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WTU's closing not seen as harbinger for others

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Jul. 11, 2011

WASHINGTON -- The model of a theological union -- where seminaries pool their academic resources and students into one institution -- is no longer financially sustainable for the Washington Theological Union, its board of directors has decided, leading to plans for its closure at the end of the 2012-13 academic year.

Other similar institutions appear to be in better shape, however.

The school's announcement June 27 was not unexpected in Washington's Catholic higher education circles.

Declining enrollment -- particularly by seminarians -- and fewer religious orders willing to continue as financial sponsors had led Washington Theological Union to rely on the endowment fund to survive in the past few years, explained Carmelite Father Fred Tillotson, the union's president since December 2009.

Enrollment has dropped from 250 students 15 years ago to 44 today, Father Tillotson told Catholic News Service. The half dozen corporate sponsors -- religious orders that sustain the institution regardless of the number of their seminarians attending it -- of a few years ago has declined to just two today: the Franciscans' Holy Name Province, based in New York, and the Carmelites' Chicago-based Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary.

For the past five years, Washington Theological Union has been running a deficit, drawing its endowment down from $10 million to $2 million, Father Tillotson said. He added that part of the decline was the result of recession-related investment losses, but part came from covering budget shortfalls. With fewer seminarians, the union, like schools that train clergy of other denominations, found more of its student base coming from the laity.

But most lay students are paying their own way, he said. And they're usually attending classes while working, taking one or two courses at a time. The mixture of a few seminarians and laypeople hasn't been enough to warrant continued operations, the school's board of trustees decided.

"We hoped to turn it around, but the situation has just become unbearable," said Father Tillotson.

By announcing plans to close two years out, the members of the board hope current students and those admitted in the last class starting this fall will have time to complete their studies, he explained. "We said, let's do this with grace and not just one day announce we're closed. We hope that will allow us to hold onto faculty, too."

In contrast, similar institutions in Chicago and New York told CNS they're more stable financially, with both reporting enrollment growth in the past few years. The presidents of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and the multi-faith Union Theological Seminary in New York said they were saddened to hear of the Washington union's plans to close, but neither sees the same threat for their schools.

"It's so tragic that they're closing," said Serene Jones, president of the Union Theological. "It's such a fine

school. Not a lot of places are doing the kind of education they do."

Passionist Father Don Senior, president of Catholic Theological Union, said the impending closure of what he considers a sister school is a sad turn of events.

The two Catholic schools were founded the same year, 1968, with three religious orders cooperating to create the Chicago union and six collaborating to form the one in Washington. The Chicago school currently has 25 sponsoring religious order communities and is the largest Catholic graduate school of theology and ministry in the United States. He said the current enrollment is around 500 people at a full-time equivalent of about 240 students.

But the two schools' financial structures have been different, Father Senior explained. In Chicago, the sponsoring organizations are not committed to the substantial financial upkeep of the institution the way those in Washington have been, for instance. With more sponsors and a larger student base, "what for us was a challenging time financially of the last few years was much harder for them," he said.

Jones said Union Theological -- a multi-faith partnership that includes Fordham, a Jesuit university; Columbia University; the Jewish Theological Seminary; and other seminaries and universities -- also has seen a decline in its number of seminarians yet overall growth, because more lay students now enroll.

Unlike the Catholic seminarians who have the support of their diocese or religious order, said Jones, Protestant seminary students typically pay their own way and have uncertain prospects for employment. Even a master's of divinity degree, the qualification for ordination, is no guarantee a new minister will get hired. More and more students are enrolling in the two-year basic master's program, instead of the three-year divinity degree course, she said.

Jones said Union Theological pays about half the cost of tuition for each student from its endowment. Some students qualify for full scholarships.

"But for the most part," Jones said, "our students are taking on personal debt for their tuition."

The school is always trying new ways of reaching new students, she said. A fast-growing segment of its student body is Latino evangelicals, but Union Theological also has lots of students who are not involved with any church or formal religious organization but simply want to better understand theology or to bolster careers in social services. It's looking at offering online degree programs and already hosts classes that are open to the general public, Jones said.

The New York school also recently hired its first instructor for a course on Islam in ministry, she said. Although it's hard to watch a similar institution succumb to financial pressures, Jones said she's "very hopeful" about the situation at Union Theological.

"I think if our institutions can hang on, the (economic) pendulum is swinging back," she said.

Father Senior told CNS he's interested in having the Chicago institution help Washington Theological Union students complete their degrees if they cannot do so before it closes, as well as other possible ways of continuing the school's mission, such as through online programs.

Father Tillotson said Washington is rich with theologians he hopes to tap as adjunct professors to fill any gaps in staffing during the school's phase-out. Other issues to settle include helping any students who can't finish by 2013 to complete their degrees elsewhere, what to do with the campus on the northern edge of Washington and what to do with its first-class theology library, he said.

"We want to sell it, it's a very good theology library," he said.

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