

# Changes in Seminary Enrollment Patterns

By Lovett H. Weems Jr.

Religious Workforce Project

Lewis Center for Church Leadership

Wesley Theological Seminary



**Religious  
Workforce  
Project**



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## About the Religious Workforce Project

Building on previous research, the Religious Workforce Project is an effort to understand the nation's religious workforce in a comprehensive way. The Project includes a national meta-analysis and a qualitative study in the Washington, DC, metro area. Funding for the project is generously provided by The Lilly Endowment, Inc. This project seeks to answer the following questions: Given today's changing religious landscape, how are leaders of U.S. congregations adapting? How do these changes shape the staffing, financial models, priorities, and the work of U.S. congregations? And what is the state of the religious workforce today?



# Changes in Seminary Enrollment Patterns

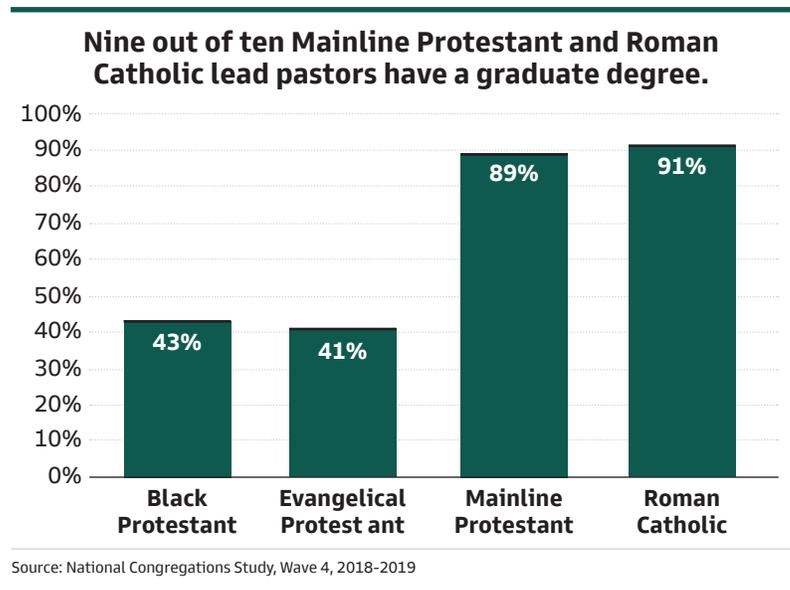
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## Introduction

Mark Chaves and researchers from the National Congregations Survey note that “clergy are a highly educated segment of American society,” with a majority of clergy holding graduate degrees.<sup>1</sup> However, there is much variation across denominations and traditions, as can be seen in figure 1.

Roman Catholic congregations have the most highly educated congregational leaders (91% have graduate degrees), closely followed by mainline Protestant congregations (89% with graduate degrees). Solo or senior pastoral leaders of Black Protestant and white evangelical congregations, by contrast, are least likely to have graduate degrees (43% and 41%, respectively).<sup>2</sup>

While the percentage of lead pastors with theological school degrees continues to increase in the NCS surveys from 61.9 percent in the time period they designate as Wave 2 (2006–2007) to 67.5 in Wave 4 (2018–2019), the researchers point out that many congregations have pastoral leaders who do not have seminary degrees even among the denominations that require



**Figure 1. Percentage of lead pastors with graduate degrees across four Christian traditions in 2018-19**

1 Chaves, Mark, Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mary Hawkins. 2021. *Congregations in 21st Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology), 38.

2 *Ibid.*, 39.



a graduate theological degree for ordination.<sup>3</sup> The increased numbers of very small congregations and the employment of more part-time pastoral leaders are two factors that lead to the service of persons without theological degrees and often without ordination across most religious traditions in the United States.

To look more specifically at the issue of enrollment of seminary students by denominations and religious traditions, we requested data regarding Master of Divinity and Professional M.A. degree enrollments in seminaries that are members of the Association of Theological Schools for the years 2000 through 2020. We requested data on Roman Catholic enrollments and enrollments for selected clusters of denominations from Black Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, and Mainline Protestant traditions. The professional M.A. is included since the M.Div. is not required for ordination in many denominations.<sup>4</sup> However, the continued standing of the M.Div. as the graduate professional degree most sought by students at ATS seminaries is captured by Tom Tanner, director of accreditation at ATS, in noting that the 40 percent enrollment proportion of ATS students in M.Div. programs has remained relatively stable for two decades. This stability comes, according to Tanner, despite the many denominations that do not require the M.Div. for ordination. Tanner points out that the “biggest growth” in the M.Div. enrollment between 1996 and 2018 came among denominations that typically do not require the M.Div. for ordination. He also points out that the M.Div. is not required for most vocations among ATS graduates, and the M.Div. requires more years of study than virtually any other professional master’s degree.<sup>5</sup>

**Tanner points out that the “biggest growth” in the M.Div. enrollment between 1996 and 2018 came among denominations that typically do not require the M.Div. for ordination.**

There are limitations to this review. Not all denominational traditions are included, and not all seminary students attend ATS-member schools. The membership of ATS

3 Ibid., 28-29.

4 The 2020 ATS Standards no longer draw a clear distinction between the “Academic MA” and the “Professional MA.” According to Tom Tanner, ATS director of accreditation, “This change stems from the ATS membership no longer seeing a clear distinction between those two MA degrees since many seminarians today pursue an MA for both professional and academic purposes.” Correspondence with the author, March 25, 2022.

5 Tom Tanner, “[Reports of the MDiv's Death Are Greatly Exaggerated](#),” *Colloque Online*, Association of Theological Schools (January 2019), 2-3.



is fluid, and the makeup of member schools can impact trends quite apart from what may be happening within the denominational groups. For example, the entrance of a seminary into ATS brings enrollment not previously counted. Another limitation is how denominational affiliation is reported by seminaries. Many students are classified as “other,” which may represent students with denominational affiliations not known by or reported by the schools. However, these figures provide patterns and trends that may offer clues regarding the theological education of clergy today.

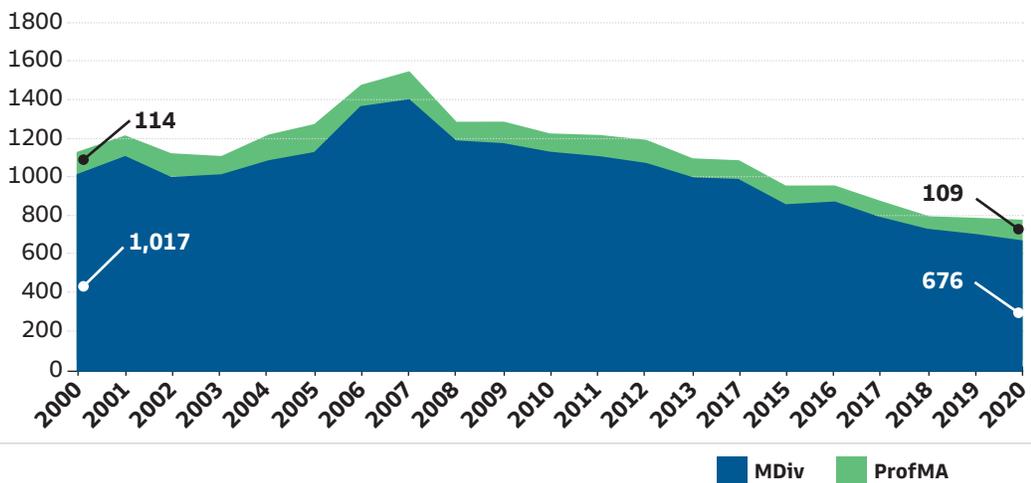
## Black Protestant

Overall, there was a 31 percent decline in enrollment from the denominations included in this cohort<sup>6</sup> in A.T.S. theological schools in 2020 compared to 2000 (table 1). Virtually all the decline came in the Master of Divinity degree program, where the decline was from 1,017 in 2000 to 676 in 2020 (figure 2), a 34 percent decline. The decline in the Professional M.A. was from 114 in 2000 to 109 in 2020, a 4 percent decline.

**Table 1. Black Protestant MDiv enrollments declined by one-third between 2000 and 2020.**

Degree Type	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total MDiv	1,017	676	-341	-34%
Total Prof MA	114	109	-5	-4%
Total Enrollments	1,131	785	-346	-31%

**Black Protestant MDiv enrollments declined between 2000 and 2020, while Prof. MA enrollments remained the same.**



**Figure 2. Black Protestant MDiv and Prof MA ATS Enrollments, 2000-2020**

<sup>6</sup> African Methodist Episcopal Church; African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion; Church of God in Christ; Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; National Baptist Convention; and Progressive National Baptist Convention.



### Master of Divinity.

Of the reviewed denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion is the only one that showed more M.Div. enrolled students in 2020 than in 2000, a gain of 18 percent (table 2). The denominations with the greatest percentage declines in 2020 compared with 2000 were the Progressive National Baptist Convention (82 percent decline) and the National Baptist Convention (76 percent decrease).

### Professional M.A.

Three of the denominations showed more Professional M.A. enrollees in 2020 than in 2000 (table 2): Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (400 percent increase), African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion (50 percent increase), and Church of God in Christ (24 percent increase). Declines were greatest for the National Baptist Convention (48 percent decline) and Progressive National Baptist Convention (33 percent decline).

**Table 2. Black Protestant denominational MDiv and Prof MA enrollments, 2000-2020**

Denomination	MDiv				Prof MA			
	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
African Methodist Episcopal	446	382	-64	-14%	31	27	-4	-13%
African Methodist Episcopal, Zion	72	85	13	18%	4	6	2	50%
Church of God in Christ	94	84	-10	-11%	29	36	7	24%
Christian Methodist Episcopal	58	44	-14	-24%	3	15	12	400%
National Baptist Convention	296	72	-224	-76%	44	23	-21	-48%
Progressive National Baptist	51	9	-42	-82%	3	2	-1	-33%



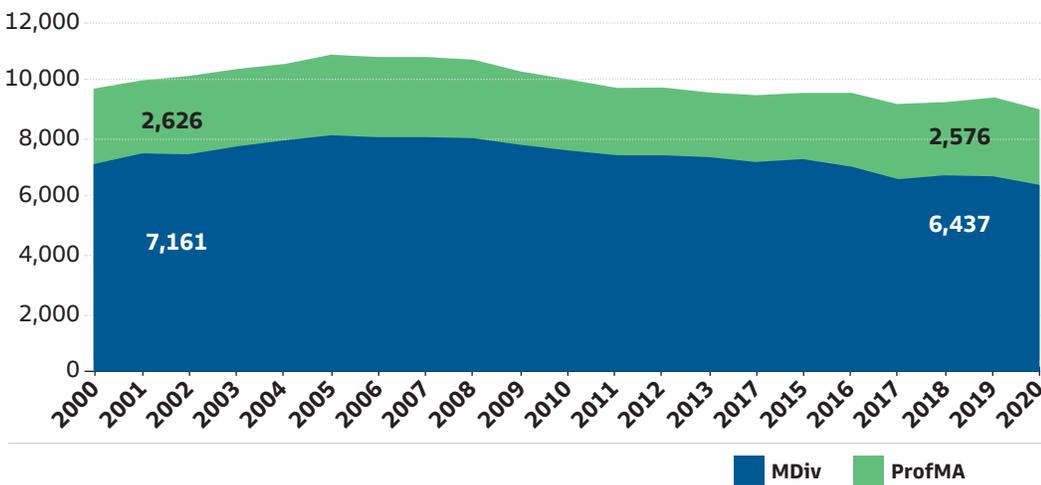
## Evangelical Protestant

Overall, there was an 8 percent decline in enrollment from the denominations included in this cohort<sup>7</sup> in A.T.S. theological schools in 2020 compared to 2000 (table 3 and figure 3). The decline in the Master of Divinity degree program (10 percent, from 7,161 in 2000 to 6,437 in 2020) was greater than the decline in the Professional M.A. (2 percent, from 2,626 in 2000 to 2,576 in 2020).

**Table 3. Evangelical Protestant MDiv and Prof MA ATS enrollments declined between 2000 and 2020.**

Degree Type	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total MDiv	7,161	6,437	-724	-10%
Total Prof MA	2,626	2,576	-50	-2%
Total Enrollments	9,787	9,013	-774	-8%

**Evangelical Protestant MDiv enrollments declined at a faster rate than Prof MA enrollments between 2000 and 2020.**



**Figure 3. Evangelical Protestant MDiv and Prof MA ATS Enrollments, 2000-2020**

### Master of Divinity.

Of the reviewed denominations, the Wesleyan Church is the only one that showed more M.Div. enrolled students in 2020 than in 2000, a gain of 78 percent (table 4). The membership of Wesley Seminary of Indiana Wesleyan University in ATS beginning in 2012 marked a pivotal point in the increase of Wesleyan Church students enrolled at ATS seminaries.<sup>8</sup> The denominations with the greatest percentage declines in 2020

<sup>7</sup> Assemblies of God; Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; Church of the Nazarene; Church of God (Anderson, Ind.); Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.); Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod; Presbyterian Church in America; Southern Baptist Convention; and The Wesleyan Church.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley Seminary of Indiana Wesleyan University is the only seminary of the Wesleyan Church. Wesley was admitted to associate membership in ATS in 2012 and accredited in 2014.



compared with 2000 were the Church of God, Cleveland, TN (61 percent), Church of God, Anderson, IN (56 percent), Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (53 percent),<sup>9</sup> and Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod (44 percent).

### Professional M.A.

Four of the denominations showed more Professional M.A. enrollees in 2020 than in 2000 (table 4): Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod (408 percent increase), Wesleyan Church (285 percent increase),<sup>10</sup> Presbyterian Church in America (83 percent) and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (17 percent).<sup>11</sup> Declines were greatest for the Church of God, Anderson, IN (74 percent decline).

**Table 4. Evangelical Protestant Denominational MDiv and Prof MA ATS Enrollments, 2000-2020**

Denomination	MDiv				Prof MA			
	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Assemblies of God	365	324	-41	-11%	316	272	-44	-14%
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*	162*	76	-86	-53%	6**	7	1	17%
Church of the Nazarene	289	222	-67	-23%	105	72	-33	-31%
Church of God (Anderson, Ind.)	87	38	-49	-56%	46	12	-34	-74%
Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.)	131	51	-80	-61%	133	125	-8	-6%
Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod	674	376	-298	-44%	12	61	49	408%
Presbyterian Church in America	739	661	-78	-11%	144	263	119	83%
Southern Baptist	4,803	4,559	-244	-5%	1,843	1,660	-183	-10%
Wesleyan Church	73	130	57	78%	27	104	77	285%

\*M.Div. begins 2008 instead of 2000. \*\*ProfMA begins 2009 instead of 2000.

9 As a new denominational group, the first year M.Div. students appear as ATS students is 2008, from which the change by 2020 is calculated.

10 Having a Wesleyan seminary join ATS beginning in 2012 helped enrollment in ProfMA just as it did for the M.Div.

11 The first year ProfMA students appear as ATS students is 2009, from which the change by 2020 is calculated.



Since the Southern Baptist Convention numbers constitute almost 70 percent of the Evangelical Protestant enrollment from these selected denominations in both 2000 and 2020, their changes though modest could skew what is happening across the other denominations. In order to examine changes among this pool of denominations without the Southern Baptist figures, table 5 below removes the Southern Baptist figures from consideration.

The primary change comes in the M.Div. enrollment. The Southern Baptist M.Div. enrollment decline from 2000 to 2020 was only 5 percent compared to the overall decline among these Evangelical Protestant denominations (with Southern Baptists included) of 10 percent. Therefore, when the Southern Baptist numbers come out of the calculations, the other denominations reviewed show a decline of 20 percent in M.Div. enrollment.

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**Table 5. Evangelical Protestant (excluding Southern Baptist) MDiv and Prof MA ATS Enrollments, 2000-2020**

Degree Type	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total MDiv	2,358	1,878	-480	-20%
Total Prof MA	783	916	-50	-6%
Total Enrollments	3,141	2,794	-347	-11%



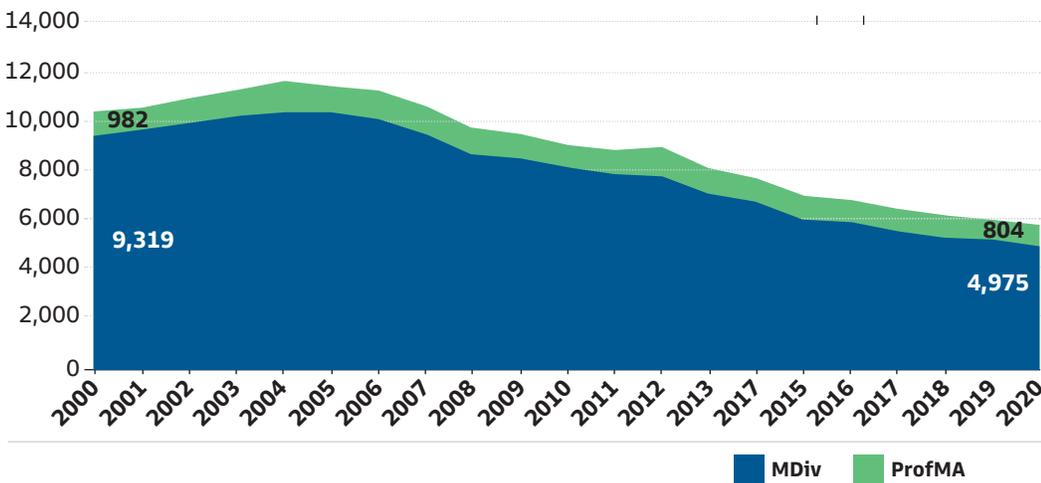
## Mainline Protestant

Overall, there was a 44 percent decline in enrollment from the denominations included in this cohort<sup>12</sup> in A.T.S. theological schools in 2020 compared to 2000 (table 6 and figure 4). The decline in the Master of Divinity degree program (47 percent, from 9,319 in 2000 to 4,975 in 2020) was greater than the decline in the Professional M.A. (18 percent, from 982 in 2000 to 804 in 2020).

**Table 6. Mainline Protestant MDiv and Prof MA ATS enrollments decreased between 2000 and 2020.**

Degree Type	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total MDiv	9,319	4,975	-4,344	-47%
Total ProfMA	982	804	-178	-18%
Total Enrollments	10,301	5,779	-4,522	-44%

**Mainline Protestant MDiv enrollments were almost twice as high in 2000 than they were in 2020.**



**Figure 4. Mainline Protestant MDiv and Prof MA ATS Enrollments, 2000-2020**

<sup>12</sup> American Baptist Churches USA; Christian Church (Disciples of Christ); Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Episcopal Church; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.



## Master of Divinity.

The most striking feature of these reviewed mainline Protestant denominations is the consistency of changes in M.Div. enrollment across the denominations. They all showed decreases in M.Div. enrollment numbers (table 7). While the American Baptist Churches and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had the largest percentage losses in 2020 M.Div. enrollments compared to 2000 (68 percent and 58 percent respectively), all the other denominations had losses around 40 percent. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) had the least decline in 2020 compared with 2000 (38 percent).

## Professional M.A.

Three of the denominations showed more Professional M.A. enrollees in 2020 than in 2000 (table 7) with the largest gains coming for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with an enrollment in 2020 that was 95 percent greater than in 2000 (from 20 to 39). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and United Church of Christ had more modest increases of 9 percent and 6 percent respectively. Four denominations had decreases in Professional M.A. enrollment in these years. American Baptist Churches had the largest decline with 63 percent fewer enrollments in 2020 than in 2000. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Episcopal enrollment declines were 40 percent and 31 percent respectively. United Methodist enrollments were virtually unchanged.

**Table 7. Mainline Protestant denominational MDiv and Prof MA ATS enrollments, 2000-2020**

Denomination	MDiv				Prof MA			
	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
American Baptist	602	190	-412	-68%	133	49	-84	-63%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	426	265	-161	-38%	20	39	19	95%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	1,391	852	-539	-39%	110	120	10	9%
Episcopal	1,055	604	-451	-43%	123	85	-38	-31%
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	1,712	724	-988	-58%	213	127	-86	-40%
United Church of Christ	606	339	-267	-44%	31	33	2	6%
United Methodist	3,527	2,001	-1,526	-43%	352	351	-1	0%



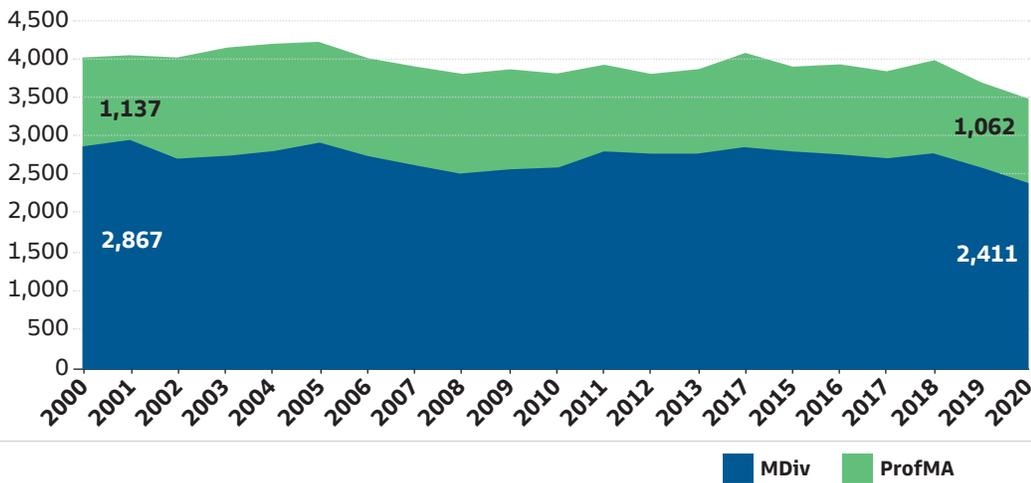
## Roman Catholic

There was a decline of 13 percent in Roman Catholic students enrolled in the M.Div. and Professional M.A. degrees in ATS seminaries between 2000 and 2020 (table 8). The decline in the Master of Divinity degree program (16 percent, from 2,867 in 2000 to 2,411 in 2020) was greater than the decline in the Professional M.A. (7 percent, from 1,137 in 2000 to 1,062 in 2020).

**Table 8. Roman Catholic MDiv and Prof MA ATS enrollments decreased between 2000 and 2020.**

Degree Type	2000	2020	Absolute Change	Percent Change
Total MDiv	2,867	2,411	-456	-16%
Total Prof MA	1,137	1,062	-75	-7%
Total Enrollments	4,004	3,473	-531	-13%

**Roman Catholic MDiv enrollments declined at a faster rate than Prof MA enrollments between 2000 and 2020.**



**Figure 5. Mainline Protestant MDiv and Prof MA ATS Enrollments, 2000-2020**



## Findings

While there are limitations of this review as noted previously, there appear to be trends in these statistics that merit further analysis and consideration by denominations and theological schools.

### 1. Overall enrollment consistency with internal disruptions

While a majority of lead pastors consistently have graduate degrees in recent decades, there is much variation regarding the level of education and educational attainment trends among religious traditions and individual denominations. Furthermore, the M.Div. degree shows resilience for ATS enrollment while the denominational affiliation of the students is changing.

### 2. Mainline collapse

There was a 44 percent decline in enrollment from the mainline denominations reviewed in M.Div. and Professional M.A. degrees between 2000 and 2020, with M.Div. decline near 50 percent.

### 3. Evangelical Protestant trending in mainline direction

For many years, trends among evangelicals seemed to go in the opposite direction from mainline churches. As mainline denominations declined from the mid-1960s forward, evangelicals saw their numbers rise. Now evangelicals are seeing signs of decline or at least a slowing of their rate of growth more associated with mainline churches.<sup>13</sup> The seminary enrollment figures reported here show that, at least among evangelical Protestants attending ATS seminaries, evangelical trends are moving closer to those of Mainline Protestants. When removing the more modest Southern Baptist enrollment declines, M.Div. enrollment among the other evangelical denominations examined declined 20 percent in these twenty years.

### 4. Black Protestant decline less than mainline but more than evangelical

Overall, there was a 31 percent decline in enrollment from these denominations in A.T.S. theological schools in 2020 compared to 2000. Virtually all the decline came in the Master of Divinity degree (34 percent decline compared to 4 percent decline in Professional M.A.).

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<sup>13</sup> Ryan P. Burge, "[Mainline Protestants Are Still Declining, But That's Not Good News for Evangelicals](#)," *Christianity Today*, July 13, 2021.



## 5. Roman Catholic relative stability

The 13 percent decline in M.Div. and Professional M.A. enrollment between 2000 and 2020 shows more stability than the shifts among some other traditions. The generally consistent Roman Catholic enrollment is even more remarkable when one considers that the number of priests born outside the United States has increased in the past twenty years.<sup>14</sup> Presumably some of these priests received their theological education outside the United States and Canada, the area covered by ATS.

## 6. Seminary patterns vary by constituencies

From a seminary perspective, the past two decades have been good for schools that draw students from evangelical Protestant traditions. They have not been good for schools that draw students from mainline Protestant traditions, especially United Methodist and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but also Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist, and Episcopal. Among this latter set of seminaries, those with small endowments have faced the greatest financial challenges.

## What Might This Mean?

### 1. Vitality outweighs virtually all else

When traditions are growing, reproducing congregations, and extending their witness, there is a need for more leadership. Usually, though not always, growth in the reach of a religious tradition brings with it resources for supporting professional or semi-professional leadership and sometimes for the education of such leaders. In the last two decades, growth among the U.S. landscape has come from the proliferation of independent and nondenominational churches and an increase in the Roman Catholic population though not in the number of parishes. The mainline denominations have been in numerical decline for over fifty years. Evangelical churches have increased in numbers and standing in the past half-century, but growth is now slowing and, in some cases, showing decline. Black Protestant patterns reflect a mixture of some denominations sharing the declining trends of long-established denominations with others trending more closely to newer and more evangelical traditions. All these trends directly impact seminary enrollment patterns.

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<sup>14</sup> Chaves, et al., *Congregations in 21st Century America*, 35. "... Roman Catholic head clergy also are much more likely to be born outside the United States (50% of Catholic head clergy) than head clergy in the other Christian groups (about 10% in each group)."



## 2. The place of professional M.A. degrees

The Master of Divinity degree is sometimes referred to as the “gold standard” of professional theological degrees. For many seminaries, the curriculum, faculty, and expenditures have gravitated around the M.Div. There are exceptions, but for schools most closely aligned with denominations and with high percentages of graduates entering congregational ministry, it is fair to say that there was the M.Div. degree and then everything else. Today there is a greater variety of degree offerings beyond the M.Div. even as the M.Div. keeps a primary place. It is interesting to note the proportional enrollments between the M.Div. and other professional master’s degrees. Roman Catholic enrollment in professional M.A. degrees compared to M.Div. enrollment was 28 percent in 2000 and 31 percent in 2020, a relatively stable situation in a tradition with relatively stable enrollment between 2000 and 2020. Evangelical Protestant professional M.A. enrollment as a percentage of M.Div. enrollment was comparable to Roman Catholic proportions at 27 percent and 29 percent in 2000 and 2020 respectively. Black Protestant and Mainline Protestant enrollments in professional M.A. degrees compared to their M.Div. enrollment are far lower percentages. In 2000, professional M.A. degree students among Black and Mainline Protestants were only 10 percent of M.Div. enrollment. By 2020, this percentage increased modestly to 14 percent with both traditions again recording the same proportions.

What might this mean if anything? Could it mean in the case of Roman Catholics that entrance into the priesthood is more limited than in other traditions (single men), and that a richer offering of theological degrees has developed over the years for those not preparing for the priesthood? In the case of Mainline Protestants, could it mean that the dependence on seminary-degree requirements for most clergy led to underdeveloped offerings for those not seeking ordination for which an M.Div. is required? For Evangelical Protestant traditions, it is interesting that even without a seminary-degree requirement for clergy among many of the churches involved, there are other factors leading to substantial M.Div. enrollments alongside strong and professional M.A. proportionate enrollments. Is this merely a case of a rising tide lifting all ships? Is it that seminaries serving evangelical students have been more entrepreneurial and responsive to broader student constituencies?



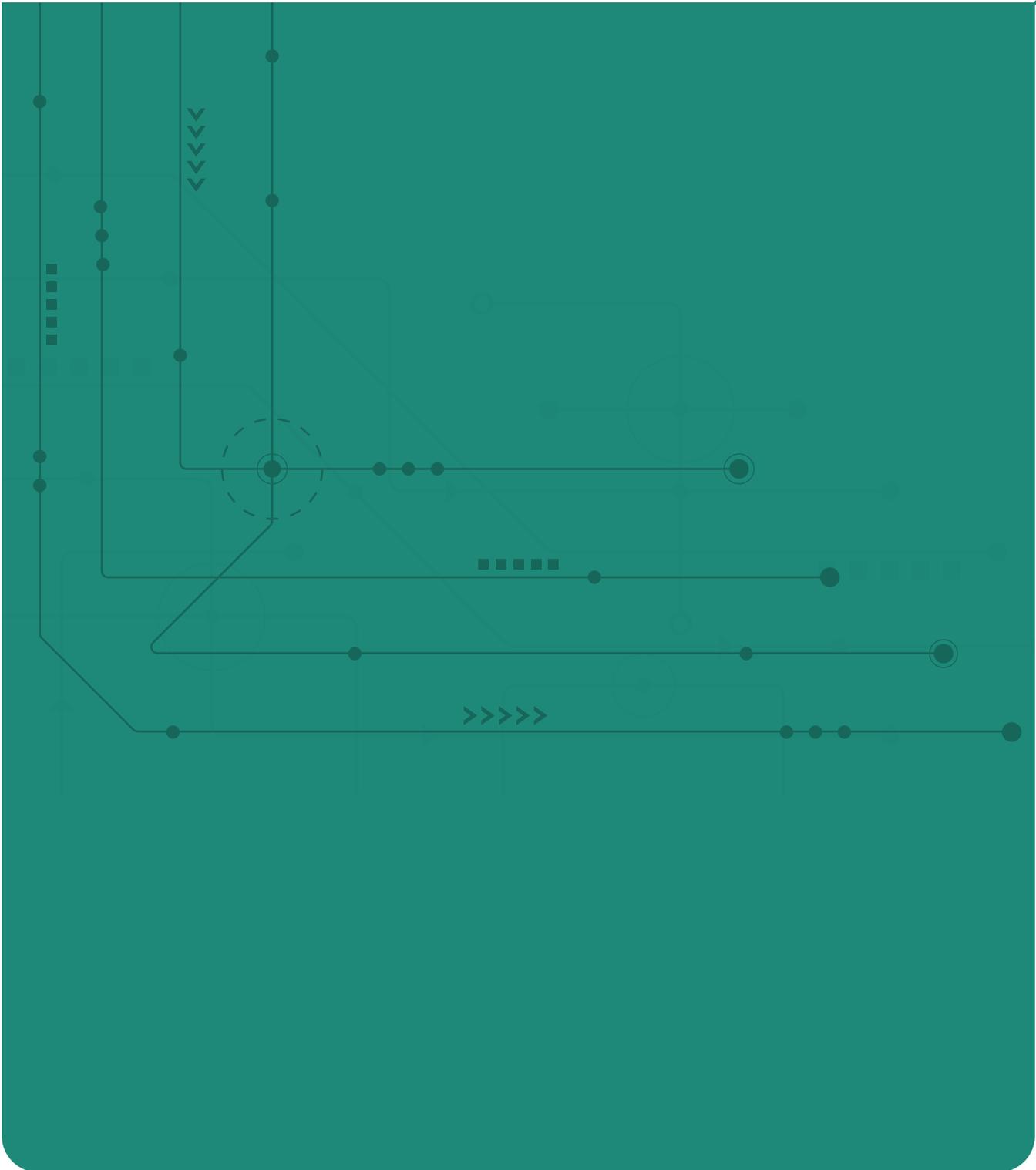
### **3. An innovation among the Wesleyan Church that fits the times**

Innovation often comes about when someone meets a need, serves an unserved or underserved constituency, or offers something in a more accessible or affordable way. One can see all these characteristics of innovation in recent times with the establishment by the Wesleyan Church of a seminary, Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University. The Wesleyan Church brings together several religious streams including a fervent abolitionist movement led by Orange Scott and others in the 1840s. Despite having institutions of higher education such as Indiana Wesleyan, there was not an official Wesleyan Church seminary until 2009. The components for successful innovation were present: Indiana Wesleyan had a track record in delivering graduate education, was trusted by the denomination, and already had a successful Master of Arts in Ministry degree program. In addition, approximately 85 percent of Wesleyan Church pastors did not have seminary degrees. Finally, a delivery system was developed to be inexpensive, accessible, and directly applicable for working pastors.<sup>15</sup>

Theological schools and denominations have both assets and challenges. New partnerships and paradigms will be needed that go beyond those currently in place that increasingly appear designed for circumstances that are changing. 

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<sup>15</sup> ["About Wesley Seminary."](#)



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