

Scholars for the church: Preparing seminary teachers

by [Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore](#)

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“How would your introductory course in your field help prepare students for ministry?” This question consistently stumped candidates fresh from graduate school who were interviewing for a faculty position in our theological school. The candidates were bright. They could map their disciplines with precision, and they cared deeply about the role of religion in society. But even those who wanted to teach in a theological school stumbled when we asked them: “What do you think ministers really need to know about your subject in order to lead people in lives of faith and action? How do you help students learn those things?” Their fumbling for answers demonstrated something veteran theological educators know firsthand—how hard it is to connect academic expertise to the deeper work of forming students for Christian ministry.

Church leaders and theological educators have worked on many levels in recent years to bridge the gap between academy and congregation. Parishes have offered transitional internships for seminary graduates heading into congregations. Clergy have met to refine theological wisdom learned in the practice of ministry. Seminaries have revised curricula and created new programs. Scholars have studied the history of theological education and suggested reconstructing the course of ministerial study and the role of practical theology. Foundations and denominations have supported these initiatives with significant investments of time and money. It has taken work at all of these levels to help bring congregations and seminaries closer together. Until recently, however, one part of the larger network has received relatively little attention: doctoral education in religion.

Doctoral education plays an important role in perpetuating the divide between academy and congregation. It is what one scholar calls the “real home” and the “strongest institutionalization” of the gap between theology and practice. Graduate programs reinforce divisions between areas of study and establish deep

commitments to specialized scholarship. “You hear so much about the gap between seminary and ministry,” one Ph.D. student at Vanderbilt said. “But the *real* gap is between seminary and doctoral work.”

That gap can feel deep and wide to students who come to doctoral study formed by a seminary curriculum designed with ministry in mind. It can feel even wider to those in seminaries and divinity schools who are trying to hire recent Ph.D. graduates to teach people preparing for ministry.

In 2003 a Vanderbilt study group surveyed deans and presidents of theological schools about their experience in hiring new graduates for faculty openings. These leaders expressed consistent disappointment in the candidates coming out of top graduate programs. One dean said that “at least two-thirds of applicants” for positions in his school “give no evidence of understanding what it takes to prepare people for ministry.”

The informal survey yielded a telling picture. Too many candidates in the so-called classical disciplines—like biblical studies and church history—demonstrate neither the desire nor the ability to connect their scholarship to the work of ministry and the lived religion of existing communities. At the same time, candidates for positions in the arts of ministry—like congregational leadership and homiletics—often understand such connections but lack rigorous academic training and do not seem ready for the kind of scholarship the school expects.

These observations reflect two sides of the same coin: the lack of integration of theology and practice in doctoral programs. Most Ph.D. programs in religion are geared to produce research scholars. This paradigm has produced tremendous advances in certain kinds of knowledge, and these advances should not be discounted. Training for membership in a guild pushes students to think critically and deeply in a field—goods that would be lost if academic disciplines were dissolved. But the guilds should serve a purpose beyond replicating themselves. We need to form at least some doctoral students to use such disciplinary expertise toward the broader aim of helping ministry students connect the many disciplines for the sake of the wider religious community.

What would it take to make such connections? A few years ago a group of Vanderbilt faculty and area clergy started meeting to consider this question. We read widely in theological education and practical theology, consulted scholars and listened not

only to deans and presidents of theological schools, but also to outstanding ministers and to graduates of Vanderbilt teaching in seminaries and divinity schools. The ministers stressed one point above all others: the seminary teachers who made a lasting difference in their lives did not just teach facts but also showed a deep interest in the lives of their students. The most memorable teachers saw theological education as a kind of ministry, and they brought body, mind and spirit to their work. They had been formed not only as scholars but also as persons. They brought an interest in formation to their teaching.

Vanderbilt's study group also listened to Ph.D. graduates who are now teaching in theological schools. If the ministers stressed the need for formation, the Ph.D. graduates helped us understand what kind of formation teachers need. They said they wished they had been introduced earlier to the distinctive culture, mission and expectations of a theological school without the immediate pressure of securing tenure. They thought that more concentrated conversations with peers in other disciplines and more opportunities to connect their scholarship with wider publics while in graduate school would have helped them move from the solitary enterprise of writing a dissertation into the communal work of teaching in a seminary. They also expressed the need for closer mentoring, especially from professors who could help them find their feet in a seminary context.

These conversations with ministers, theological educators and seminary leaders highlighted a common theme: a program in doctoral education that supports teaching for ministry must engage in new processes of formation. With this insight in mind, Vanderbilt—with significant support from the Lilly Endowment—launched a Program in Theology and Practice in the fall of 2006. The program aims to form faculty in every discipline as outstanding teachers of people preparing for ministry and as groundbreaking scholars who can connect work in and across disciplines to the concerns of everyday ministry. It seeks to produce a generation of “practical theologians” in the most expansive sense of that phrase.

The program's main features arise directly from the study group's reading, conversations and informal surveys of core constituencies. A key component is a yearlong seminar that brings local ministers together with doctoral students and faculty from many disciplines to consider questions in religious practice and ministry. The seminar offers a chance to work across the disciplines of theological education in conversation with experienced ministers serving in a wide range of institutions. Although ministers are often involved in M.Div. programs, they rarely

participate in doctoral education. Their extraordinarily fruitful presence in a doctoral seminar has kept the conversation closer to the lived questions that should drive theological education. They have pushed us to move beyond mere talk about practice to a serious and far more cumbersome engagement with practice at the crossroads of academy and lived ministry.

The program also involves a monthly teaching and research colloquy that brings faculty members together with beginning and advanced Ph.D. students for conversations that move from case studies in teaching to more personal and vocational reflections. The monthly colloquy has proven to be one of the most intense and important parts of the program. It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the program engages doctoral students as whole persons.

Two other components center more explicitly on formation for teaching in a theological school. An *integrative teaching fellowship* places Ph.D. students as teaching assistants in the divinity courses, such as field education, the global immersion travel seminar and the capstone senior project, that ask ministry students to bring together multiple disciplines to answer questions of ministerial practice. One respected leader in theological education has named these integrative courses as one of the responsibilities for which recent graduates are least prepared. Graduates with whom we talked agreed. They said that they “have not been trained to teach in an integrative manner” and that such teaching requires “time-consuming” collegial interaction. Involving doctoral students in integrative courses does not just prepare them to teach these particular courses. It also forms them for integrative work in every aspect of their teaching and research.

The other component focused on teaching is an *externship* for students who have finished exams and begun dissertations. The externship allows Ph.D. candidates a chance to teach in a setting beyond a research university—in seminaries within a day’s drive of Nashville—and also to receive mentoring from people beyond their home institution. The grant agreement asks senior administrators at the seminary to point out the folkways of the school’s culture. It pairs students with experienced faculty members for conversations about the meaning, practice and purpose of theological education. The teaching experience matters, but the quality of these mentoring relationships is what will make the externship into a real capstone of the formation process.

Forming students in every discipline who can connect theology and practice requires a redefinition of both terms. Theology must be more than a single discipline reserved for a few scholars in universities and seminaries. It should be the work of the whole people of God and a habit of mind and heart that infuses every area of the curriculum. Reimagining theology in this way goes hand in hand with reimagining practice. Our program tries to help students understand the ways that practices embody knowledge of God, the world, ourselves and other creatures. Here practice refers not to the acquisition and application of a technical skill, but to a complex pattern of interaction by which people elaborate structures and theories of faithful life over time.

Neither of these redefinitions is completely new. Many powerful currents within and beyond the academy are already pushing toward these revised understandings of theology and practice. Our challenge is to gather these energies and channel them toward forming doctoral students in every discipline who can cross the gap between studying in a Ph.D. program and teaching in a seminary.

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