

Making ministry difficult: The goal of seminary

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue



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"See our big buildings?" asked the dean of the medical school as he swept his hand across the panorama of the Duke Medical Center. "Their purpose is to produce a handful of doctors who can be trusted to be alone with a naked patient. Takes us four years."

I repositioned the dean so that he faced the neogothic buildings of the divinity school. "That's where we teach our seminarians to be in awkward situations with naked, vulnerable parishioners. It takes us only three years."

After two quadrennia as a church bureaucrat, slogging through the mire of the ecclesiastical trenches and sending pastors to remote, unappealing locations where Jesus insists on working, I'm again teaching in that countercultural phenomenon called a seminary. I was honored to serve with fellow clergy who risked United Methodism in Alabama, though I leave behind a subpoena and three lawsuits. Don't tell Governor Bentley that I've fled the state.

My admiration is unbounded for clergy who persist in proclaiming the gospel in the face of the resistance that the world throws at them. But I found too many clergy who allowed congregational caregiving and maintenance to trump more important acts of ministry, like truth telling and mission leadership. These tired pastors dash about offering parishioners undisciplined compassion rather than sharp biblical truth. One pastor led a self-study of her congregation and found that 80 percent of them thought the minister's primary job was to "care for me and my family." Debilitation is predictable for a *kleros* with no higher purpose for ministry than servitude to the voracious personal needs of the *laos*.

Most people in mainline churches meet biblically legitimate needs (food, clothing, housing) with their checkbooks. In the free time they have for religion, they seek a purpose-driven life, deeper spirituality, reason to get out of bed in the morning or inner well-being—matters of unconcern to Jesus. In this environment, the gospel is presented as a technique, a vaguely spiritual response to free-floating, ill-defined omnivorous human desire.

For all their problems, however, churches are often a good deal more self-critical and boldly innovative than seminaries. The most effective clergy are finding creative ways to start new communities of faith, to reach out to underserved and previously unwelcomed constituencies, and to engage the laity in something more important than themselves. But seminaries have changed less in the past 100 years than vibrant congregations have changed in the past two decades. Few mainline seminaries teach future pastors how to start new communities of faith.

Pastors starting out in ministry repeatedly told me: "We got out of seminary with lots of good ideas but without the ability to lead people from here to there." And: "I've learned enough to know that something is seriously wrong with the current church, but I don't know where to begin to fix it." Seminaries produce clergy rich in ideas but impoverished in agency, well intentioned in caregiving but deficient in leadership.

After interviewing a dozen students at one prestigious seminary, I asked my district superintendents, "How many of these candidates could be helpful in the work that we believe God has assigned us in Alabama?" They identified only two of the 12.

If that much-touted moniker "servant leader" means anything, it means being willing to submit to what the institution now needs in this time and place. Mainline churches that want to be part of God's future need impatient instigators rather than patient

caretakers for the status quo.

Our Board of Ordained Ministry habitually asked candidates questions like, “What are your gifts and graces for ministry?” Invariably, the pastoral candidates reveal themselves to be incredibly gifted. I persuaded the board to ask questions about behavior, such as “When is the last time you started a ministry?” and “Tell us about your most recent failure in the church—and about what you learned from it.” No ventures, no leadership; no failures, no initiatives.

While serving in Alabama, I worked with a pastor who succeeded in planting a congregation in a marginalized, Spanish-speaking community where other attempts had failed. I spent a day with her, primarily to urge her to go back to school and finish her seminary education. Later she told me that in her previous life she had started three restaurants. Two failed before one succeeded. I learned then not only why God had used her so effectively in starting a church but also why I ought to put her in charge of new church development rather than encourage her to return to seminary.

When teaching *The Local Church in Mission* last semester, rather than have students write a paper on their theology of mission, I had them attempt to start a mission enterprise in a church context. Then they told me what they’d learned from the experience about the skills needed to be a pastor for a North American church in a missionary situation.

What is the grand goal of seminary? I’ve decided it’s this: to make ministry in the name of Jesus Christ as difficult as it ought to be. For me this entails a twofold effort.

The first task is handing over what the church has learned in 2,000 years of leading in the name of Jesus, indoctrinating a new generation into the God-given wisdom of the church. The paradigmatic story of being called to leadership is Exodus 3, the call of Moses. Moses asks, “Who are you that you should send me?” Moses cannot represent a deity without knowing the peculiar identity of the God who sends him against the empire. Nor can we. Students need to investigate and reiterate the identity of the triune God who, in every time and place, summons the people required to help the church be faithful.

The second task is to push would-be pastoral leaders to step up and help the church think, pray and act its way out of the present malaise.

“Here’s the way my generation tried to serve the church and its mission,” I say.
“Now here’s my list of failures and disappointments. God has sent you to overcome my generation’s limitations in doing church. Go for it!”

In doing this work, I find that students keep calling me back to the theological wonders that convene us. This is a benefit of working among those who outrageously believe that they have been summoned, commandeered, called to leadership in the Body of Christ. Whatever God wants to do with the world, God has decided to do it with them.

I ask students to describe, in fewer than five pages, their “call to Christian leadership.” Reading those papers is a faith-engendering experience. I’ve learned about people jerked out of secure positions and shoved into a very different life trajectory. I’ve learned about a nurse to whom Jesus personally appeared on a patio. When I finish reading these papers I think: “Wow. Jesus is more interesting (and dangerous) than even I knew.”