

Seminary 2050: Connected to God, connecting others to God

by [Maggi Dawn](#) in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

What we want theological education to look like depends on what sort of church we want, and on what we think ministers are for. Do we want highly trained leaders who know how to lead, recruit and motivate? Or do we want pastors and priests who know God, and know how to connect other people to God?

The church in the Western world has been in a steady decline for decades. Congregational numbers are falling, and mission is not as effective as we might wish. It would be easy to look to the ministers of the future to solve these problems. Shouldn't we train the next generation of ministers to reverse the trend and refill the pews? Shouldn't students spend their seminary years learning to communicate the faith in culturally relevant ways and not waste time on outdated theology or church history? I'm not so sure those are the right questions. In our concern for cultural relevance we must beware that we don't produce sociological experts who have only a thin grasp of the heart of the faith.

If we want pastors and priests who know what it means to catch a glimpse of God and who can enable others to catch the same vision, then we must create the space for them to engage deeply in theology—not just as an intellectual pursuit, but contemplatively and practically too. We are called to worship God with mind and heart, soul and strength; if pastors and priests don't know how to do this, they may be equipped to fill a building, but not to build the church.

We can learn something from those who are disillusioned with the church. If you doubt that the tradition has any continuing cultural relevance for the postmodern generation, just look at where disaffected ex-charismatics are turning for inspiration. The popularity of the Northumbria Community and Taizé, and the host of small independent churches that describe themselves as embodying some form of the "new monasticism," seem to suggest that the spiritually hungry seek not contemporary coolness, but timeless truth. The same is true in any youth ministry in

any town. Ask a teenager which of their youth leaders they trust and respect, or ask a young adult which youth leader made an impact on them ten years ago, and they will tell you not about coolness and cultural relevance, but about someone who connected them with the most important things in life. It's not the cool youth leader who is "down with the kids" who earns their respect, it's the one who has learned to be genuine, to pay attention to them and to care about what happens to them—even if he is old and wears a cardigan!

Theological education doesn't need to be more fashionable. It doesn't need to be more sociologically attuned. It needs to be more theological. It must teach people how to think both intellectually and contemplatively, how to embrace and live with doubt, how to act in vulnerability. In short, it must enable them to touch God. Nothing less will do.