATS programs equip leaders with critical skills in finance, strategic planning, and mission alignment, addressing the complexities of managing substantial financial and organizational resources while maintaining institutional missions.

Similarly, the In Trust Center for Theological Schools has emerged as a critical resource, especially in board development and governance. Recognizing the unique relationship between theological CEOs and their boards, In Trust has developed resources that support strong governance and strategic oversight, which are essential for effective institutional leadership. In Trust's focus on board education, leadership transition, and shared governance underscores the need for theological school leaders to work closely with their boards, as Graham notes, to ensure alignment with their institutions' missions and financial sustainability. Through webinars, consulting services, and its publication, the center offers guidance on the nuanced responsibilities of theological boards, making it a vital complement to ATS's leadership initiatives. Together, ATS and the In Trust Center have established a robust foundation for advancing and sustaining leadership in theological education, empowering leaders to meet both institutional and societal challenges with resilience and insight.

In sum, the trends shaping leadership in theological education reflect an ongoing transformation. Leaders are increasingly adopting adaptive, justice-oriented, and collaborative models that allow them to respond to societal needs while honoring the core values and mission that define their institutions. These changes highlight the need for theological education to remain relevant, responsive, and resilient in a rapidly evolving world. As stewards of their institutions, today's leaders are tasked with more than organizational oversight; they serve as active participants in the public and spiritual life of their communities, bridging traditional theological foundations with contemporary social engagement. This adaptive leadership not only advances institutional missions but also strengthens theological education's contribution to society at large, offering a model for impactful, justice-centered, and resilient leadership.

Hearing *From the Leaders*

As we seek to understand the factors contributing to turnover among theological school leaders and to develop strategies for fostering both personal and institutional resilience, it is crucial to examine executive leadership from the perspective of the CEO's office. The following three sections aim to provide a comprehensive view of the current state of executive leadership in theological schools, covering the period from 2019-2024.

First, the two recent ATS leadership surveys, Gin and Wong's ATS Leadership Studies Survey of Presidents (2020) and Lizardy-Hajbi's ATS Leadership Education Studies Project: CEO Interview Report (2021), will be analyzed to explore their importance for today's institutional leaders. Second, I will present the findings from interviews with recently transitioned leaders, drawing on their experiences to identify patterns, challenges, and potential strategies for resilience within theological institutions.

Gin and Wong's ATS Leadership Studies Survey of Presidents (2020)

The 2019 ATS Leadership Study engaged 127 presidents of theological institutions, capturing nearly half of all ATS-accredited school leaders. This study sheds light on the evolving nature of executive roles within theological education and provides essential insights into the demographics, career paths, job satisfaction, and stressors shaping the field. By examining the unique pressures facing theological school CEOs—who operate at the challenging intersection of church, academy, and nonprofit management—the study reveals how these leaders navigate a blend of institutional governance and spiritual leadership amidst an increasingly complex educational and religious landscape.

Predictors of Job Turnover and Role Challenges
Regression analysis in the study highlights key factors influencing CEOs' decisions to leave their positions. While traditional markers of job satisfaction, such as salary, coworker relationships, and professional development were not significant predictors of turnover, job stress stood out as a critical factor. Notably, relational stressors—such as handling challenging employees, retaining effective staff, and managing board dynamics—were reported as primary sources of strain. This data underscores that the interpersonal and organizational facets of the role often drive turnover more than dissatisfaction with the work itself.

Strong leadership skills, especially in networking and political navigation, were associated with increased retention, suggesting that well-connected CEOs may have greater job stability. In contrast, weak mediation skills and a lack of human resources focus were linked to higher turnover rates. Additionally, spiritual practices such as Sabbath and simplicity played a significant role: CEOs who struggled to maintain these practices reported a higher likelihood of seeking other employment. These findings highlight how critical personal spiritual well-being is to sustaining leadership in theological institutions, where personal faith and professional obligations are deeply intertwined.

The Unique Institutional Context of Theological Schools
Theological schools straddle the faith-based nonprofit sector and higher education, which subjects them to employment pressures from both industries. Presidents and CEOs often balance competing expectations from diverse stakeholders, responsible to both academic standards (accreditation bodies, faculty, and regulatory requirements) and ecclesial expectations from donors, denominational leaders, and alumni. These diverse constituencies have different, sometimes conflicting, definitions of success, forcing CEOs to navigate a complex landscape of competing priorities.

Functioning as both institutional administrators and spiritual leaders, theological CEOs often experience role strain, as they balance mission alignment with financial viability. The study revealed that CEOs devote significant time to external relations (11.5%), faculty oversight (10.4%), and strategic planning (7.5%). With an average workload of 56.7 hours per week, these diverse responsibilities contribute to a demanding role and high stress levels.

Workload, Satisfaction, and Stress
Despite these pressures, most CEOs report high job satisfaction, with over 90% indicating they are either satisfied or very satisfied with their roles. This apparent paradox—high satisfaction amidst heavy stress—likely stems from the intrinsic rewards of working in mission-driven institutions that shape future religious leaders. Supportive relationships with colleagues and boards enhance emotional resilience, though significant stressors remain, particularly in areas such as enrollment (49.6%), financial stability (48%), and managing difficult employees (43.2%). For many, the cumulative impact of these stressors can lead to burnout and, ultimately, turnover, emphasizing the need for resilience and adaptable leadership strategies to sustain long-term effectiveness.

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Leadership Styles

CEOs in theological education demonstrate diverse leadership styles, with many adopting collaborative (44.8%) and visionary (41.6%) approaches to meet the unique challenges of their roles. These styles reflect the need for a balance of strategic vision and collaborative governance, as CEOs engage a wide range of stakeholders while driving their schools' missions forward. Interestingly, comparison across other senior leadership roles—such as CFOs, CAOs, and CDOs—reveals notable differences:

- **Collaborative Leadership**: CEOs (44.8%) align closely with CAOs (62.8%), both of whom prioritize collaboration for managing faculty and academic governance. CFOs and CDOs also value teamwork, underscoring the importance of collective approaches across executive functions.

- **Visionary Leadership**: CEOs stand out in this category, with 41.6% identifying as visionary leaders, significantly higher than CAOs (14.0%) and CFOs (7.9%), reflecting their broader responsibility for institutional direction and mission.

- **Organizational Thinking**: CEOs (32.8%) and CAOs (42.1%) prioritize structured, systems-level planning, highlighting the need for strategic thinking across senior roles.

- **Servant Leadership**: CFOs (40.8%) are more likely than CEOs (31.2%) to identify as servant leaders, possibly due to the service-oriented focus on financial stewardship.

These findings underscore the varied leadership approaches needed to navigate theological institutions' unique demands, with different roles bringing distinct strengths to institutional governance.

Turnover Trends and Leadership Longevity

Gin and Wong's survey offers valuable insights into leadership turnover trends. The average tenure for theological CEOs is just under six years, with nearly half expecting to retire in their current positions. However, over 20% report they would leave if the opportunity arose. Notably, newer CEOs were more likely to consider leaving early in their tenure, suggesting that turnover risks may peak in the early years when the demands of the role are most intense. This finding either indicates that leaders in theological schools may not be adequately prepared for these demands or that turnover is becoming a norm in theological institutions.

Lizardy-Hajbi's ATS Leadership Education Studies Project: CEO Interview Report (2021)

Building on the quantitative findings of Gin and Wong's ATS Leadership Study, Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi's project offers a "soul" to the data by bringing forward the lived experiences of theological CEOs. As a practical theologian and qualitative researcher, Lizardy-Hajbi conducted in-depth interviews with thirty CEOs, gathering narrative insights to illuminate the "sacredness" of leadership in theological schools. This project, the second phase of the ATS study, captures the unique relational and spiritual dimensions of these roles and highlights areas for executive development and support. Through interviews with leaders from a diverse sample of theological schools across denominational lines, Lizardy-Hajbi uncovers the deeply personal rewards and substantial challenges that CEOs encounter in their roles.

The Multi-faceted Nature of the CEO Role

A key finding in Lizardy-Hajbi's research is the remarkable breadth of responsibilities that theological school CEOs bear. Far beyond strategic oversight, these leaders are often immersed in daily operations, teaching, fundraising, and external relations, managing a scope of work that one interviewee described as "all-encompassing." The need to serve as both the internal and external face of the institution introduces a tension between strategic and operational duties that can be overwhelming.

In contrast to larger universities where responsibilities are distributed across multiple officers, many theological CEOs find themselves consolidating roles due to limited resources and the smaller size of their institutions. This concentration of power can make delegation difficult, with CEOs handling everything from strategic planning to crisis management and faculty oversight. One president, for example, shared that they even manage routine student support tasks, illustrating the extreme reach of responsibilities that can lead to unsustainable workloads.

Pathways into the Role and Preparation

The interviews reveal that pathways to the CEO role are often indirect, with many leaders coming from academic administration, ministry, or nonprofit sectors. While some bring prior leadership experience, few feel fully equipped for the unique demands of theological school administration, particularly in areas like financial management, fundraising, and board relations. One CEO explained, "Every day, I'm reminded of my shortcomings in this role. It's not something you're ever fully prepared for." Leaders with backgrounds in business or finance expressed

This gap in preparation underscores a pressing need for targeted development pathways that address the distinct mix of skills required in these roles, from managing institutional finances to cultivating donor relationships and navigating complex governance structures.

feeling somewhat better equipped for these administrative responsibilities, yet even they found theological school leadership uniquely demanding.

This gap in preparation underscores a pressing need for targeted development pathways that address the distinct mix of skills required in these roles, from managing institutional finances to cultivating donor relationships and navigating complex governance structures.

Stressors and Burnout
The CEOs interviewed consistently identified stressors stemming from their expansive responsibilities, with financial sustainability as a primary source of pressure. Many theological schools are tuition-dependent and face rising operational costs amid shrinking enrollments. One CEO noted, "Tuition doesn't cover our costs, so we rely on gifts and constant fundraising." The necessity of spending significant time on donor relations can intensify burnout, with some CEOs reporting that as much as 40% of their efforts are focused on fundraising.

The emotional toll of managing faculty, making difficult decisions, and facing institutional crises also emerged as significant stress factors. Several CEOs shared that the strain of their role has manifested physically, with one leader recounting times of "chest pain" due to stress. Such stories illustrate the intense personal toll this role can take, especially when compounded by the isolation CEOs often feel as the central figure in their institution.

Stress Management and Coping Strategies
Lizardy-Hajbi's study also explores the ways theological CEOs manage the intense stress associated with their roles. Common coping mechanisms include family time, physical exercise, spiritual practices like prayer and meditation,

and support networks among peers. Many leaders find peer relationships, whether through ATS workshops, professional organizations, or informal networks, to be essential for their emotional and professional resilience. Yet even with these strategies, burnout remains prevalent, particularly among CEOs in embedded institutions who face additional bureaucratic constraints from larger universities.

Leadership Turnover and Transitions
The interviews suggest that the cumulative pressures of theological leadership often contribute to high turnover. Many CEOs begin contemplating departure when stressors like financial strain, faculty conflicts, and emotional exhaustion become unmanageable. For some, burnout is the primary driver for stepping down, while others leave due to misalignment between personal vision and institutional direction. External pressures, such as denominational shifts and broader changes in theological education, also influence turnover, as one president reflected: "Our denomination is facing a crisis, and it will impact the identity of our school." These insights highlight the intersection of personal and institutional factors driving leadership transitions.

Lizardy-Hajbi's findings emphasize that the challenges of theological school leadership often go beyond professional qualifications. The role's expansive responsibilities, especially in resource-limited institutions, require a more holistic and adaptive approach that recognizes both the personal and institutional dynamics of leadership. This evidence suggests a pressing need for distributed leadership models, where responsibilities are shared more widely across executive teams, as well as enhanced preparation and support structures to mitigate burnout and foster sustainable leadership tenures.

Challenges & Lessons *From Recently Transitioned Leaders*

Together, the ATS reports underscore the immense complexity of theological school leadership, where personal resilience, strategic insight, and spiritual grounding are essential for navigating a unique and challenging landscape. The quantitative and qualitative findings highlight a shared set of challenges, including financial strain, enrollment declines, and the expansive, often overwhelming responsibilities of theological CEOs. These studies show that a nuanced understanding of these dynamics can help institutions build supportive structures that foster both leadership well-being and institutional resilience.

Across both studies, common themes of stress, burnout, and the emotional toll of the role emerge, as leaders contend with competing demands—from strategic planning and faculty oversight to extensive fundraising and donor engagement. The quantitative data offers a statistical lens on turnover predictors and demographic trends, while the qualitative insights reveal the more personal side of these experiences, including the sense of isolation many leaders feel. Together, these findings portray a complex, often isolating role where even high job satisfaction does not negate the profound strain on CEOs' physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

With these insights as a foundation, the report now turns to field research conducted in the summer of 2024. Through ten semi-structured interviews with recently transitioned CEOs of theological institutions, these case studies bring further depth and texture to the data by offering a firsthand perspective on the realities of leadership turnover.

The stories that follow provide a window into the lived experiences of those who have recently stepped down, illuminating the pressures and challenges that influenced their transitions.

Below is a selection of seven of these cases studies, all anonymized, in which we encounter leaders who undertook the overhaul of a seminary amid governance and financial crises exacerbated by the pandemic, and a CEO who managed complex relationships between two unexpected institutional partners but ultimately found the administrative demands insurmountable. We also hear from a president who worked tirelessly to unify faculty amid a shifting institutional landscape and another who pioneered online education at a seminary, though at a significant personal cost. The cases represent a diversity of institutional types, as well as, ecclesiastical traditions.

These accounts underscore systemic challenges within theological education leadership, including strategic downsizing, extensive fundraising, faculty retention amid complex institutional shifts, and efforts to drive growth during a time of crisis. By delving into these personal narratives, we gain nuanced understanding of the pressures that shape leadership transitions in theological education today, offering lessons that can inform more resilient and sustainable support structures for current and future leaders.

Rev. Westbrook – Horizon Institute

Standalone, Ecumenical, Mainline

Background: Just prior to the 2020 COVID Pandemic, Rev. Westbrook took on the presidency of the Horizon Institute (HI), an ecumenical standalone seminary in a major urban center. HI, while rich in history and mission, faced significant structural challenges dating back to its founding. These challenges would come to define Westbrook's tenure as president, as they navigated complex governance dynamics, financial crises, and the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Leadership Mandate: Westbrook was not brought in to simply maintain the status quo. Their mandate was clear: lead a comprehensive, top-to-bottom overhaul of HI to ensure its survival and relevance in a rapidly changing theological education landscape. Westbrook was tasked with rethinking HI's operational model—moving from what they termed a "payphone system in a smartphone world"—and repositioning the institution for long-term sustainability.

Institutional Challenges: A critical challenge Westbrook faced was HI's flawed governance structure. The school operated under a multi-institutional partner model, where several denominational institutions—functioning more as houses of study than fully-fledged institutions—retained significant control over HI's operations. This created a baked-in conflict of interest: these denominational seminaries appointed leaders who had no structural accountability to HI but wielded influence over its decision-making processes. This led to persistent governance and financial difficulties, including a lack of alignment between the school's needs and the contributions from its denominational partners. For example, despite HI's operating budget was less than around $7 million annually, the collective contribution from the denominational partners was only $750,000.

HI's financial health was precarious. The school's endowment had been depleted due to past decisions to borrow against it for operational expenses, leaving HI vulnerable to market fluctuations. Westbrook recounts a harrowing moment during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when the endowment dropped by nearly $1 million, putting the institution on the brink of a margin call that could have wiped out the remaining assets.

Vision and Successes: Despite these challenges, Westbrook worked diligently to craft a new narrative for HI, which they termed "HI next generation." Their methodology sought to retrieve the best of the past to forge a path forward—reframing the institution's mission and legacy for the future. This vision found traction not only among students and faculty but also with civic stakeholders in their city. Westbrook successfully positioned HI as a justice-oriented institution, producing leaders who would be change-makers in their communities. This civic engagement was a significant success, with various sectors—real estate, environmental justice, and food systems—recognizing HI as a valuable partner in shaping the future of the city.

Leadership Stress and Health: While Westbrook made notable strides, the stress of leading an institution with such deep-rooted challenges took a toll. After fewer than 5 years in the role, they reached a breaking point. One morning, they woke up unable to move and told their partner, "I can't do this anymore." The constant pressure of managing a flawed governance system, a financial crisis, and the emotional toll of crisis management during the pandemic led them to resign.

Reflections on Leadership: Reflecting on their tenure, Westbrook highlighted the importance of resilience and self-regulation as key attributes for leadership in theological education. They noted that the ability to manage one's nervous system is critical for anyone navigating the intense pressures of executive leadership. They also emphasized the need for leaders to be equipped with a combination of financial literacy and narrative-building skills—being able to read financial reports with the same competency as sacred texts and crafting a compelling institutional story.
Their experience underscores the structural challenges faced by standalone seminaries, particularly those with governance systems that hinder rather than support executive leadership. While their vision for HI sparked hope and creativity, the institution's deeper, long-standing issues proved difficult to overcome. Their story highlights the importance of institutional structures in determining whether leadership can thrive or merely survive under immense pressure.

The ability to manage one's nervous system is critical for anyone navigating the *intense pressures of executive leadership.*

Chancellor Reeves – Trinity House Seminary

Standalone, Mainline

Background: Chancellor Reeves served as the CEO of Trinity House Seminary (THS) from 2018 to 2021. THS, a mainline standalone seminary offered a variety of degrees, including MA and doctoral programs. Reeves entered the role with the intention of cultivating support for the school and exploring new business models to ensure its survival in an increasingly precarious landscape for theological education.

The Leadership Mandate: From the outset, Reeves recognized that traditional models of theological education were unsustainable, particularly for seminaries like THS that lacked a significant endowment. Their goal as Chancellor was to develop new partnerships and an "ecology" that would allow the seminary to thrive. One of the highlights of their tenure was successfully forging partnerships with external organizations representing different denominational and faith traditions. One relationship resulted in the development of a new major scholarship fund, providing critical support for students. These efforts exemplified Reeves' outward-facing vision of leadership, where building relationships beyond the institution would be key to its sustainability.

Institutional Impact of COVID-19: Like many higher education institutions, THS was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Reeves had been in discussions with their judicatory to develop programs aimed at providing theological education outside the traditional MDiv track. However, these efforts were derailed by the pandemic, and by the time THS and its partners emerged on the other side, the landscape had changed dramatically. Many of their denominational churches had seen a sharp decline in membership, and numerous congregations had either closed or merged. This left THS's pre-pandemic strategies outdated and the seminary scrambling to redefine its place in a new and weakened ecclesial reality.

At a broader level, Reeves noted that the pandemic accelerated a trend in theological education that had already been in motion: the closing of freestanding seminaries. With funders growing increasingly skeptical of the long-term viability of independent institutions, the question was no longer whether schools would close, but which ones. This created a challenging fundraising environment, as donors and foundations became more reluctant to invest in schools that could not demonstrate a sustainable path forward.

Personal and Professional Challenges: As the pandemic forced Reeves to shift their focus from visionary leadership to administrative tasks, they found themselves increasingly dissatisfied with the role. What had once been energizing work—developing new partnerships, rebranding the seminary, and engaging with external stakeholders—gave way to what Reeves called "administrivia." The day-to-day realities of leading an institution through a global crisis, combined with the isolation of working remotely, left them unfulfilled. A self-described people person, Reeves struggled with the remote nature of leadership during the pandemic, finding it difficult to maintain their energy and enthusiasm through Zoom meetings alone.

In addition to these professional challenges, Reeves experienced the existential weight of carrying the survival of the institution on their shoulders. One of their major concerns during the first nine months of the pandemic was simply keeping the people in their institutional community safe. While THS had the infrastructure to move fully online, Reeves constantly wrestled with decisions about whether to bring people back for in-person activities and how to balance educational needs with health risks. This stress compounded the difficulty of navigating an already uncertain financial and operational landscape.

Reflections on Leadership and Institutional Sustainability: Reeves' tenure at THS exemplifies the pressures faced by many leaders in theological education today. They articulated a clear understanding of the unsustainability of the current model for freestanding seminaries and believed that the future lay in developing new partnerships that would integrate theological institutions more deeply into their local communities and economies. They recognized that seminaries that could not adapt quickly enough to this new reality were at risk of closure, a fate they saw increasingly play out in the sector.

Despite the challenges, Reeves saw successes in his outward-facing work, particularly in building relationships that aligned with THS mission of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Their efforts to integrate partners outside of their tradition bright spots in their presidency, offering a new vision for what THS could become.

Ultimately, however, the combination of the pandemic, administrative burden, and the lack of in-person engagement took its toll, leading Reeves to step down in 2021. Their story underscores the importance of visionary leadership in theological education but also highlights the limits of what even the most dynamic leaders can achieve in the face of systemic challenges.

Dean Wilder – Harbor View Divinity

Embedded, Ecumenical

Background: Dean Wilder served as the Dean (CEO) of Harbor View Divinity School (HVDS) for a decade that spanned from the early 2010s to the early 2020s. They also held a previous administrative role as Academic Dean for five years prior to their appointment at HVDS. At HVDS, their responsibilities as Dean were expansive, ranging from budget supervision and curriculum reform to fundraising and overseeing significant building projects. As the public face and voice of the school, they worked to establish a cohesive internal culture and foster a sense of community within the faculty.

Leadership Vision and Successes: One of Wilder's most significant achievements was fostering a sense of collegiality and unity among the faculty at HVDS. When they arrived, there was notable internal dissension. Over the course of their decade-long tenure, they worked diligently to transform the faculty into a cohesive body, where open debate and disagreement could be met with mutual respect. Wilder described their greatest reward as watching the faculty grow into a collaborative team, one that could envision and achieve shared goals. Their role as a unifying figure was pivotal in healing past divisions and building a stronger institution.

In addition to this, they played a central role in the development of new programs and curriculum reform at HVDS, all while managing fundraising and the construction of a new building at the school. These successes reflect their ability to navigate the complexities of academic leadership, ensuring that both the physical and academic infrastructures of the school were aligned with its mission.

Challenges in an Embedded School: One of the ongoing challenges Wilder faced was navigating the relationship between HVDS and the broader University system. As an embedded institution, HVDS benefited from institutional resources and stability but often struggled to be understood by the university's leadership. Wilder served under multiple provosts during their time as Dean, each with a distinct leadership style. This meant that just as they had succeeded in advocating for the Divinity School with one provost, a new one would arrive, and they had to begin

> Wilder described their greatest reward as watching the faculty grow into a collaborative team, one that could envision and achieve shared goals.

the process of building understanding all over again.

Additionally, during their tenure, the University began to shift its self-image from a regional liberal university to a global institution. Wilder expressed reservations about this change, questioning whether the University's pursuit of global stature might come at the cost of its established strengths. They also spoke critically of the growing influence of external rating services on the university's decision-making, which, while not directly affecting the Divinity School, placed significant pressure on other university departments.

Impact of Fundraising and Administrative Work: As with many senior leaders in theological education, fundraising was an essential part of Wilder's role. However, they noted that the increasing demands of fundraising pulled them away from the day-to-day life of the school. Balancing these external responsibilities with the need to maintain a healthy internal culture was a constant challenge. Wilder believed that successful administration required someone to act as the "heartbeat" of the school, keeping a pulse on the needs of faculty, staff, and students while fostering a forward-looking vision for the institution.

Reflecting on their own experience, Wilder suggested that embedded schools might benefit from having a Chief Operating Officer (COO) or another high-level staff member who could manage the day-to-day operations, allowing the dean to focus on larger strategic goals and external responsibilities like fundraising.

Personal and Professional Networks: Wilder acknowledged that they did not feel fully equipped for the financial aspects of the deanship, particularly fundraising, when they first took on the role. However, they benefited from mentoring and support, particularly from their time as Academic Dean in their previous appointment, where their own dean had mentored them for senior leadership. This preparation gave them a foundation to build upon, though they still relied heavily on their colleagues at HVDS for guidance. Wilder also developed a network of other administrators from theological schools with similarly aligned values. This group provided vital support during their early years as dean, convening for mutual encouragement and reflection. They emphasized the importance of having truth-tellers in their life—colleagues and friends who would offer honest feedback and counsel, which they found crucial for their success in the role.

Reflections on Leadership: Despite their accomplishments, Wilder seriously considered leaving the deanship mid-tenure, they stated, "I loved my job, but it was killing me." The constant strain of managing human relationships, balancing institutional priorities, and facing the broader onslaught against higher education had taken a toll on their health and well-being.

Navigating National and Institutional Crises: One of the most significant moments in Wilder's leadership was during the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The election results left much of the HVDS community in shock and mourning, with faculty and students expressing fear and uncertainty about the future. Wilder responded by organizing listening circles where members of the community could share their thoughts and emotions without interruption or judgment. This approach became a model for how the school would handle future crises, including the murder of George Floyd and other moments of national trauma. These initiatives reflected Wilder's commitment to fostering a space for truth-telling, healing, and resilience within the HVDS community.

> They emphasized the importance of having truth-tellers in their life—colleagues and friends who would offer honest feedback and counsel, which they found crucial for their success in the role.

tenure. The exhaustion of balancing internal and external responsibilities, along with their desire to return to teaching, pushed them to the brink of resignation. It was only through a conversation with one of their provosts that Wilder decided to stay. The provost helped them establish a plan to work remotely from their family cabin upstate during the summers, which provided the respite they needed to continue.

Wilder ultimately stepped down at the end of the COVID-19 Pandemic, after ten years in the role. Reflecting on their

Conclusion: Dean Wilder's tenure as the CEO of Harbor View Divinity School exemplifies the challenges and rewards of leadership in an embedded theological institution. Their ability to build strong relationships within the faculty, navigate shifting university priorities, and manage both the external demands of fundraising and the internal needs of the school were central to their success. However, their experience also highlights the personal toll that leadership can take, as well as the necessity of strong support networks and collaborative leadership teams in sustaining long-term effectiveness.

Provost Hawke – Grace and Peace School of Theology

Standalone, Progressive, Mainline

Background: Provost Hawke served as the president of Grace and Peace School of Theology (GPST) for nearly ten years, during a period of significant transition for both the school and theological education in general. Prior to their time at GPST, Hawke worked in various academic roles, including serving as Academic Dean at a university-embedded divinity school. Following their presidency at GPST, they took on a new role as Executive Director of a major faith-based non-profit where they continued to navigate the complex challenges of leadership in adjacent fields.

Leadership Challenges and Vision: When Hawke arrived at GPST, the institution was facing both internal and external pressures. GPST had recently sold its historic buildings and land, and Hawke found themselves unexpectedly stepping into the role of architect for a new seminary building. This was an unfamiliar challenge for Hawke, requiring them to balance the physical and operational restructuring of the seminary with broader strategic leadership.

Hawke's leadership style centered on creating opportunities for transformative change within the institution. They focused on understanding the landscape of theological education, assessing the opportunities and challenges, and working with their team to chart a path forward. This approach was evident in their commitment to moving GPST into the digital age, as they spearheaded the introduction of online education, making GPST one of the first progressive theological schools to offer an online MDiv program. Although the change was initially met with resistance from some faculty members, Hawke believed in the long-term value of technology in education. The pandemic later validated their push for online learning, showing that the groundwork they laid was essential for the seminary's survival and future success.

Governance and Institutional Transformation: One of Hawke's most pressing challenges was navigating the GPST governance structure, which was described as "medieval" by one colleague. This rigid system often hindered the rapid adaptation needed in an evolving educational landscape. Hawke recognized that the traditional governance models in theological education were ill-equipped to deal with the speed of change required, especially as schools faced declining enrollments and financial difficulties.

Hawke also worked to restructure GPST internally by re-building the leadership team, including key positions like a VP of Academic Affairs and a VP of Institutional Advancement. However, governance issues persisted. For example, during a pivotal decision to appoint a new academic dean, the faculty refused to choose between two candidates and deferred the decision to Hawke. This situation highlighted the disconnect between faculty expectations and the reality of leadership within a seminary context.

Personal and Professional Growth: Hawke's time at GPST was marked by intense personal and professional growth, though it often came at a cost to their well-being. They described their experience as "nearly killing" them, with the stress causing significant health issues, including hair loss. Hawke initially shouldered the immense pressure of leadership, feeling responsible for fixing all the problems within the institution. This sense of responsibility took a toll on their physical and mental health.

After leaving CTS, Hawke reflected on their leadership style, realizing that they had matured in their approach. In their subsequent role at a major faith-based non-profit, they adopted a more measured stance, stepping back to observe rather than trying to control every aspect of the organization. This shift allowed them to take a healthier and more sustainable approach to leadership, though they acknowledged that the "fix-it" mentality had driven their success at GPTS.

Long-Term Vision for Theological Education: Hawke expressed deep concerns about the future of theological education. They predicted that within 15 years, theological education would look very different, with only a small number of elite, well-funded schools remaining. The rest, they believed, would either close or merge, as current models of education and funding were no longer sustainable. Hawke suggested that schools should consider consolidation now while they still have resources, to create something of lasting value.

Hawke's commitment to innovation and leadership development was also evident in their attempts to integrate leadership development into GTPS's curriculum. They advocated for building leadership skills into the MDiv program, believing that theological education needed to prepare students not only in theory but also in practical leadership. Unfortunately, their push for this curriculum overhaul did not gain traction with the faculty, who had never experienced this form of education themselves.

Conclusion: Provost Hawke's time at Grace and Peace Theological Seminary was marked by both transformative successes and significant personal challenges. Their efforts to modernize the seminary through online education and governance reform demonstrated their forward-thinking leadership, though they often found themselves at odds with entrenched institutional structures. Their reflections on leadership and the future of theological education offer valuable insights for the next generation of leaders, particularly in understanding the importance of creating space for transformation and recognizing the limits of personal responsibility in complex institutions.

President Jones – Inspire College of Religions

Standalone, Progressive, Multi-Denominational

Background: President Jones served as President of Inspire College of Religions (ICR) from 2013 to 2023. Before this, Jones was the Academic Dean of an embedded theological seminary. Jones was initially drawn into administrative leadership from their faculty role, having taught at the seminary level for over 20 years. Their presidency at ICR was marked by extraordinary financial challenges, strategic downsizing, and programmatic innovation.

Jone's primary responsibilities included fundraising, strategic financial management, enrollment growth, and academic innovation. They were tasked with managing a shrinking budget while ensuring that ICR continued to fulfill its mission. Their leadership role required extensive engagement with a wide range of internal and external constituencies, including alumni, donors, ecclesial bodies, and global partners.

Leadership Challenges and Achievements: Shortly after Jones assumed the presidency, ICR's proposed merger with a neighboring liberal arts college fell apart, leaving the school saddled with significant debt. The institution's budget had ballooned due to an expanded staff and faculty intended for the merger, and the dissolution of the partnership created an immediate financial crisis. Jone's was forced to make deep cuts, reducing the school's budget by half, laying off staff, and cutting back on faculty through attrition.

Despite these overwhelming challenges, Jones achieved several notable successes. They raised between $35-40 million over the course of their presidency, ensuring that ICR never missed a payroll despite its financial struggles. They also successfully attracted a diverse and talented faculty, even under difficult circumstances. More than half of the current faculty at ICR were brought in during their tenure, during which Jones utilized creative hiring methods, such as post-doctoral positions, to bring in young scholars. Finally, under Jones's leadership, ICR launched several new academic programs, including partnerships with international institutions. These partnerships expanded ICR's global reach and introduced new doctoral degrees,

ensuring the school remained innovative in its academic offerings.

Significant Changes in the Role: From the start of their presidency, Jones recognized that their role would be all-encompassing. They needed to be involved in nearly every aspect of the institution's operations, from financial planning and enrollment management to relationship building with denominational leaders and donors. They spent much of their time on the road, working to build confidence in ICR's future among key stakeholders. As the financial crisis deepened, Jones found themselves increasingly focused on fundraising and cutting costs.

Challenges with the Board and Senior Leadership: Jones acknowledged that ICR's board lacked the financial resources to provide significant support, and while committed, they were not in a position to help address the school's financial crisis. Jones also faced turnover among senior leadership, particularly in the advancement office, which hindered the school's fundraising efforts. Although Jones's decision to outsource ICR's financial operations saved significant costs, this required careful oversight, most of which fell on Jones's shoulders.

Reflections on Leadership: Jones reflected that no leader is fully prepared for the complexities of running a theological institution. Their background in theological education helped them navigate some aspects of the role, but the multifaceted nature of the presidency—dealing with finances, faculty, students, alumni, and external constituencies—demanded continuous learning and adaptation. Jones emphasized the importance of building trust with faculty and staff and empowering them to lead without micromanagement, while also maintaining a focus on the institution's financial and strategic goals.

Satisfaction and Longevity: Jones did not describe their presidency as enjoyable, but rather as mission-driven. Their sense of calling to ICR's mission, combined with a deep commitment to the institution's legacy, sustained them through a decade of immense challenges. Despite the personal and familial sacrifices required, Jones found

satisfaction in the work they accomplished, particularly in maintaining ICR's relevance in theological education and keeping the institution operational during its most difficult years.

Conclusion: Jones's leadership at ICR underscores the importance of resilience, strategic innovation, and relationship building in times of institutional crisis. Their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, raise critical funds, and continue innovating academically reflects their deep commitment to ICR's mission and legacy.

The multifaceted nature of the presidency—*dealing with finances, faculty, students, alumni, and external constituencies—*demanded continuous learning and adaptation.

Principal Vos – Celestial Institute

Embedded, Mainline

Background: Principal Vos served as the CEO of Celestial Institute (CI) – an embedded mainline seminary at a major research university. They had the longest tenure of anyone interviewed for this project, covering nearly two decades of the early to mid-2000s. As Principal and CEO, Vos was responsible for overseeing the hiring process, managing budgets, fundraising, and resolving disputes. They also played a critical role in ensuring that the curriculum was delivered effectively.

Of their many responsibilities, Vos described managing faculty and staff recruitment and retention as among their most rewarding tasks. Vos prided themselves on fostering an extraordinarily collegial culture within CI, where faculty were supported and courted by top-tier schools but remained loyal to their own university context. They worked closely with faculty, making sure faculty research needs were met and that they had the resources to remain at the forefront of their scholarly fields. This, combined with effective governance, contributed to a high retention rate of faculty during their tenure.

Achievements: Vos's efforts to cultivate a sense of community and support for faculty, even among those with differing opinions, created a collegial environment that helped retain top talent. Moreover, they cite having led a strategic planning process in 2018–2020 that resulted in exciting new developments for CI mission. This initiative culminated in securing a multi-million dollar grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to support innovation. During their long tenure, Vos also served a university-wide position, which enabled them to support both the needs of CI and the needs of the university as a whole, though this left them physically and emotionally exhausted by the end.

Challenges in the Role: Vos was keenly aware of the changing landscape of theological education, comparing it to "riding the rapids." They acknowledged the ongoing societal devaluation of institutions and professionals, which added pressure to their role. Despite these challenges, they embraced the dynamic and ever-changing environment, finding enjoyment in navigating new strategic opportunities for the institution.

Theological education, especially in a major university context, demands both nimble, strategic thinking and advocacy. Vos emphasized that future leaders must be effective fundraisers, as traditional support from churches for theological education and clergy training continues to decline. They also pointed out that leaders must have more than intellectual capability—they need a passion and zest for the demanding work ahead.

Leadership Approach: Vos highlighted their ability to address conflict head-on, an essential skill for any administrator. They took pride in their ability to find creative, transformative solutions to conflicts, whether they arose from scheduling, student issues, or faculty disputes. Vos also thrived in risk-taking, provided it was calculated and backed by thorough research. They considered this one of the hallmarks of their leadership style, particularly as they navigated complex institutional decisions during their tenure. Ever a planner, Vos gave the university several years of forewarning of their intention to retire, allowing the university to prepare for their departure. Reflections on Leadership Preparation: Holding a doctoral degree in the sciences and not theology, Vos did not initially see themselves as a candidate for leadership in a theological school. They were drawn into the role due to their extensive experience in lay leadership within their denomination. This background, combined with their administrative experience leading a major church agency, prepared them for the complex challenges of managing an academic institution.

Vos noted that the work of a dean or president in theological education often exceeds one's prior training, but their experience navigating conflict, managing a multi-million dollar budget in their previous position, and their ability to build effective governance structures helped them find success at CI.

Satisfaction and Longevity: Vos's sense of joyful work was central to their satisfaction in the role. While they recognized the challenges and long hours involved in the position, they took immense pride in CI's role in shaping the future of the church and theological education. They

expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with some of the "smartest people around the world" who were dedicated to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Though Vos retired, they never seriously considered leaving the position earlier. Their three-year retirement plan allowed a graceful transition out of leadership, ensuring the stability of the institution they loved.

Conclusion: Vos emphasized that future leaders at theological schools like those in embedded contexts must be well-versed in the workings of large institutions. Navigating these structures is essential for success, particularly when dealing with university processes and advocating for theological education at a higher level. Vos also noted that successful leaders in theological education must possess both passion for the mission of the school and the ability to seize strategic opportunities. Vos's tenure exemplifies the importance of these qualities, particularly as they led CI through a rapidly changing landscape.

Vos noted that the work of a dean or president in theological education often exceeds one's prior training

Chancellor Faulkner - Sacred Path Seminary

Standalone, Mainline

Background: Chancellor Faulkner's tenure as the CEO of Sacred Path Seminary (SPS) was marked by their ability to balance the demands of development, administration, and spiritual leadership, all while fostering a community of intellectual and pastoral depth. Their primary responsibilities included leading a capital campaign, working closely with the Board of Trustees, cultivating donors, and maintaining essential relationships with judicatories, churches, and alumni. In addition to their fundraising and administrative duties, Faulkner was a spiritual presence on campus, preaching often in chapel services and addressing pastoral concerns within the seminary community. They also worked diligently to manage the chemistry of the faculty and staff, a task that took time and effort to fully develop into a cohesive and effective team. Overseeing admissions, collaborating with the CFO on budget matters, and leading a senior management team were all essential components of their role.

Faulkner experienced several significant transitions during their time as Chancellor. One of the most immediate challenges was shifting from their prior role as a well-liked faculty member to the more administrative position of Chancellor. This transition required careful attention to the changing dynamics of their relationships with colleagues, as they had to build new, often more formal, connections with those they once saw primarily as peers. Over time, they also oversaw the growth of a social work program, which became an increasingly prominent part of Sacred Path Seminary's institutional life. However, SPS faced challenges from competitors within the seminary landscape, raising questions about its long-term viability in light of broader shifts in theological education. For an historically progressive institution, the national and state political climate, particularly in their more conservative region of the country, added further pressure to the institution, as it navigated a changing and often polarized environment.

Reflecting on the future of the role, Faulkner recognized the growing importance of online education, anticipating that this shift would pose a significant challenge to SPS. They also highlighted that future leaders would need to find ways

to align the demands of the role with their own strengths, emphasizing the importance of intentionally enjoying the position. They believed this sense of personal enjoyment was a key factor in sustaining leaders through the inherent challenges of the job.

Support structures: Faulkner attributed much of their success in handling the demands of the presidency to the strength of their leadership team. In particular, their CFO played a critical role in managing the financial aspects of the institution, an area in which Faulkner felt less confident. They also benefited from attending conflict management workshops and consulting regularly with a network of other presidents. They cited the support provided by Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the coaching they sought to improve their fundraising skills as significant sources of ongoing professional development which helped them to find increased satisfaction in the role, even while it was stretching.

The relationships Faulkner built with students, alumni, and faculty, alongside the intellectual challenge of the role, were highlights of their tenure. As a former professor, Faulkner enjoyed applying theories that they had taught in the classroom to their administrative work. Leading the seminary allowed them to make an impact in ways that would not have been possible as a local pastor or bishop, and this sense of meaningful work was central to their overall satisfaction in the role.

Challenges: However, the role was not without its challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic posed an existential threat to the seminary, significantly intensifying the

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Future leaders would need to find ways to align the demands of the role with their own strengths, emphasizing the importance of intentionally enjoying the position

Effective leadership hinges on building a strong team. Faulkner also stressed the importance of emotional and spiritual self-management in navigating the pressures of theological education leadership.

stress of leadership. Faulkner admitted feeling restless at times, and they considered other opportunities, including positions in denominational structures, but their commitment to the institution ultimately kept them grounded in the role. They fostered a high level of trust within their leadership team, especially with their CFO, whose financial expertise was invaluable. Faulkner emphasized the importance of building a leadership team that complemented one another's strengths, allowing for more effective decision-making.

Succession planning was a constant focus for Faulkner. They invested in their own leadership development through workshops and programs with ATS, and they placed a strong emphasis on cultivating leadership potential within the faculty. However, they acknowledged that Sacred Path Seminary's small size imposed limitations on institutional succession planning.

Conclusion: One of Faulkner's most significant contributions was their leadership in fostering ethnic, racial, class, and cultural diversity at the seminary. Through such initiatives, they worked to increase awareness of cultural differences within the community and to create a more inclusive environment. Over time, this initiative led to significant increases in the diversity of both the faculty and the student body, marking a lasting impact on the seminary's institutional culture.

Faulkner's leadership style was grounded in their belief that effective leadership hinges on building a strong team. They also stressed the importance of emotional and spiritual self-management in navigating the pressures of theological education leadership. Finally, they recognized that financial stability was essential for long-term institutional success, relying on secure revenue streams from foundations and major donors. These core principles guided them during their tenure and left an indelible mark on SPS.

Reflecting on the Voices *of Recently Transitioned Leaders*

Resilience in Crisis

As we reflect on these individual stories of leadership, it becomes clear that these stories reveal broader patterns of resilience, innovation, the importance of team building, and the toll of leadership. The common threads of navigating institutional crises, fostering strategic partnerships, and managing personal health highlight the complexity of the role, as well as the need for adaptive leadership models.

The stories of recently transitioned leaders underscore the theme of resilience, particularly in the face of crises that forced rapid adaptation and unwavering commitment. Rev. Westbrook at Horizon Institute and Chancellor Reeves at Trinity House Seminary exemplify this resilience as they confronted financial instability compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Westbrook's leadership was defined by their determination to reimagine a historically struggling institution, even when the pandemic nearly depleted the endowment, placing the school on the brink of financial collapse. This moment of reckoning required Westbrook to reassess and fortify their leadership approach, despite the unrelenting pressure. Similarly, Reeves faced the challenge of steering Trinity House through a period of declining church membership and donor skepticism, which heightened the seminary's vulnerability. Reeves adapted by forming strategic partnerships and scholarship funds, demonstrating resilience in pivoting theirrole to address urgent needs, even if it meant placing visionary work on hold.

These accounts reveal that resilience in theological education often involves a balancing act between visionary leadership and crisis management. Leaders like Provost Hawke at Grace and Peace School of Theology also encountered setbacks, especially from governance structures that resisted change. Yet, by persevering with governance reform and online program initiatives, Hawke demonstrated resilience not just in the face of internal resistance but in anticipating the broader changes in theological education. These leaders highlight that resilience in times of crisis requires both flexibility and a tenacious commitment to institutional transformation, even when the path is uncertain.

Strategic Innovation

Strategic innovation is another recurring theme, with several leaders introducing forward-thinking initiatives that repositioned their institutions for future success. Provost Hawke, for instance, was an early proponent of online education at Grace and Peace, leading the school to adopt a digital MDiv program well before the pandemic made such innovations essential. Their push for digital learning encountered initial resistance but ultimately set the institution on a path that proved invaluable when in-person operations became impossible. President Jones at Inspire College also modeled strategic innovation, launching new programs and partnerships despite facing profound financial strain. Through creative approaches to faculty hiring and extensive international partnerships, Jones kept Inspire relevant and competitive in an increasingly challenging educational landscape.

In the case of Chancellor Faulkner at Sacred Path Seminary, innovation took the form of fostering diversity and inclusivity, a strategic priority that shaped the institution's culture and reputation. Their efforts led to significant increases in ethnic and cultural diversity, creating a more inclusive environment that will have lasting impacts on Sacred Path's community and mission. Collectively, these leaders underscore the importance of adaptive strategies and the willingness to champion initiatives that prepare institutions for a changing future. Their experiences illustrate that innovation in theological education requires a commitment not only to programmatic advancements but to cultural and relational growth that resonates with a diverse, modern constituency.

Team Building

Effective team building is not merely about delegating responsibilities but fostering a shared sense of purpose and unity within the institution.

For each leader, effective team building proved crucial in navigating the complexities of their roles. Chancellor Faulkner and Principal Vos both highlighted the importance of building supportive and complementary teams that could manage the demands of a rapidly shifting environment. Faulkner's ability to rely on a strong CFO enabled them to focus on the broader mission of Sacred Path, confident that the financial aspects of the seminary were in steady hands. This emphasis on team dynamics helped Faulkner navigate both internal and external pressures, underscoring their belief in the strength of collaborative leadership.

Dean Wilder's experience at Harbor View Divinity School also highlights team building as essential for institutional success. Tasked with unifying a divided faculty, Wilder fostered a culture of mutual respect and cohesion that enabled the faculty to work toward shared goals. Their investment in internal relationships created a collaborative environment where faculty felt supported, which, in turn, strengthened the school's mission and stability. Similarly, Vos at Celestial Institute worked to cultivate a collegial atmosphere that encouraged loyalty and high retention among faculty members, even amidst competing offers from prestigious institutions. These leaders demonstrate that effective team building is not merely about delegating responsibilities but fostering a shared sense of purpose and unity within the institution.

Personal Health and Burnout

Despite their successes, the toll of leadership became evident for many of these leaders, as the weight of their roles often resulted in personal health challenges and, ultimately, decisions to step down. Rev. Westbrook's story at Horizon Institute exemplifies this struggle, as they reached a breaking point after years of relentless crisis management and institutional overhaul. The intense pressure to manage both governance dysfunction and financial instability took a severe toll on their health, leading to their eventual resignation. Chancellor Reeves also faced burnout as the pandemic shifted their work from visionary tasks to relentless administrative duties, leaving them unfulfilled and drained by the isolation of remote leadership.

Similarly, Dean Wilder and Provost Hawke encountered significant personal challenges, with Hawke reflecting on the toll that their "fix-it" mentality took on their health. Wilder's experience balancing internal and external responsibilities pushed them to the brink, and only a temporary retreat allowed them to continue in the role. These narratives underscore that personal well-being is often at odds with the demands of theological leadership, emphasizing the importance of sustainable work practices and institutional support for leaders. Together, their reflections highlight the need for structures that support leaders' health and well-being, fostering a sustainable model for the next generation of leaders in theological education.

Conclusion

This study underscores the profound challenges executive leaders face in theological education, navigating roles marked by intense demands amid rapid cultural shifts. As they guide their institutions through complex times, themes of resilience, strategic innovation, team building, and personal well-being emerge as essential to fostering sustainable leadership. Based on these insights, this report recommends four strategies to support leaders and their institutions in adopting resilient, adaptive approaches to executive leadership.

Reset Expectations for Tenure and Legacy
Recognizing that the landscape has shifted from legacy-building to adaptive, impact-focused leadership, boards and stakeholders should embrace a new approach to tenure. Shorter, mission-driven terms, designed to pivot institutions through critical transitions, can foster resilience by prioritizing adaptability over longevity. This shift allows leaders to focus on timely, transformative contributions rather than decade-spanning legacies, while boards sustain stability by promoting a continuum of purposeful leadership.

Encourage Role Specialization and Distributed Leadership
Given the breadth of responsibilities theological leaders must manage—often spanning finance, pastoral care, administration, and development—leaders should be empowered to concentrate on their strengths, delegating other roles to an empowered executive team. By shifting from a model of "single-point leadership" to distributed leadership, institutions can alleviate overextension and prevent burnout, supporting continuity and stability across essential functions even during transitions. This specialized approach encourages a shared sense of responsibility and resilience across the leadership team.

Clarify Institutional Relationships and Set Strategic Boundaries
The relational demands of executive leadership are substantial, often stretching presidents across a web of connections with boards, faculty, alumni, students, and stakeholders. Leaders who routinely evaluate and strategically manage these relationships—focusing on life-giving engagements while delegating or reshaping others—help sustain institutional vitality and their own well-being. Strengthening support structures and empowering others to take on critical interactions enables presidents to concentrate on strategic relationships, creating a foundation for sustainable leadership.

Prioritize Spiritual Health and Vocation
At the core of theological leadership is a sense of calling, which must be actively nurtured to sustain leaders through personal and institutional crises. Prioritizing spiritual practices that affirm leaders' sense of purpose and connection to God's work can help mitigate burnout and anchor them in resilience. By cultivating spiritual well-being, leaders not only reinforce their capacity to navigate challenges but also embody the values and mission they seek to impart within their communities.

In conclusion, resilient, adaptable executive leadership is essential for theological schools to flourish in an era of profound change.

By realigning expectations, promoting role clarity, fostering strategic relationships, and prioritizing spiritual well-being, these strategies offer a framework for sustainable leadership that honors both institutional and personal resilience. When integrated into leadership models, these strategies can help theological schools navigate this period of transformation, fostering a continuity grounded in mission, community, and care.

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