Choosing a seminary: Learned ministry is about all of us

by Stephanie Paulsell in the May 6, 2008 issue

In American theological education, we are in the midst of recruitment season. Applications to M.Div. programs across the country have been read and argued over by admissions committees, and offers of admission have gone out in the mail. Now we are wooing our accepted students, making the case that our school is the right place for them to become the ministers God is calling them to be.

Every year, in university-related divinity schools and free-standing seminaries alike, those of us doing the recruiting hear several versions of this question: Can I learn the practical side of ministry at your school, or will I be too busy with academics? The students who ask this question often report that they have been warned by those with a stake in their vocation that the more emphasis a school places on academic study, the less able that school will be to prepare them for ministry. “I’ve been told that your school is fine for making theologians,” a student wrote to me recently, “but if I want to become a *minister* I should go somewhere else.”

Worries over the effect of academic study on “real” preparation for ministry have pervaded American theological education since its beginnings. Increase Mather investigated the theological education provided by Harvard College in 1723 in order to find out whether students, as he feared, had to “lay aside” what they learned in school in order to become “excellent young ministers.” His anxiety—that study might impede authentic ministerial formation—has been passed from hand to hand, it seems, through each successive generation.

It’s not that there aren’t reasons to be anxious. Certainly academic work can be used to barricade oneself from the world, or to demean those with whom one doesn’t agree, or to feed a hungry ego. Like any human practice, it can be done well or badly, used for good or ill. But nearly all of our schools were founded on the hope that the academic study we ask of our students would deepen their engagement with God and the world. Nearly all of us carry the mandate, inherited from those who

bequeathed us these institutions, to educate a learned ministry.

Say “learned ministry,” and you risk invoking the image of a bearded Victorian poring over his books while the needs of the world collect unmet outside his closed door. But making a case for our schools as vital places of ministerial formation means making a case for a renewed notion of learned ministry. What do we mean by that well-worn phrase today?

A learned minister is a minister who knows how to learn in a variety of contexts—churches, hospitals, classrooms, prisons, shelters, poetry slams, dance studios. A learned minister ought to be able to think critically with the knowledge produced in a church about the knowledge produced in a classroom and vice versa. We do our students a disservice when we suggest that some of this knowledge is academic and some of it is practical, as if some of their learning is optional, merely decorative. Ministry is the most deeply human work there is. What can we possibly learn that cannot be taken up and used in such work? Whatever human beings have discovered, wondered at, created, loved, studied, translated or puzzled or prayed over cannot be alien to the minister.

Recruitment season makes it clear that creative, generous-spirited, brilliant people continue to be called by God into ministry. The vision we offer of a life in ministry ought to be equal to their calling and equal to the sacrifices they will make in order to respond to it—a life in which learning and living, thought and practice, intellectual and spiritual formation are impossible to pry apart. The life to which we recruit our students should be a life in which a student’s best efforts of attention—to the Greek alphabet or to the disruptive child in the Sunday school class that she tries, week after difficult week, to teach—will bear fruit in ministry and sustain her in her vocation in ways that she and we cannot yet imagine.

Learned ministry is not just about the minister, though; it is about all of us. Our convictions about the formation of ministers have everything to do with our vision of Christian life itself. The minister who eagerly learns wherever she is, the minister who deems no knowledge irrelevant to her pastoral vocation is, I strongly believe, the minister we most need. For she reminds us, in the living out of her vocation, that our faith excludes nothing of what it is to be human, that there is no dimension of our lives that is irrelevant to our life with God.