

Holy poverty and the seminary

By [Tripp Hudgins](#)

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Paul said "the foolishness of the cross," not "the stable middle class lifestyle," if you want my opinion on seminary education, the changing economy, and baptismal identity in general. We bear a responsibility to care for one another as Christians (and beyond) that we have abdicated to the persnickety "marketplace." It's time to talk about holy poverty again, I think.

I can hear my free-church friends and colleagues now, "But we don't take a vow of poverty!" It's true. We don't. We remember this historical movement away from the monasteries and the cathedrals, the parish system and the state church. This is an issue of ecclesiology, no question. What I wonder, however, is if in our attempts to not fall into the traps of the past, we simply have settled on the marketplace as our model for ecclesiology. I assume we have.

My degree is a "professional degree," yet within its conceptual framework the notion that I am "professed" is easily lost. I am not called to earn, but to labor, to serve. My work is "worth" nothing. Instead, it is a response to a vocation that in many ways we all share. The wealth of the community affords me the opportunity to respond to that shared call in a particular way. I am not your employee. I am your pastor. I am poor. Any wealth I may possess comes directly from the pockets of others.

Seminaries are places for the formation of pastors, not employees. I am afraid, however, that we have lost the sense of that. Seminaries, once considered part of the church, are now often perceived to be outside agencies or even adversaries of the congregations they were designed to serve. Communities once shared their wealth to establish institutions of learning (again, a kind of formation) so that they would have a place to send those in whom they perceived a call to the work called "pastor."

But that has changed. It has. There's no way around or even through it.

So, [when I read about](#) the fear of the loss of the middle-class status of clergy, I am not surprised that some of us are shocked. Yet, we have been told that this would

happen. A prominent pastor [warned us about](#) why we should seek this work.

So, if any of the following inform or narrate your impetus for pursuing professional ministry, I'd like to ask you to take a step back and reconsider your vocational choice:

— I work to live. My job is how I make money.

— I've got my diploma and I'm done with all those books forever!

— I'm hoping that being a pastor will make me popular/please (or shock) my parents/make me seem super holy.

— I'm a lone ranger. I've got this ministry gig down and I don't need any help.

— I'm doing this because I need emotional affirmation and I'm too scared to go to therapy and figure out why.

— I love to talk but I hate to listen.

Indeed. Have we lost our middle-class status? I wonder why we had it in the first place.

No seminarian should graduate with debt. This is true. I agree. Holy poverty is not the same as economic destitution.

This should have nothing to do, however, with economic class. Instead, it should reflect the sense of responsibility we all share as Christians to provide servant leaders for the church. This is not about having a nice line of work. No. This is not even about the larger issue of economic justice. No, this is about whether or not individuals, congregations, and larger ecclesial bodies value ordained ministry any longer.

I am afraid that we have our answer. This is the challenge seminaries face.

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