

“Really Great D.Min. Programs – and Why They Are Critically Important Today”

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Doctor of Ministry programs are, in my opinion, far more important for the church and for society today than is commonly believed, even among those who labor in the D.Min. vineyards. I am even willing to venture that they are “critically important.” The future effectiveness and faithfulness of the churches in our complex and rapidly changing world, especially those in the older “historic” denominations, depends now more than ever on the spiritual depth, the articulate faith, and the practical skill and wisdom of its leaders. And it is precisely these qualities that D.Min. programs aim to foster. This means that D.Min. programs are elite programs in the best sense of that word. They seek to cultivate the highest levels of ability and effectiveness in the church’s most gifted leaders.

Accordingly, my purpose in these lectures is twofold: (1) To lay out what I believe to be the essential elements of not just good, but really great D.Min. programs – programs that shoot for the highest levels of excellence, that challenge our most talented and able pastors to be all they can be in the service of Christ and his church in the world, and (2) To explain, in both social and theological terms, why I believe such programs are more important today than ever before, and worthy of our best efforts as theological educators and as theological institutions.

I speak, of course, entirely from my own perspective and convictions, as a theological educator for thirty five or more years, and as an devoted participant in my own institution’s D.Min. program during the roughly twenty year of its history at

Emory. During that time I was also heavily involved in Candler's Th.D. program in pastoral counseling, which is more advanced academically and perhaps more complex than the D.Min. in some respects, but is fundamentally similar to it in many ways, principally in its commitment to integrating theory and practice in a theological perspective. In any case, as a result of numerous experiences teaching and advising D.Min. and Th.D. students, I came to certain conclusions about the importance of programs of this kind and what makes them strong or weak, how inherently difficult good theory/practice education really is, and how much it challenges seminary faculties to develop their pedagogical and advisory abilities beyond traditional comfort zones. This means there are a lot of ways to short-cut the process, to cheapen the work and to weaken, even trivialize the educational process. But it also means that some really good and important, even innovative educational goals can be accomplished as well. So I do have my opinions and am happy to share them with you, though of course they have also changed and evolved over the years, and were I still actively engaged in this work, I would expect them to continue to evolve as new generations of students and social and cultural changes present new curricular and pedagogical challenges. However, as one wag has put it, "My opinions may have changed – but not the fact that I am right!"

I. What Constitutes A Really Great D.Min. Program?

My thesis is that there are six vital features of any really great D.Min. program, no matter how it is set up and executed. I offer them here in more or less random order, though there are deep levels of resonance among them:

1. SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT. A really great D.Min program offers significant opportunities for, and expectations of, spiritual development and renewal, through worship, fellowship, and disciplines of personal care, critique, and self examination. I realize that this is a debatable thesis, at least among seminary faculties some of whom may object to the inclusion of "spirituality" among the aims of an academic degree program, even one that is professionally oriented. But I make no

apology for this up-front claim. It is based in part on the empirical observation that D.Min. students, like all experienced ministers, however successful and prominent, bring deep personal, spiritual, and professional hungers to the table, whether acknowledged or not (and often they are not) – hungers that are integral to their theological and practical needs and must be addressed in some meaningful way if the educational experience is to yield a genuinely enhanced capacity for ministry. If not, whatever is learned of practical methods or theological knowledge will remain superficial and lacking in formative, effective spiritual power for leadership.

Beyond this practical consideration, however, my assertion is based on a fundamental principle of Christian theology itself, insofar as theology is understood to be a reflective discipline of the church that can only properly be done in the context of the worshipping Christian community.¹ Such a principle does not, of course, make theology any the less intellectually critical or rigorous. To the contrary, worship in a broad sense, (I would propose) facilitates precisely the kind of wholistic integration that a great D.Min. program would hope to facilitate, drawing on right brain as well as left, and on tacit, symbolic, and ritual forms of knowing as well as discursive, intellectually critical modes. Nor should we neglect the critical role of *koinonia* in D.Min. programs, by which I mean the cultivation of the deepest kinds of human bonds, the sharing of hunger and need, and the expressed willingness to engage one's neighbor in honesty and in depth. Such a communal ideal challenges defensiveness regarding personal and professional personae, as well as individual competitiveness which is so rife and crippling in ministry. But it also means that D.Min. directors and perhaps some faculty need to be trained in group dynamics and leadership, and in at least some fundamentals of therapeutic care, psychology, and spiritual direction. A great D.Min. program would, in my vision, in fact include an appropriate amount of attention to self-discovery through peer and supervisory, perhaps even therapeutic, engagements – a coming to know one's own motivations, needs, strengths, problem areas, and “growing edges.” Such self-knowledge seems to me to be inherent in any serious, contemporary

understanding of spiritual development, and should be among the fundamental aims of any “really great” D.Min. program.

2. SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE. A really great D.Min. program develops critical perspectives on the current situation of churches and individuals in contemporary society. I used to tell my students that the first question in any situation of ministry, individual or collective, is “What is going on here?” That is, the first order of business is to resist the temptation to begin “doing” in order to explore in more depth what the occasion entails, to gain perspective and insight, and thus to be able to shape one’s ministry in a thoughtful and responsible manner. The ability to do this, however, depends on having a good set of lenses through which to view the situation. This is because the problem is both how to see the obvious – to notice perceptively what is directly apparent – and how to see *through* the obvious, or beneath it, into “what is going on” behind or below the surface, influencing and nature and direction of things. There are many such lenses available for ministry today, including theology itself, which pastors need to grasp as a mode of perceiving and understanding human situations, and not just as a set of beliefs. But it also includes non theological disciplines like sociology, psychology, and anthropology, as well as the resources of great novels, short stories, plays and poetry, and the critical study of popular culture and its distinctive wisdoms. Individual pastors cannot know, in any great depth, more than a few such disciplines, but a working knowledge of even a few of them seems indispensable for a ministry that rises above the level of folk wisdom and practice to operate with discernment and wide-ranging, long-term perspective.

I am, I suppose, especially biased in this regard toward the importance of psychology (including the psychology of religion), family systems theory, and social theory (including the sociology of religion), which offer powerful, often unobvious ways of understanding situations in depth and wisely guiding ministerial practice and theological interpretation. Without such theoretical insight any leader today is surely blind, and more likely than not to fall into the ditch, as many less well informed pastors have done. A truly great D.Min. program therefore makes sure that its students have

genuinely learned, both conceptually and in practice, at least a couple of such disciplines that they can use insightfully and effectively in their ministries. Such knowledge, at the doctoral level, ought to be learned and integrated well enough that it functions as a second nature, a “natural” way of understanding situations and fashioning appropriate and effective forms of leadership in response to them.²

3. THEOLOGICAL RENEWAL. A really great D.Min. program includes a renewed encounter with the gospel—and a critical search for its meaning today. This is not just a matter of “reading theology” or “getting caught up on theology since seminary.” I’m calling for a fresh engagement with fundamental theological (and human) questions through reading, lectures, and discussions, in both biblical studies and contemporary (and historical) theology. Its true purpose is more than to acquire knowledge; it is to awaken the student’s theological imagination and passion for theological inquiry. Sadly, however, at least in my experience, ministers and theological students (and some theological faculty) often understand the study of theology to mean either: (1) getting up on the ideology of the institutional church—becoming sufficiently articulate with the official theology to have credibility and respect—but otherwise ignoring it on the grounds that formal theological knowledge (as opposed to simple pieties) is thought to have no useful relevance to the practicalities and pressures of daily ministry, or (2) the mastery of a set of irrelevant academic abstractions that at one time in the past one had to do in order to earn a seminary degree but now can be left to the professionals. Evidence in support of this grim impression comes from anecdotal experience, from the pitifully small number of books of theology actually purchased and read by clergy (according to publishers), and from the small interest that clergy typically show in continuing education events on theological topics.

To be sure, the problem does not lie entirely with the clergy. Professional theologians (including biblical scholars) have been known to write overly abstract,

erudite, specialized works having little power to enliven or challenge the life of faith or the work of ministry. But not all theology (or biblical scholarship) is like that. Some, indeed, presents relevant, powerful understandings of faith and Bible that deserve the careful attention of serious pastors. I am thinking, for example, of such works as Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan's The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem, Walter Brueggemann's many provocative works, Walter Wink's Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination and his The Powers That Be, and Elizabeth Johnson's She Who Is, to name but a few of the works that I have personally found fresh, hard-hitting, and theologically eye-opening in the last few years. I will venture to assert that one would have to be almost brain dead intellectually not to feel grasped and stimulated by books of this caliber. Happily, in my experience some D.Min. students came to our program hungry and thirsting for theological renewal after years of parish ministry and found the D.Min. program a wonderful source of theological stimulation and renewal; others sadly had lost the hunger for theology or perhaps never had it, and presented greater challenges to the faculty. In any case, should not our best and brightest leaders – those who enter our D.Min. programs for whatever reasons – be reading books of this kind, and shouldn't a really great D.Min. program introduce them to such resources if they do not already know them, and seek to engender a thirst and passion for them if they have not already got it?

4. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY. A really great D.Min. program provides, for students who are monocultural, an experience of an alternative cultural context and opportunities to begin to develop intercultural competence. For those who are already bicultural or multicultural, a really great D.Min. program provides opportunities to reflect critically on their multicultural identity and experience, and to further develop its implications for their spiritual and theological development, and for their practice of ministry. This proposition is the new kid on the block of D.Min. education, I suppose. It is certainly one that I have only lately come to

understand as important, whereas twenty five years ago it was barely recognized anywhere in theological education.³ But in a multicultural society, in the 21st century, it has become essential to gain multicultural competence, even for pastors of seemingly homogeneous, monocultural churches. For cross-cultural encounter is now a fact of everyday social experience for the majority of Americans. Even communities that appear homogenous and monocultural are often rife with deep cultural differences – of age and generation, of gender and sexuality, of lifestyle and personal and religious history – all of which constitute cultural differences if considered in that light. Moreover, the value of intercultural competence, like that of theological renewal, is more than practical; it is profoundly important for spiritual life and development.

Here is an important insight: pastoral theologian David Augsburger has said that “One who knows but one culture knows no culture.”⁴ Only when we encounter a different life-world – a different way of putting everyday experience together and living it – that we come to realize that we too “have” a culture. Only then do we truly know that many of our “natural” and “commonsense” assumptions are not necessarily so natural and commonsensical for people in other cultures, and that many of our daily social practices are not shared or would even be considered good in other communities. Such practices, beliefs, and values, so natural to us, are, as we now recognize, “socially constructed.” This must really be experienced to be adequately grasped, however, and the most effective and authentic way to experience it is to become immersed in distinctly different culture, even for a short time, and to learn as much of the language as possible as well.⁵

It is essential for any leader today, religious or otherwise, to gain insight into the historical and therefore “constructed” character of their own life-world and the fact of its existence as but one world among the many, often profoundly different “worlds” that our fellow human beings inhabit. And while it may lie beyond the means of many D.Min. programs to provide significant intercultural experiences at this time, it is surely urgent that they make every effort to become able to do so. Our brightest and best leaders should be given the opportunity to have such an experience and to reflect on its

significance for the church's mission and its faith and value commitments in a pluralistic world. And they should be *required* to make use of it!⁶

Gaining intercultural competency also entails acquiring factual information about other cultures – information (for example) about non Christian religions, their beliefs and practices, and the customs and traditions that define the life experience of people other than ourselves. It is no longer good enough, for example, to view the role of “world religions” in seminary education as “elective,” however desirable, “useful,” and encouraged. Today, a knowledge of other religions is a necessity for anyone who wants to understand even the nightly news. Should not our religious leaders be at least as knowledgeable? And should not the same case be made for the necessity of intercultural competency in all of its forms, religious and secular? Moreover, is it not incumbent upon Christian faith itself to develop as full an understanding as possible of the world – meaning the many worlds of human culture – that God loves and seeks to redeem?

5. ENHANCED PRACTICE. A really great D.Min. program enhances the ability to perform ministry effectively. It goes without saying that doctoral programs in ministry should be expected to produce more skillful, effective leaders, though at Candler, in an otherwise very fine D.Min. program, we never really checked to see whether any real improvement, however defined, was showing up in the actual practice of our D.Min. students' ministries, nor did we attempt to track improvement in any specific way through the program. Naively (or slothfully), we assumed that enhanced knowledge and self-understanding, which our program emphasized, would yield the fruit of better practice, a belief I fear not always warranted.

Neglect of practical skill development may not be generally true of other programs today, but it is always a difficult goal to achieve, and difficult to know how and whether it is being achieved. In simple terms, however, let me suggest the educational enhancement of functional competence involves two things: (1) specifying operationally what good or ideal practices look like in the varied functions of ministry

(preaching, liturgy, administration, care, etc.), and (2) assessing practice in terms of the frequency of their occurrences in the student's ministry – whether the pastor exhibits the better forms rarely, sometimes, usually, or always. Implementing such an agenda obviously requires on-site observation by someone, faculty or otherwise, as well as self-assessment by the students themselves, and such observation and evaluation are not often easily arranged or achieved. But some attempt to determine how actual ministry is being practiced seems to me to be an essential feature of any “really great” D.Min. program.

But lest there be misunderstanding, my emphasis on skill development in the arts of ministry is not intended to reduce the entire meaning and practice of ministry to the exercise of defined professional skills. “Practice,” in the wider and deeper sense of *praxis*, entails elusive elements of moral judgment, perceptiveness, creativity, charismatic leadership, natural talent and spiritual wisdom integrated within the pastor and the pastor's community. This is not reducible to any defined set of professional skills. Nor is “skill” necessarily limited to mechanically enacted technique. Skills can be profoundly rich, creative, inarticulate, elusive modes of action developed over years of faithful practice (think: how to be a friend, a lover, a story teller, an inspiring preacher), and they should be understood and defined in that way. No educational curriculum can teach the art of ministry (or any art) and its many component skills in all their dimensions.

However, it is equally idealistic and naïve to think that one can do without the discipline of fundamental skill development in the more narrow, specific sense of the term. You have to learn your scales before you can play Chopin with any artistry. And the greatest artists, athletes – and saints – all attest that they never outgrow their need for practicing the fundamentals. Similarly, it seems essential that a really great D.Min. program will include a studied attention to how the student is actually performing the various component arts of the art of ministry, and will have methods of definition, pedagogy, and assessment aimed directly at that goal, and integrated experientially and reflectively with the other five basic components of the ideal D.Min. program.

6. PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH. A really great D.Min. program entails professionally oriented research into actual ministry performed, with the aim of enhancing the depth, breadth and overall effectiveness of ministry practice for oneself and for ministry more generally. During the period of course work this feature involves multiple integrative research experiences of the theory-practice-reflection variety, that then culminate in a formal research project that demonstrates personal growth in the practice and theologically informed understanding of ministry that is of relevance and importance to the church and its social setting.

My pitch here, however, is for research that is uniquely appropriate to *practitioners* of ministry, hence determined by the nature of *practical* knowledge and the kind of knowing and understanding that is shaped by context and by the inescapable need to act in concrete situations (which is of the essence of all practical knowing and reflecting). Practical knowledge, as I used the term, means a sophisticated – and potentially profound – form of “how to” knowledge. I mean “how to” not in a narrow, technical sense of the exercise of a set of techniques (compare Aristotle’s *technê*), but in a broader and deeper sense that is more nearly comparable to the Aristotelian *phronesis*. Practical knowing in this sense is more like wisdom because it includes a knowledge of ends and values as well as means, and therefore requires capacities of discernment and judgment rooted in character. Examples include how to lead, how to be a friend, how to love, how to pray, even how to create and deliver a moving sermon.

Research rooted in such a concept of practical knowing, or wisdom, is essentially of the “reflective practitioner” kind.⁷ It originates in and focuses upon a real, practical situation of ministry (however simple or complex, in which action is necessary and unavoidable).⁸ It seeks to perceive the situation accurately, gain reflective, critical distance on it, and move toward decision and action in a continuous flow between perception, discernment, and further action. “Action” must also be understood in a broad sense that includes simply “being present.” It then returns to critical reflection on the action taken and repeats the cycle. This “action-reflection-action-reflection” model

is, in my opinion, the best way to conceive the nature of fundamental research in ministry (or in any profession) which is essentially practical in nature and is therefore inherently appropriate to professional (as distinguished from purely academic) research.⁹

The point of this enterprise includes but is not limited to the development of the practitioner's own ability and effectiveness as a practitioner. Presumably anything of deep importance learned through particular instances of practice, generated by particular individuals or communities, can also have wider significance for the advancement of the profession as a whole. And it may also yield insights into the various theologies and theories that were employed in the critical reflective phase of the research process.¹⁰ In fact, throughout its history the church has developed its theological understanding of many doctrinal and moral topics through ongoing critical reflection on practice (e.g., its teachings on marriage, divorce, forgiveness, illness, and the like). The D.Min. research project simply focuses and formalizes this ongoing historical process with respect to the practice of ministry. For this reason, the idea that D.Min. projects ought to be published in some manner is an essential correlate of this concept. A "really great" D.Min. project will have relevance to the wider profession of ministry and the mission of the church. Its significance will not rest solely on the learning and professional development of the individual leader. Realistically, not all projects have anything fundamental or earth-shaking to contribute to theology or theory, of course, and in fact few do. But even projects that fail to make fundamental discoveries about doctrine or theory, and that basically confirm previous theology, theory, or practical insight without making novel contributions in larger arenas, are nonetheless still important for what they are able to affirm and confirm. At the same time, it seems of fundamental importance to maintain the ideal of seeking to contribute to the larger community of practice even if truly novel insights or findings are only rarely achieved.

Learning to do research of this kind is not easily or quickly mastered. It involves operating at several levels of complexity. This include the accurate perception and

multi-leveled analysis of empirical situations, and reflection that interrelates theories and perspectives of all kinds with concrete practice. It also relates component theories and perspectives to each other, including especially thinking that moves between theological and non theological perspectives. And it involves the exercise and perhaps the enhancement of practical abilities, a growing maturity of pastoral perception and judgment, and the integration of the whole experience and its multiple dimensions of meaning into the personhood and spirituality of the pastor and, to some degree also, into the life and faith of the community. This is not a simple business.

As a pastoral theologian, however, I wish to give special stress on the importance of the pastor's own growing maturity and integration of knowledge and practice, and my believe that any great D.Min. program will give significant emphasis to enabling this to happen. And I make no apologies for the psychological nature of this point, because it is essential in all ministry and in all theological education that the soul (the *psyche*) be given deep and abiding attention informed by the best knowledge and wisdom we have of it (*psychology* is the *logic* of the *psyche*), and every opportunity to grow in self-understanding, maturity, and in an understanding and appreciation of what "care of souls" really means when it is *my* soul that is cared for in spiritual depth. "Reflective practitioners," especially in ministry, need to have a deep knowledge of who they are – what drives their ministry, their relationships, and their lives as a whole, and even their faith; what values they hold dear and why; and what relationships past and present shape their behavior and identity. It is important, for example, for D.Min. students to ask themselves (and to be asked) why they are interested in pursuing their chosen topic of research – what it means to them and why – so that they can be freely and authentically related to their projects rather than driven by hidden personal agendas and needs (such as trying to please father or mother, atone for guilt, or resolve the grief of a significant loss). Many a D.Min. project has foundered on the reefs and shoals of hidden meanings that sabotage the student's ability to pursue their inquiry freely, creatively, and effectively.

In any case, designing and carrying out action-reflection research in ministry is a complicated business, being both public and private, intellectual and active, theological and non theological. For this reason it seems to me that really strong D.Min. programs work at the task of developing research capability from the moment the student enters the program. Doctoral seminars in ministry ought to model this complex process over and over, so that when students reach the “project” stage they view it as a next natural step forward, something they can actually do and even want to do because they have been doing it, or some version of it, all along in their course work, and because it feels like a natural and essential part of the doing of ministry itself. Practical research in ministry ought not to be viewed as some horrible, alien obligation suffered through once and for all in order to clinch a degree, but as an integral, ongoing, natural expression of ministerial practice, a *perspective* on the whole work of religious leadership. The D.Min. project itself is then seen as only an intentional, formalized, supervised instance.

Thus, in a nutshell, I would contend that a really great D.Min. program, regardless of details, would provide experiences of (1) spiritual development, (2) social and psychological perspective, (3) theological renewal, (4) intercultural competency, (5) enhanced practice, and (6) practical theological research. This is, admittedly, a tall order. But this vision or something like it, is urgently important for church leadership today, and needs to be creatively embodied in our most advanced programs in theological education. Indeed, something like it, more introductory and basic, is also needed at the master’s level. So now we come to our other big question: why is this so? Why are D.Min. programs of this kind so urgently needed?

II. Why Are Really Great D.Min. Programs Important Today?

I have contended, without apology, that the D.Min. is an elite (as opposed to elitist) degree, meaning not a degree that seeks to confer status but one that aims at cultivating true superiority and excellence in the practice and understanding of ministry. It is my further claim that church, society, academy, and individual ministers

all stand to benefit from excellence. Excellence is not in principle a matter of status or prestige (though it may confer status and prestige); it is a matter of practical and reflective quality; it has moral signification and even, given current conditions that I will outline shortly, imperative importance.

But excellence in the practice and understanding of ministry is a labor-intensive, costly, and complex undertaking requiring what can only be called an extravagant investment of energy, resources, and patience. It also requires taking the long view – for nurturing true excellence in any practice cannot be done quickly or on the cheap. Nor can it be mass produced. Great artists, athletes, scientists, and statesmen are not produced en masse. They are mentored, and their development requires a subtle interplay between the tried and true pedagogical wisdom of teachers and the unique talents, temperament, learning styles, and moral character of the “mentee.”

Elite forms of education – education for true excellence – are thus at their deepest philosophical and practical levels countercultural in American society. They constitute a prophetic voice in a society that idolatrizes speed, efficiency, and measurable outcomes. Americans, imbued with egalitarian ideals and fearful of any questing after excellence as socially elitist, do not readily comprehend or reward educational programs that lavish attention on the few, and are apt to grow impatient with any long-term process of development. However, the cultivation of excellence need not imply aristocratic privilege if framed in terms of service (and ministry as literally “service”), and if we remind ourselves that to whom much is given in terms of natural ability and intensive educational opportunity, much is expected. To seek excellence for them is not inherently to endow a privileged class, and only a misinterpretation of excellence as competitive social status and snobbery can make it so. Nor does seeking excellence for those with special gifts in any way deny the equal moral obligation to cultivate everyone’s potential to the full. On the contrary, it affirms its importance, and holds the specially gifted as well as the less gifted equally accountable to the whole body for the development and use of whatever talents and opportunities have been given to them.

And it is precisely the values nurtured by such education that are most needed in religious leaders today, as the following, very cursory overview contemporary American society, religion, and the churches will attempt to suggest. In making these observations I am not, obviously, attempting a detailed scholarly analysis of American society, but rather sketching in summary fashion what historians, sociologists and social commentators have noted in abundance. These points may therefore seem obvious and oversimplified, as indeed in a sense they are. But for present purposes they can serve to sketch the broad contours of the challenging and complex world in which religious faith and the life of our churches occur, and which really great D.Min. programs must seek to address if they are to be maximally relevant and faithful to the church and its ministry.

Religion and the Churches in Contemporary Society

We may begin by simply noting, without elaboration, a few of the most relevant and striking features of our society that bear significantly on the challenges facing religious leaders today, all of which, I would suggest, are readily recognizable and obvious but nonetheless of fundamental importance to advanced theological education.

1. There is a growing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity stemming from the liberalizing of American immigration law in 1965. While this diversity is not generally reflected within the membership of “mainline” Christian denominations, it is a clear and present reality in most of their immediate neighborhoods and larger communities, and it has modified the social consciousness of virtually everyone within and outside the churches.

2. A rational-technical and scientific culture pervades every social organization and shapes public thinking and action, and the churches’ thinking and action, on almost every issue of importance, even though large numbers of people are not well educated in science and technology themselves, and often cling to unscientific and irrational beliefs and practices that have bearing on public and ecclesiastical policies.

3. There has been a notable weakening of many of society’s “mediating structures” and integrative institutions like schools, neighborhoods, social clubs, and

churches that once held generations together and tended to provide intermediate, face-to-face social space between the family and the macro worlds of business, politics, media, and public life. Patterns of family life are also becoming more diverse and fragmented.

4. Market mechanisms and mentalities dominate every stratum of society, shape the operating principles and procedures of many organizations including churches (which are forced to promote their interests competitively in a religious “market”), and profoundly shape individual consciousness, values, and action. Choice, competition, and consumerism rule our age and influence moral and religious experience. Consequently, we tend to value education, science, the arts and culture, marriage and family, even religious faith, more for what they are good for (employment, health, happiness) than for their inherent or intrinsic meaning and worth.

5. Individuals, especially in the middle and upper classes, must negotiate increasingly complex, novel, intersecting, and often conflicting social roles and relationships in family life, work, leisure, and religion. And a certain kind of social intelligence (and a lot of education) is needed to manage subtle, complex social interactions and role functions, and to communicate and operate effectively in our highly bureaucratized, technically managed social order.

6. There is a resulting loss of historical orientation for a great majority of people; in the fast-paced life caught up in rapid social change, historical memory, heavily influenced by current needs and pressures, shortens and loses nuance and detail, historical memory and perspective are poorly understood, under appreciated, and often devalued.

7. Concomitant with these changes, and presumably a function of them in some way, the modal or “typical” personality patterns and character structures of individuals appear to be changing in late modernity as well. In ancient, medieval, and early modern times personality was typically defined by a sense of historical location and loyalty, close identification with the collective order, and individualized responsibility reinforced by anticipatory as well as post hoc guilt, and authoritative systems of

meaning derived from social authority but so deeply embedded in a compulsive character structure and identity that they seemed inevitable and natural. By contrast, the late- or postmodern style of personhood appears less driven by commitment to traditions, institutions, and social authorities, less inwardly structured by compulsive mechanisms, and more freely self-directing and self-oriented, more competitively individualistic reflecting the free market culture, more able to pick and choose among cultural options including moral and religious systems, and thus more given to a preoccupation with personal fulfillment and self-expression.¹¹ Narcissism is technically the clinical extreme of this development, though many commentators find a narcissistic streak running through much contemporary culture and coloring the personality organization and character structure of large number of people today.¹²

8. In the midst of all this, religion in its many forms does not necessarily weaken or secularize (though it has done so in Europe), but it inevitably changes in other ways. It easily loses historical depth and memory, and its appeal to authoritative institutions, traditions, texts and rituals tends to acquire diverse and often extreme forms, ranging from the fanatical conformity and authoritarianism of the right (or the left) to what sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues have nicely termed “expressive individualism,” which appears to reject all external authority in favor of the dictates of the self (though in fact it is often highly conformist in other ways).¹³ Ironically, both the authoritarian spirit and extreme individualism resemble one another in certain respects: they tend to reject cultural and institutional pluralism which highly diverse societies require (they want all religion and public institutions fashioned in their own image), and they often devalue or mistrust objective, critical thinking as in the natural and social sciences and historical inquiry.

9. In the historic religious denominations these social tendencies often lead to a loss of clarity about spiritual heritage, identity, and purpose, as in many mainline congregations, or else they simplify and reduce the richly nuanced contents of their historical theology and practice to more appealing, manageable and marketable forms.

10. With individualism, cultural fragmentation, the loss of historical continuity, and the reduction of historic faith to the status of a product to be chosen by the religious consumer (and marketed by competing religious institutions), religion for many becomes privatized. Loyalty to authoritative religious institutions gives way, if not to atheism or agnosticism, then to inward, private faith, feeling, and intuition about mystery, and publicly to a genial, pluralistic friendliness toward all religions, which in practice usually means devotion to none.

This is admittedly an incomplete, sketchy, and somewhat biased picture of our social landscape relevant to ministerial leadership and practice (it may fail to appreciate sufficiently the constructive aspects and potentials within this social landscape), but I hope I have said enough to suggest that religious leadership today faces daunting social and cultural forces requiring uncommon, even countercultural insight, courage, and faith. I am suggesting that the most gifted and well trained leaders of our religious institutions need also to be, in some respects, *countercultural* leaders – not rebels but cultural innovators who seek to advance historic faith by selective, critical appropriation that is both prophetically critical of and creatively responsive to the radically new social and cultural challenges of late modernity. We need extraordinary leaders who can help fashion newly faithful forms of worship with integrity, generate practices of personal devotion and discipleship, help transform congregations into more deeply caring spiritual communities, and who can realistically yet artfully and graciously manage the demands of ecclesial order and institution including its financial and administrative requirements, and who can inspire intelligent and prophetic public witness and service through word and deed.

Implications for Advanced Theological Education

Like everyone else, religious leaders themselves are also navigating these rapid, dangerous currents, and it would be self-serving and unrealistic to suppose that any of us are not as much a part of the problem as of its solution. Ministers, even the most

highly educated and sophisticated, are influenced like everyone else toward forms and practices of faith that reflect the spirit of the age more than the Holy Spirit. Some try to capitalize on it for personal gain and glory; others despair and burn out. Still other excellent, conscientious and capable leaders do their best to lead with courage, faith, and creativity while feeling caught between declining support for historic religion, and a culture whose fundamental values and sources of power and meaning are often at profound variance with biblical and Christian teachings.

Educational programs for leadership by themselves cannot be expected to solve these problems of course. There are realistic limits to what any educational program for leadership development can accomplish. But we have to believe that leadership does make a difference, and really great educational programs can make small but significant differences in the vision and practical effectiveness of leadership. However, as I have indicated, to rise to these challenges, such programs need to engage the whole person in psychologically and spiritually significant ways (and not be pitched narrowly to intellect or skill alone). They must inspire and motivate, yet develop critical thinking, perception and genuine skill in practice. And they must draw upon, and help the student integrate, a range of resources, historical and contemporary, theological and non theological that can provide the critical angle and spiritual vision to enable communities of faith to chart the way ahead.

I am well aware that educators like me are more than a little tempted to indulge in well meaning but untempered idealism when we theorize about education. However, while a dose of idealism is no doubt a good and necessary thing in any educational enterprise, I am also aware that the academy itself, which likes to pride itself on its critical distance from "culture," is not immune to the pressures and problems of the larger culture, and often ironically replicates and intensifies them in its educational programs and pedagogy. Faculties should not be uncritically entrusted with the transformation of culture, and seminary faculties in particular can boast of no necessary, superior wisdom when it comes to meeting the difficult challenges of religious and ecclesiastical leadership today. Seminaries, like the wider academy,

have, on the whole, also largely reduced the educational enterprise to the accumulating of credits for career certification, and have allowed a mass, somewhat depersonalized approach to teaching to replace the individual mentoring of pastors that was once the standard form of theological education. Moreover, we have allowed theological education to focus too much on specialized, information-centered pedagogy rather than seeking to cultivate of deeper spiritual wisdom and insight. All of these factors impose limitations on the realistic possibilities of D.Min. education of the kind I am advocating.

Further, the fragmentation of the academy into highly specialized disciplines and their guilds clearly contributes directly to these and other tendencies, and any attempt to run counter to them in D.Min. programs is up against the massive weight and self-interest of these specialized interests and their reward systems for seminary faculty. There are also powerful economic constraints on what any educational program can attempt to do today with very limited resources, especially one that emphasizes individual development and challenges reigning educational and cultural paradigms. And we are always confronted with the individual limitations of even our best students' previous educational experience, which has often inculcated the very cultural attitudes and practices that we seek to challenge and change. Individual psychological factors with both students and faculty also often play a huge role in trying to implement or change anything in an educational institution, to say nothing of faculty and ecclesiastical politics. Given all these constraints, it is always far easier to reduce the D.Min. to simple, workable terms that perpetuate rather than challenge prevailing patterns than to aim high and press ahead for fundamental change.

In this context, however, it ought to be the mission of our most advanced educational programs in ministry to pioneer the kind of multi-dimensional, integrative educational experience I have outlined in my proposed six features of really great D.Min. programs, for only programs conceived along some such lines as these will be able to inspire and enable our best and brightest leaders to lead the churches prophetically and creatively in today's social milieu.

How can D.Min. programs begin to acquire this sort of purpose and direction, and this sort of curricular shape? There is clearly no simple answer. However, I wish to propose that in broad terms and very briefly, it is most promising to conceive of the leadership task in advanced theological education according to the following twofold strategy.

First, it is essential that D.Min. directors and concerned faculty articulate for their colleagues and administrators, as well as for current and future D.Min. students and for the churches and denominations, a *vision* of the nature of the D.Min. task and its importance in sociological, cultural, historical and theological terms. Such envisioning of the larger context and educational hopes is an essential first step, and should be set forth as clearly as possible as a proposition for serious debate and discussion with these various constituencies. Specifically, it should challenge assumptions that the D.Min. degree is merely peripheral to the M.Div. Rather, the D.Min. should be viewed as an essential vanguard research program for both students and faculty aimed at developing the most creative and socially effective forms of religious leadership possible in our society, which in turn can serve as a laboratory for the whole of theological education, including the M.Div. curriculum. The elite character of the D.Min. should serve, not to segregate and isolate it from basic theological education, but to enlighten and inspire faculties about the M.Div.'s deepest purposes and possibilities.

Second, D.Min. directors need to secure faculty and administrative commitment to the development of the D.Min. degree as outlined in this paper by learning about and utilizing the nature of the commitment process itself, a process that is generally little understood or wisely managed. How is it, we must ask, that people come to “buy into” social projects and relationships with passion, persistence, and creativity over time? Without some understanding of the social psychology of commitment, leaders tend to assume that articulating vision and offering moral exhortations to strive to attain it – the “preacher’s approach” to generating commitment – is all that can be done. However, there is some helpful theory and research on this topic that can move us past

exhortation. I am thinking, for example, of work done by Philip Brickman and his associates some years ago. Though intended as a theoretical research study, Brickman's work offers excellent insights into the general nature and dynamics of the commitment process that can be applied to the practical leadership task of nurturing commitment.¹⁴ There is no magic bullet in his theory or in other excellent studies that have been made of the committing process, but there is definitely much to be learned about it, and a real possibility exists for exploiting its insights effectively in the practical work of leadership in general, and for the exercise of leadership within theological faculties in particular.¹⁵ It is a small but instructive irony to add that the task of developing faculty commitment to a significant vision of the D.Min. degree requires precisely the kinds of complex leadership skills, theoretical insights, and theological perspective on the part of D.Min. program directors that really great D.Min. programs themselves would seek to develop in their students!

Final Thoughts

I have argued, essentially, that our historical moment calls for a supreme educational effort at leadership development for our churches and religious institutions, and that the D.Min. degree – not the Ph.D. in Bible, theology or religious studies – can and should become the true cutting edge educational opportunity for this undertaking. This opinion contrasts sharply with the regrettably low esteem with which theological educators tend, on the whole, to view the advanced ministry degree and its demands on their time and expertise. Typically, I fear, theological faculty consider the D.Min. a poor and very distant cousin of the exalted Ph.D. Self-respecting theological scholars often, it appears, hold the D.Min. in some degree of contempt, as a form academic pandering to the status anxieties and career aspirations of the clergy, or as an institutional necessity for the theological seminary in its relations with the church, or perhaps as a work of charity performed for the clergy by a conscientious faculty concerned about the church but unpersuaded that D.Min. studies can contribute very

much realistically to helping the church address its deeper cultural and theological problems today.

No doubt this attitude reflects the intellectual and academic level on which many D.Min. programs and students actually function compared to their Ph.D. counterparts. And it probably derives in large part from academia's enchantment with highly specialized disciplinary knowledge and its all too frequent disdain for the practical as such, which it wrongly equates with trade-school skill development and technical education, failing to grasp the true nature of reflective practice and practical reasoning.

D.Min. directors need to challenge these and similar assumptions in their faculties, and advocate for a vision of practice-oriented education that is rich with intellectual and behavioral subtlety, complexity, and nuance as it seeks to understand and further develop the elusive arts of religious leadership in a complicated world. Rather than being viewed as an extra, optional, academically compromised degree, the D.Min. program should evoke the passionate commitment and creative energy of the entire faculty, and challenge its students with the highest expectations. This is not a time in history for mediocrity in theological education at any level, much less at the most advanced. It is a time that calls for our best efforts to confront the confusing, conflicting, and often destructive and dehumanizing forces in our world with an embodied understanding of the Good News that is realistically attuned to the contours of contemporary society and culture, and able to envision and venture constructive alternatives in light of the biblical witness of divine saving power and faithful care. It is a time for developing really great D.Min. programs.

Such programs, as I have argued, would at minimum combine personal growth and spiritual development with significant experiences of worship and fellowship, the cultivation of critical insight into contemporary society and the role and nature of religion within it, opportunities for multicultural experience and the development of intercultural competency, seminars offering biblical and theological work that grapples with the most serious questions of human life and the contemporary world, and methods for fostering growth in proficiency and effectiveness in the various arts of

religious leadership – all integrated into an ongoing process of professional development that does not end but only really begins with the D.Min. program itself.

Notes

¹ Christian theology in this sense is to be distinguished from theology as a purely academic discipline (systematic theology) or the academic study of religion as such (“religious studies”). I am assuming here what Farley calls theology as *theologia* – as a “*habitus*, a cognitive disposition and orientation of the soul, a knowledge of God and what God reveals,” a form of practical knowledge “having the primary character of wisdom” (*Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*, p. 35).

² For example, Carl Jung, though controversial in some respects, offers many great insights of widely recognized importance, such as “everything that is unconscious is projected” and his thesis that much contemporary religion is centered in conscious experience only and is thus ego-centered, shallow, literalistic, and personalistic, rather than centered in a sense of mystery given by the unconscious. If the latter, it would be more open to ambiguity, uncertainty, symbol, sacrament, and mystical insight than allowed for by prevailing, contemporary modes of consciousness.

Systems theory, for its part, makes the extraordinary, counter-intuitive claim that what individuals experience cannot be properly understood apart from the position they occupy in their various emotional systems. This point has deep and pervasive relevance to understanding the interrelationships of personal and congregational life. It also points to the fundamental importance of emotional differentiation of individuals within emotional systems (like congregations), and its particular important for pastors and leaders.

³ My colleague (and successor) at Candler, Emmanuel Lartey, calls for “intercultural competence” in all ministry, and has written a fine little book, Intercultural Pastoral Care (Epworth, 2006). Under his influence and guidance, intercultural competence has also been added to the practical requirements of Candler’s ThD program in pastoral counseling.

⁴ Cross Cultural Pastoral Counseling, p. 18.

⁵ The acid test here is the need to learn the language of any culture one truly wishes to understand, because language is absolutely foundational to culture. Without language competence, one’s engagement with another culture is significantly limited, though acquiring a foreign obviously requires an investment of time, money, and commitment

that often (though not always) lies beyond the practical possibility of most of us if we have not already begun it in earlier education. But we must ask: should not D.Min. programs, that seek to educate religious leaders at the highest level, encourage or even require rudimentary language study, at least for certain students and programs where the skill seems sufficiently important because the larger ministry context is multilingual?

⁶ I congratulate Candler's institutional neighbor in Atlanta, Columbia Theological Seminary, for long having had such a requirement in their M.Div. program and the resources to implement it as a curricular requirement.

⁷ Schön, Donald, The Reflective Practitioner (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁸ The kinds of situations, problems, or issues I have in mind for D.Min. research would include but are not limited to such possibilities as:

- Stewardship, money, and lifestyle issues
- Worship wars or other worship questions
- Bible study that matters and is intellectually informed and honest
- Confirmation: its meaning, problems, and possibilities today
- Personality clashes and conflicts in the congregation
- Racial, class or other diversification issues in congregations
- Denominational heritage and identity in a pluralistic society
- Looking beyond the congregation to social and environment witness
- Ministry in chronic pain and degenerative illness
- Ethical dilemmas in medical care, and in professional and business practice
- Parenting in relation to moral and spiritual development
- Youth culture and the Christian faith
- Making sense of theological teachings in relation to other beliefs and values
- The challenge of non Christian spiritualities in society and congregation.

⁹ I have recently proposed, in a pair of articles, that the action-reflection mode of research can be usefully organized around three fundamental questions that can be asked serially, repeatedly, and in relation to each other in all pastoral work: (1) What is going on here? (2) What should be hope and pray for here? And (3) How can we best proceed? These questions are always, in fact, asked and answered in any practical situation pastoral or otherwise one way or another, intentionally or intuitively. But it is helpful to lift them out and conceptualize them in this way. It should be noted that each question is both theological and non theological, and the three are interrelated, so that pastoral practice always in fact moves back and forth among them. For a version of this proposal aimed at theological educators, see Rodney J. Hunter, "Ministry in Depth: Three Critical Questions in the Teaching and Practice of Pastoral Care," in Secularization Theories, Religious Identity, and Practical Theology (forthcoming). For a

version written for a student readership and oriented to questions of spirituality in ministry, see Rodney J. Hunter, "Ministry in Depth: Three Critical Questions in the Practice of Ministry," in Healing Wisdom: Ministry in Depth, ed. Kathleen J. Greider, Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, and Felicity Kelcourse (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

¹⁰ See Seward Hiltner's venerable work, Preface to Pastoral Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), for the classic statement of this method. See also Donald Schön, *op. cit.*, for a more general statement applicable to all professions. Hiltner's work, now sadly forgotten, though dated and problematic in certain ways (e.g., its clericalism, gender bias, clinical concept of professional practice), nonetheless continues to offer, overall, a viable and insightful conceptual structure for understanding the nature and the promise of action-oriented research in theology (he called it "operation-centered"). For a discussion of Hiltner's continuing relevance, see Rodney J. Hunter, "A Perspectival Pastoral Theology," in Turning Points in Pastoral Care: The Legacy of Anton Boisen and Seward Hiltner, ed. by Leroy Aden and J. Harold Ellens (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990, pp. 53-79), also published as "A Perspectival View of Pastoral Theology: A Critique of Hiltner's Theory," in the Journal of Psychology and Christianity, 4:4 (Winter, 1985): 18-36.

¹¹ See Philip Rieff, The Triumph of the Therapeutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1968 [1966]) for an eloquent, insightful, and classic statement of this thesis from a psychoanalytic perspective.

¹² See for example Christopher Lasch's contemporary classic, The Culture of Narcissism (New York: Warner Books, 1979) and The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times (New and London: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1984). However, it may be helpful to note here the important distinction Donald Capps and Richard Fenn make in Individualism Reconsidered: Readings Bearing on the Endangered Self in Modern Society between narcissism and individualism:

"But the differences between the individualist and the narcissist are fundamental and deep. The individualist, unlike the narcissist, has a deep sense of duty to self which is the sources of certain obligations to others and to community. The individualist also has a strong commitment to long-term goals, and a deep, and genuine, investment in self-discovery.

"In contrast, the pure narcissist has little or no sense of obligation to self and others, of commitment to anything over the long run ('keeping options open' is key for the narcissist), and little investment in self-discovery. Where the individualist places a premium on personal autonomy, not at the expense of community but for the sake of it, the narcissist is overly dependent on others,

unable to survive without their constant attention, and has little interest in or appreciation for the creation of a private space, both inner and outer, which is safe from the intrusions of others and immune to the demands of social conformity and group mentality. . . . The narcissist has difficulty sustaining long-term relationships, but, on the other hand, the narcissist cannot endure solitude, as he or she needs constant attention to shore up a fragile self” (p. 290f.).

¹³ Bellah, Robert, Richard Madsen, Richard M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

¹⁴ Brickman, Philip, et al., Commitment, Conflict, and Caring (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987).

¹⁵ See for example Kanter, Rosabeth Moss, Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1972). Daloz, Laurent A. Parks, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks, Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Colby, Anne, and Damon, William, Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment (New York: The Free Press, 1992).