

Protagonist Corner

What Is the Matter with Seminaries?

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Seminaries do not prepare their graduates for the practice of ministry. The reason for their failure is clear. Most Protestant seminary faculty have little experience in congregations and no sense of the demands of ministerial practice. Their careers have been restricted to academic institutions where they have adopted a "guild" mentality which determines what and how they teach. Therefore, seminary students are exposed largely to an academic style of leadership and an academic method of communication—classroom teaching. In the course of three or four years they become steeped in academic subject matter, attitudes and values. When they graduate and enter the ministry, they find themselves ill-equipped, even disabled, for the actual work of ministry. The first years are a difficult period, requiring the new minister to unlearn much of what seminary taught and simultaneously to acquire a more relevant on-the-job theological education.

This view of the failure of seminary education is widespread. Many practicing ministers subscribe to it. It is advanced with special ferocity by national and regional church executives and held by some of the seminaries' internal critics. Altogether it is the most popular explanation of what is wrong with seminaries.

I think the view is more convenient than true. It does serve to sum up a vague, almost universal unease about seminary life and preparation for ministry. It is neat; it is plausible; it locates the blame. But it is difficult to sustain if one observes carefully the current state of the ministry and of academic life in seminaries.

Where, for instance, is the evidence that ministers have been stamped in an academic mold? Only a few follow regular regimens of reading, writing and critical investigation. A much larger number are marked by their uncritical acceptance of tired conventions or fashionably popular ideas. Neither the good effects of scholarly formation, such as an appetite for ideas, nor the bad—pedantry, for instance—seem to persist in many ministers. Their absence leads one to question whether "exclusively academic formation" accurately describes what seminaries are doing wrong. If the academic imprint were as strong and deep as is usually alleged, surely the pattern of what Robert Lynn calls the "study-centered" ministry would be prevalent.

The usual view of seminary faculty is, I think, similarly inaccurate. Though no one has thoroughly studied the background and training of seminary faculty, perusal of the resumés of the full-time teachers in five or six very different institutions reveals considerably more variety of backgrounds (including more parish experience) than the usual view allows. Even more inaccurately drawn is the role of the real villain in the piece, "the guild." On exami-

nation, the guild is very difficult to locate. Though several large associations for religious and theological studies do exist, they are not animated by the real mark of a guild, a single standard of performance. In fact, different denominational configurations and, within them, different seminaries, have different standards. For some, scholarship is paramount. In many more cases, teaching is most important, or service to the denomination, or even piety or orthodoxy.

So far I have suggested that the problem with seminaries does not lie where it is usually located, with a powerful academic guild orientation that is transmitted through faculty to future ministers. It is still necessary, though, to account for the great discomfort most people feel with the job seminaries are doing. Seminaries' activities are the consistent focus of criticism from their own graduates, from church officials, and from the few lay people who take an interest in them.

What *is* the matter with seminaries? In my view, the problem that infects the seminaries and makes them so disliked has its origins in the wider church; the absence of an adequate image of the ministry.

Currently we are in the grip of the so-called professional model, which defines ministry as a series of functions the minister must be competent to perform. No one, of course, could argue that ministry is not in some sense a profession. Sociologically it functions that way, and certainly competence in practice is a high value for ministry as it is for other professions. The problem arises from our current tendency to define ministry as *only* a profession. In standards for clergy evaluation, in the goals of "competency-based" curricula, in the content of most continuing education programs, the focus is on what the minister does, excluding from the field of vision what she believes, symbolizes or thinks. Further (following our society's individualistic definition of professionalism), we emphasize the competence of the individual practitioner rather than the faithfulness of the community. Finally, because the modern professions undergird social structures already in place, professional ministry has an affinity for the *status quo* and prevailing cultural values. It summarizes, rather than advances, our current understanding of what ministry can be.

This inadequate image of ministry might better be named the functional model, since a professional, in contemporary terms, is little more than a highly skilled functionary. Such usage would rescue the word "profession," which has been emptied of its rich, ancient association with the committed life. But the problem for the ministry (and, I would argue, other contemporary professions as well) goes beyond terminology. We have reduced not only the term, profession, not only our idea of ministry, but also our actual expectations to one narrow, functionalist dimension. It is the thinness of this image of ministry that afflicts theological education.

Theological seminaries have both responded to the professional model, with verbal assent and some program adjustments, and resisted it. Competency has become the theme of most D. Min. program descriptions and many M. Div. programs as well. Courses in ministerial skills have been added to curricula. At the same time, large portions of the curriculum remain unchanged, pre-dating the professional model. Some of this resistance is deliberate, a healthy attempt to vary the uniformity of the professional model. Much of it, I suspect, is iner-

tia, the tendency to go on doing things as they have always been done.

But neither the response nor the resistance get at the root problem for seminaries, congregations and other expressions of the church: our earlier images of ministry are outmoded, and our current understanding is pale and thin. Sticking together old and contemporary views in a *pastiche* curriculum only confuses students and splinters their sense of vocation. It segments the faculty because they have no shared sense of what they can together accomplish. It leads to the listlessness, confusion and absence of educational passion which have made seminaries a perennial target of criticism.

The solution to the problem of seminaries and the inadequacy of preparation for ministry is not near at hand. It requires a church-wide effort to re-envision the ministry: to explore biblical, theological, and cultural images which might enrich the fashionable pragmatic and organizational model; to correct its individualism by attention to our corporate call; to complement the concern for effectiveness with a renewed commitment to radical faithfulness. The problem of seminaries will only be addressed by a newly-luminous image of the ministry of the whole church.