

The well-credentialed pastor

My friend doesn't want a PhD. He's getting one anyway.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue



(Photo by Pornpak Khunatorn / iStock / Getty)

A close friend called me recently with some distressing news: he is getting a PhD.

“That’s a shame,” I said, followed by, “Congratulations.” It was not good news, but the latter felt like the thing a good friend should say.

To be clear: my friend does not want a PhD. And what I’ve learned pastoring a church that neighbors a campus with a lot of PhDs on it is that few people in their right mind do.

The path to a PhD is purposefully rigorous, attracting those who want to pursue some line of inquiry and expand their own and the field’s scholarship into bold new territory. It is equal parts revelation, determination, and pioneering, and the extra years spent in the classroom are seen not as sacrificial but as the best use of a

candidate's gifts and time (and money!). The commitment is such that the mere pursuit can become a profession unto itself.

My friend knows all of this, but these reasons for a PhD are not compelling to him. He is a pastor—an excellent pastor—and he lives in the same world as the rest of us, where a terminal degree will open career doors but otherwise will feature scarcely in his chosen vocation. His choice is like the choice to exercise or cut your fingernails: it is ostensibly a necessary evil on the path to a better future.

But what if some necessary evils are not necessary after all?

Walter Gretzky told the peewee hockey team he coached—which included his son, Wayne—to “skate to where the puck is going, not to where it has been.” Hockey fans know this advice better than Proverbs, and business leaders often use it to talk about innovation. As tired as sports metaphors can be—Are you tired of having the ball in your court yet?—this is one that I think can actually help us.

Churches are notoriously tardy to the party. Some congregations are still years away from having an Instagram presence, to say nothing of TikTok; meanwhile, the Enneagram of the 1970s is beginning to take flight. We spend a lot of our time skating to current trends, only to find that the puck has already slid somewhere else. We spend way too much time looking backward, playing catch-up, instead of preparing for what lies ahead.

As a firm believer in the West African philosophy of Sankofa, I treasure deeply the stories and wisdom that come from our past. But let's be honest: instead of equipping leaders for 21st-century realities, a lot of what the church is doing is forcing leaders to equip themselves for 20th-century expectations. We spend a lot of our time reacting to where the puck has just been.

The PhD has long been the ultimate prize for both pastor and congregation. For a pastor, it means you've been through something and you're really smart, even if you haven't really been through all that much yet and your degree has in no way prepared you for congregational ministry. The PhD is mostly agnostic toward practical ministry, but it doesn't matter: you're the best.

For a congregation, if your pastor is the best and your pastor works for you, then how impressive does that make *you*? We've embraced this myth that smart people solve our problems. It's a classic model of leadership, even though there are

countless times when “the smart one” leads us straight into nowhere. It’s the reason my friend is pursuing a degree that he does not want and can’t imagine using. Because this kind of thinking is where the puck has been.

Where we’re headed is much more exciting. Global health crises, changing political landscapes, economic upheaval, and racial reckonings are but a few of the real chances we have as the church to mark the world with the imprint of God. And if we think the people leading us will all need to have PhDs, we are not only fooling ourselves but costing ourselves precious time. What our church needs are people who can help elicit trust and speak to our deepest yearnings. We need congregations that address realities with the boldness and faithfulness of the One whom we claim inspires us. We need laypeople and clergy who are emboldened to speak the truth of God within the church’s walls and at the gates of empire.

We need critical thinkers—always—but this is but one cog in the wheel of critical leadership. This diversity of gifts and skills is where the puck is headed.

So if it sounds like I’m disappointed in my friend, I’m not. He’s doing what he needs to do to thrive in the world as it is. But it’s a shame when ecclesial bodies lack the imagination for what “the best” means beyond a terminal degree, and it’s a shame when people denigrate the DMin degree as a mere shortcut to becoming “the Rev. Dr.” We need more people focused on the practice of ministry in the 21st century. We need better criteria to assess fitness for ministry, emphasizing competency over credential. We need ordination processes and seminary curricula that encourage students to use their education not to open doors but to pursue their vocation.

The work ahead of us is difficult, because we’ll have to say good-bye to some old ways around preparation for ministry. But the good news is that ahead of us is exactly where God needs us.

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The *Century's* community engagement editor Jon Mathieu discuss this article with its author Julian DeShazier.