Case Study 1: Respect for the past and the future
FROM THE PAST, A NEW FUTURE FOR HILLTOP THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Ted Mann, president of Hilltop Theological Seminary for the past eight years, led the school's trustees and faculty on a solemn walk through the campus. They paused at aging dormitories and historic classroom structures — each soon to be demolished — and shared prayers of gratitude for the people who once lived and worked there.

“There wasn’t a dry eye among us,” recalled Dan Carter, chairperson of the governing board. “Some were tears of loss; others, tears of joy. Yes, nothing would ever be the same again for Hilltop, and, yes, it was going to be fantastic — although it took us a while to come to that realization.”

The complex deal-making that led to the sale of all but a corner of the campus had been several years in the making, and not without considerable conflict and second-guessing. For more than a century, Hilltop had provided ministerial education for the school's parent denomination. Affection for the rolling, tree-lined campus ran deep among alumni and the churches they served.

However, as discussions dragged on in the boardroom, in administrative meetings, and within the faculty, the proverbial handwriting on the wall became impossible to misread. “To put it bluntly, Hilltop had come to the end of the line for the status quo,” President Mann said.

Mann had been recruited to the Hilltop presidency because of his reputation as a turnaround guru, having “snatched two of the denomination’s colleges from the jaws of death,” as Chairman Carter described Mann’s past work. However, the seminary’s situation was worse than the new president had been led to believe — or worse than the board understood.

“Financial reserves had been depleted. Several million dollars had been borrowed from the endowment, including from restricted funds. Faculty and administrative salaries were at the bottom of our comparison group. And deferred maintenance was killing us,” Mann recalled.

The school's 1950s residence halls and apartment buildings, once a reliable auxiliary income stream for Hilltop, were in particularly poor condition with more than half of the units vacant. And what with changes in student demographics, there wasn’t much hope of filling the buildings again, even if repairs were made. The sons of the school’s parent church who in years past had arrived on campus with families in tow had been replaced with mostly local students — female and male — for whom access to parking mattered more than on-campus housing.

“We had become an ethnically and denominationally diverse commuter seminary long before we faced up to the shift,” said Chairman Carter, a veteran board member who agreed to serve another term to help the school navigate the sea of red ink. “We don’t need eight acres and a bunch of ram-shackle buildings. Three acres, two buildings, and a parking lot are enough.”

Still, winning support for selling off most of the school’s acreage took several years of conversations, ranging from coolly pragmatic to hotly emotional. “We worked hard to achieve consensus by listening to all kinds of alternatives,” President Mann recalled. “No one was shut out of the process. The board, our alumni, our faculty, and especially our students had a voice at the table.”
“Discussions dragged on longer than many on the board thought was necessary, but now that we’re finally moving forward, everyone – okay, almost everyone – agrees it was right to put in the time,” Chairman Clark said with a chuckle.

A particular sticking point was the board’s decision to retain the historic Mary Roe Library. “Blending the old with the new challenged our architect and added to construction costs, but we think it was worth the money and effort. We wanted people to know that we’re not abandoning Hilltop’s history. Rather, we’re taking a symbol of our past with us into the future,” Mark Little, chair of the board’s facilities committee, explained.

The commitment to the school’s theological and denominational pedigree also showed in curricular revisions of recent years. “It wasn’t just the physical plant that suffered from deferred maintenance. Our academic programs were equally out of date and run down. Our programs – the Master of Divinity degree in particular – didn’t support the needs of 21st century seminarians,” Academic Dean Mark Little stated. “We’ve dropped courses, updated others, and added new ones, all without sacrificing the distinctiveness for which Hilltop is known. As I tell faculty, it’s not where or how we teach that matters most, it’s what we teach that makes Hilltop unique,” Little said.

Although the future looks promising for Hilltop thanks to the courageous and careful work of the past decade, President Mann knows that the challenges facing theological education are ongoing. “Someone once said that the difference between a church and a cathedral is that a cathedral is never finished. Seminaries have to be like that. They’re never finished. Hilltop isn’t finished,” he said.

Discussion questions

1. Identify the major characters in the case and describe the role that each one played in the transformation of Hilltop Theological Seminary.

2. What were the primary issues that the Hilltop community had to address?

3. What is your response to the solutions that the Hilltop community chose?

4. In light of the school’s financial difficulties, what do you think of the board’s decision to spend more money than might have been necessary by holding onto the historic library building? How would your board respond (or has responded) when faced with this or a similar situation?

5. Based on the information you’ve been given about Hilltop’s situation, to what other issues do you feel the board, administration, and faculty should give attention?

6. What might/could have been done differently by the Hilltop administration and faculty to entirely avoid the sorry situation in which the seminary found itself?