

First call: From seminary to parish

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

I was a freshly minted product of seminary, plopped down by the bishop into a forlorn little church in rural Georgia. During my first sermons, my congregation stared at me impassively.

At first I thought that the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between us was due to a gap in education. (Educated people tend to think this way when dealing with the uneducated.) Then I noticed that my parishioners easily referred to scripture in their conversation, freely used biblical metaphors, and sometimes mentioned obscure biblical texts that I had never read.

At first I thought that their way of interpreting the world was primitive or simple or naive, but eventually I realized that their ways of thinking were different from mine. I had been trained to construe the world psychologically or sociologically rather than theologically. I was thinking in the mode of the academy; they were thinking with the Bible. We were not simply speaking from different perspectives and experiences, but across the boundaries of two different worlds. I was in the middle of an intersection where two intellectual worlds were colliding.

While it's risky to characterize so complex a phenomenon as theological education as "the seminary," the world of theological schooling is more uniform and standardized than the world of the church. Seminaries, whether large or small, conservative or liberal, have more in common with each other than with the churches they serve. Their internal lives—how they construct their curricula, select their faculties and set expectations of their students—are based more on the models of other seminaries than on the mission of the church.

Seminaries in my denomination—United Methodist—are experiencing a growing disconnect between the graduates they produce and the leadership needs of the churches these graduates serve. This disconnect causes friction between churches and their new pastors, and sometimes defeat for all concerned. It occurs because Protestant seminaries have organized themselves on the basis of modern, Western ways of knowing. They are still held captive by an epistemology borrowed from the

modern university, with its notion of detached objectivity, the fact-value dichotomy, the separation of emotion and reason (with reason as the superior means of knowing) and the loss of any authority other than an isolated, sovereign self that is subservient to the needs of the modern nation-state. Seminarians are equipped mainly to provide a kind of chaplaincy care for those who have difficulty functioning in a capitalist economy; many discover that they lack the prophetic skills necessary for ministry.

At the same time, seminaries have overlaid the church's ways of thinking with academic thinking, and the seminary as the church created it to be (a place to equip and form new pastoral leaders for the church) has become the seminary as graduate- professional school for credentialing. It's a place where faculty talk mostly to one another. (Nietzsche noted that no one reads theologians except for other theologians.) Faculty accredit and tenure other faculty using criteria derived mainly from the secular research university. While the seminary desperately needs faculty who can negotiate the tension between ecclesia and academia, most faculty continue to be most adept at embodying academia.

The seminary selects and evaluates its students on the basis of the same criteria. Instead of selecting those students who can most benefit Christ's work with the church, it uses criteria by which it turns out many pastors who have little interest in serving the church.

District superintendents and I were unimpressed with a recent group of soon-to-be seminary graduates. As administrators in a declining organization, we desperately need people who can take risks, develop new churches and new ministries, and help lead us out of our current malaise. These seminarians seemed most interested in being caregivers to established congregations, caretakers of ministries that someone else initiated. They were attracted to our denomination precisely because they would never have to take a risk with Jesus.

When seminaries appoint faculty who have little skill or inclination to traffic between academia and church, is there any wonder that the products of their teaching find that transition difficult? It's not surprising that many new pastors quickly jettison "all that theology stuff" the seminary taught, give in to the "real world" of the congregation, and spend the rest of their ministry flying by the seat of their pants.

The best thing that seminary has done for its graduates is introduce them to the burden and the blessing of the church's tradition, form them into advocates for the collective witness of the church, and lead them to believe that the church is God's answer to what's wrong with the world.

But too much theological training (arising out of the German university of the 19th century) places the modern reader above the texts of the church, and assumes a privileged, detached and superior position to the church's historic faith. The academic guild trains pastors to stand in judgment of the texts. This sets up the pastors for a jolt when they find themselves in the role of the ordained one who leads the church not in detached criticism of the texts, but rather in faithful embodiment of them. Pastors are ordained to communicate that scripture and convey their tradition compellingly and faithfully to their congregations, not primarily so that the congregations can think through the tradition, but so that they can incarnate Christian truth in their discipleship. Pastors are not free to rummage about in the recesses of their egos, nor are they free to consult extraecclesial texts until they've done business with scripture itself.

Another problem is that seminarians tend to be introverted, reflective, personal seekers after God, while the church is heavily politicized and communal. Pastors need to be "community persons," officials of an institution who are expected to worry about community and group cohesion with a Savior whose salvation is always a group phenomenon. The seminarian is flung into a politically charged, complex organization, a family system that requires knowledge of group dynamics and wisdom in leading a disparate group of people who have been caught in the dragnet of God's expansive grace in Christ. When Chrysostom spoke about his own inadequacy to be a pastor or bishop, it is this public quality of Christian leadership that he was thinking he lacked.

When the seminarian becomes a pastor, she leads an organization that has goals such as embodiment, engagement, involvement, participation and full-hearted commitment, embrace of the enemy, hospitality to the stranger, group cohesion, *koinonia*. Her discipleship is not to engage in cool consideration of Jesus but rather to follow him. If she fails to make the move from being the lone individual tending her own spiritual garden to her new role of public leader, she will have a tough time in the parish.

Recently a group of our best and brightest new pastors told me that what they need most from the church and from me as their bishop is supervision. They yearn for help with the move between these two worlds because they realize that they are not prepared. My conference is spending about half as much on training recent seminary graduates as we contribute to their seminary. I tell new pastors:

1. Learn to speak and teach scripture. Laity sometimes complain that their young pastor uses “religious” words like *spiritual practice*, *liberation*, *empowerment*, *intentional community* (this is an actual list a layperson collected and sent to me), which no one understands and no one recalls having encountered in scripture. We are ordained to lovingly cultivate and actively use the Bible’s language.
2. The difference between the thought of the laity in your first parish and that of your friends back in seminary is not so much the difference between ignorance and intelligence as it is a difference in ways of thinking. Learn to appreciate the thought and speech of people who are outside of the restrictions imposed by the academy.
3. If you have difficulty making the transition from seminary to parish, remember who you are: the point of studying and examining the Christian faith is that you embody that faith. The point is not to devise something that the modern world finds interesting but rather to rock that world with the church’s demonstration that Jesus Christ is Lord. At times your memory of questions raised and arguments engaged in seminary may distract you from the church’s mission and purpose.
4. On the other hand, remember that the church has a tendency to bed down with mediocrity, to accept the status quo and to let itself off the theological hook too easily. At its best, theology can and should make Christian discipleship difficult. An accommodated, compromised church reassures itself that “all that academic, intellectual, theological stuff is bunk and is irrelevant to the way the church really is.” Criticism of the church ought to be part of the ongoing mission of a faithful church that takes Jesus seriously. I pray that your theological education has made you permanently restless with the church as it is, and eager to look for the church that is to be.
5. Theology tends to be wasted on the young. It’s only when you run into a complete parochial dead end, when you are fed up with the people of God (and maybe even God too), that you will need to know how to have a good conversation with some saint in order to make it through the night. Your winning smile, pleasing personality

or winsome way with people will not be enough to sustain you as you work with Jesus, preaching the Word, nurturing the flock, looking for the lost.

Only God can sustain you, and God does that through the prayerful, intense reading and reflection that you began in seminary. When you're in a small church alone, with total responsibility on your shoulders and a weekly treadmill of sermons and pastoral care, there is little time to read and reflect. Ministry has a way of coming at you, of jerking you around from here to there. You will be tempted to take short cuts and borrow from others what ought to be developed in the workshop of your own soul. Take charge of your time, prioritize your work and don't neglect the essentials while you are doing the merely important.

6. Try to ignore your parishioners when they attempt to use you to weasel out of the claims of Christ. "When you are older, you will understand," they told me as a young pastor. "You're still full of all that theological stuff from seminary. Eventually, you'll learn," said older, cynical pastors. (Now it's, "Because you are a bishop, you don't really understand that it's unrealistic to . . .") God has called you to preach and to live the gospel before them. Be suspicious when you're encouraged to settle in and make peace with the "real world." There is much that passes for "the way things are" in the average church that makes Jesus want to grab a whip and clean house.

7. Get some good mentors. Ministry is an art, a craft, and one learns a craft by looking over the shoulder of a master, watching the moves, learning by example, developing a critical approach that constantly evaluates and gains new skills. There is something built into the practice of Christian ministry that requires apprenticeship, from Paul mentoring young Timothy to Ambrose guiding the willful Augustine. In my experience, one of the most revealing questions that I can ask a new pastor is, "Who are your models for ministry? Whose example are you following?"

That I am here today, over 30 years after my transition from seminary to pastoral ministry, suggests to me that God is infinite in mercy, full of forgiveness and patient with those whom the Lord calls to ministry. Herein is your main hope in moving from seminary to pastoral ministry.