

Way of life: Intentional reflection on the life of faith

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

From this theologian's perspective, the central challenge for pastoral ministry today concerns the most important mark of good ministry: the ability effectively to mediate faith as an integral way of life to persons, communities and cultures. This has been true throughout history, in every culture and for every community of faith. In our time, however, communities of faith seem to be falling short precisely at this point.

If the number of people actively engaged in religious practices in our nation were the only relevant indicator, one could think that on the whole communities of faith were as successful today in mediating faith as a way of life as they were decades or even a century ago. And yet the faith that people embrace is, arguably, shaping their lives less and less. The faith seems not so much an integral way of life as an energizing and consoling aura added to the business of a life shaped by factors other than faith.

An indicator of this change is a shift in language to describe religiosity. We have moved away from "faith" to "spirituality." The talk of "faith" rightly emphasizes cognitive and moral content and life in community; the talk of "spirituality," on the other hand, is cognitively and morally vague and emphasizes the empowerment and healing of autonomous individuals.

This increasing difficulty of connecting faith and life stems primarily neither from lack of effort nor from the absence of skills on the part of communities of faith and their leaders. As many sociologists of religion have noted, part of the problem is that in a market society, faith has a difficult time escaping the logic of the marketplace. It is in danger of degenerating into yet another consumer good, to be used when the need for it is felt and placed in storage or discarded when not. The problem is not that faith is "bought and sold" as a consumer good (the so-called commodification of religion), but that the smorgasbord culture exerts pressure on people to employ faith

to satisfy their discrete and changing wants rather than be the shaper of life as a whole.

The smorgasbord culture is a challenge for communities of faith. But the main problem is that the communities of faith have not found effective ways to offer a compelling vision of an integral way of life that is worth living. Many people are seeking precisely that. They are unsatisfied with a lifestyle shaped only by two watchwords of contemporary culture: “freedom” and “prosperity.” This is signaled by the resurgent interest in spirituality as related to almost every dimension of life—from medicine to business, from arts to politics.

Why are the communities of faith increasingly ineffective in their central task? The reasons are many. But the difficulty starts with theological education. Like all academic disciplines, theology participates in the movement of subdisciplinary differentiation and increased specialization. This is an indispensable condition of fundamental theological research. In the process, however, the overarching subject of theology and its internal unity seems to get lost. After their first experiences in churches or parachurch organizations, many young pastors are no longer certain that the long years of theological study were useful. The narrowed subjects and highly specialized theological interests of their professors do not sufficiently overlap with the everyday realities of their parishioners. Three or more years of study have handed them a tool that is sophisticated but of questionable usefulness.

To help themselves out of the predicament, many pastors revert to forms of faith they knew before their theological education began. Some turn to completely uncritical approaches to texts and concepts. These, however, soon prove woefully insufficient for the complexities of life and are intellectually implausible. Others opt for an easy relevance by adopting vague religiosity and interlacing it with various secular languages (e.g., of psychology or social critique). These languages may be valuable in their own right, but their relation to the language of faith is often tenuous at best. Michael Welker says that the result of these two ways of coping with the difficulty of connecting faith with life is, in the first case, a self-banalization of faith, and in the second, self-secularization. Either of these approaches deprives pastors of the ability to formulate a compelling faith-based vision of life that can shape persons, communities and cultures.

Pastors can mediate faith as a way of life only if they find it compelling themselves and if their parishioners are moved by it because it makes sense of their lives. For

help in defining a compelling faith, ministers have in the past looked to theological institutions of higher learning. It is tragic, however, that even the best of such institutions are producing very little writing about what the Christian faith has to do with the lives of lawyers or artists, manual workers or intellectuals, marketers or politicians, parents or spouses.

One of the most pressing needs of pastoral ministry, therefore, is to develop, sustain and academically legitimize reflection on Christian faith as a way of life. In the Christian tradition such reflection is not unusual. The most effective and lasting works—of Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Kierkegaard, Simone Weil and others—have been effective and lasting because they offered a vision for a lived faith. Every great theology has been a vision of a way of life. Not surprisingly, the main challenge for pastoral ministry ends up being almost identical to the main challenge for theology and theological education.