

Bridging the gap: The Th.D.

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

A Ph.D. student in religion veered off from his friends one morning to head toward the divinity school chapel. “Where are you going?” one of his colleagues asked. “To chapel for the Lord’s Supper,” he replied. His friend thought for a moment before responding with the critical distance beloved in the academy, “Well, that’s problematic.”

The divide between academic study and everyday life seems especially wide in religion. Doctoral programs in religion study faith from the outside, like a mortician tending a corpse. Those who want to serve the church as pastors follow a different track in less rigorous M.Div. or D.Min. programs. Meanwhile seminaries struggle to find professors for their “practical” posts—teaching positions in preaching, liturgy, Christian education, evangelism—who combine both practical know-how and rigorous academic training.

A number of academic programs have tried to close this gap in theological education. Boston University has had a Th.D. program for a decade, and Emory and Vanderbilt have launched interdisciplinary and ecclesially minded Ph.D. programs. The newest such effort, the Th.D. program which was started two years ago at Duke Divinity School, seeks to make student conversations like the one above—well, problematic.

“The difference between the Ph.D. and the Th.D. students,” one Duke Th.D.er said, “is that we have to care about the church.”

Duke’s Th.D. program has 16 students, each of whom is committed to a program that is as rigorous as any Ph.D. student’s. Two years of residency are required, and students must pass language exams—unlike with the D.Min. program. Yet students’ course of study and dissertation must also be aimed at a practical dimension of church life.

“We want these projects to be in service to the church,” said associate dean and program director Lacey Warner. “And we want to form current and future leaders in

the church.”

Among Duke’s students, Warren Kinghorn, a medical doctor, is studying Christian responses to illness. Rebekah Eklund is working toward the qualifications for teaching scripture but specifically aims at “teaching scripture in and for the church.” Students are expected to bring ministerial experience to the program and to head back into church service in some fashion after completing their studies. This goal naturally affects conversations between students: “When I read books, when I talk with teachers and colleagues, inevitably it comes back to ‘What does this mean for the church?’” said Jeff Conklin-Miller.

Warner said students in the program have already altered the atmosphere in the seminary courses at the divinity school, where the church-oriented Th.D. students serve as assistant teachers: “The students ask important questions and get the faculty excited,” she said. —*Jason Byassee*