

Pastors by degree: Evolution of a vocation

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

There is no state regulation for the profession of pastoral ministry. Although you need a license to practice medicine or law, or to open up shop as a massage therapist, you don't need one to be a minister. There are expectations about what qualifies people for ordination, of course, but these expectations are changing. The forms of regulation that once required a master of divinity for ordination have been weakening, with congregations and judicatories becoming more interested in effectiveness than in credentials.

For several decades the M.Div. degree has been the necessary credential for ordained ministry among most U.S.-based denominations. Without state regulation, it's only a working norm, yet it's been an effective norm because church bodies have had the social power to regulate who can be ordained.

But there has been a pattern, even within denominations, of allowing people to become pastors without an M.Div. The Course of Study has functioned this way in the United Methodist Church for decades. The Presbyterian Church has "commissioned lay pastors." These alternatives are making a comeback—especially among smaller congregations that cannot afford an M.Div.-educated pastor.

The exceptions made by independent congregations are also increasing. Independent megachurches are developing their own methods of developing leaders. At Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minnesota, for example, the process is no longer only informal; the church has launched its own seminary to educate its leaders. Such initiatives are mostly focused on forming lay leaders, but lay leaders are increasingly taking roles once reserved for M.Div.-educated clergy.

Some senior pastors of large and influential congregations do not have a seminary degree, including Brian McLaren, who has served as pastor for a vibrant and growing congregation and been one of the main inspirations of the emergent church movement. Increasingly bishops and other judicatory leaders are less interested in

whether someone went to seminary than in whether the person is an effective leader.

The genie is not likely to be put back in the bottle. The M.Div. will probably not have the same authority in the future as it's had in the past. It will be similar to the M.B.A.—a valuable degree if it has formed people well and is obtained from a strong program, but not a necessary credential.

These transitions are forcing us to ask what it means to educate people for pastoral leadership and what the nature and purpose of ordained ministry is in our culture and time. The latter question has traditionally been addressed with an emphasis on word and sacrament and by reference to some understanding of church order. High-church and low-church traditions define ordained ministry differently, with the latter often blurring the lines between tasks reserved for clergy and those for laity.

Yet circumstances are blurring even long-standing differences in sensibilities and practice. Many discussions are driven by the available supply of pastors for small congregations, or by the financial requirements for employing a full-time pastor, as well as by questions about educational requirements and the criteria for effectiveness. Many of us find ourselves trying to fix problems that are symptomatic of deeper questions and challenges that we can't identify.

We need to take a step back and ask some basic questions. On church and ministry: What do we mean by church? By a congregation? What conditions identify a regularly gathering group of Christians as a congregation rather than as a part of a larger or geographically connected set of such groups? What kind of leadership is needed for such groups? What is the purpose of setting aside some people as ordained? What responsibilities ought to be reserved for such persons?

On education: what educational formation ought to be expected of all Christians? How should that formation be learned and lived over the course of a lifetime? Are different kinds of formation needed for different vocations? How should we articulate the vocations of those called to full-time responsibility in the church as pastors or lay professionals, and those whose vocations are lived in the world?

On theological education: what kinds of degree-based education will best serve congregations and their professional leaders? Do we need new models of education that address the challenges facing large congregations?

I suspect that the M.Div. will still be an important degree 25 years from now. But I also suspect that the notion of a ministerial vocation will have evolved significantly. What does that mean for our concept of education for Christian life and for ministry?