

Teaching vacancies: A crisis in practical theology

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

When the longtime professor of preaching at Bethsaida Theological Seminary retired, no one at the school could have predicted the ordeal that lay ahead. A search committee was appointed, and a position description crafted. The candidate needed to have a Ph.D., an appreciation for Bethsaida's theological tradition and at least some experience as a pastor and as a teacher of preaching. The committee placed ads in all the usual journals and waited expectantly for a flood of responses. After all, a similar search for a New Testament professor the previous year had yielded over 60 applicants, many with strong publication records and proven teaching experience.

But six months later, barely a dozen applications had been received, and not a single candidate met the minimum requirements. The search committee called graduate schools, e-mailed established scholars in the field of preaching and sent personal letters inviting members of the professional academies to apply. Nothing. Finally the committee reported to Bethsaida's dean that the search had come up empty. The dean instructed the weary committee to redouble its efforts. Three years later, the committee is still looking.

Bethsaida Theological Seminary is imaginary, but its plight is not. In the aptly titled report "Hard to Find," issued in 2002, the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education reported widespread distress among theological schools in filling faculty vacancies in the practical disciplines—preaching, worship, religious education, pastoral care, leadership and the other so-called arts of ministry. Auburn researchers interviewed deans and search committee chairs who consistently complained that faculty searches in the practical fields were "difficult" and presented "more complications" than searches in other fields. One school reported holding a position in homiletics open for 12 years.

Why is this so? Recently a team of theologians and religion scholars at Emory University in Atlanta set out to explore the problem. They learned that a storm had been gathering force in the practical theological fields during the past two decades. The first gale-force wind hit when a large number of professors in these fields began vacating their posts, either to retire or to take more lucrative positions in churches or other agencies. This problem will become worse: an earlier Auburn study indicated that nearly 60 percent of the faculty now teaching in the practical fields will be eligible to retire by 2006.

Then, even as vacancies increased, a second storm surge hit: theological schools gradually began to set higher standards for faculty in the ministry fields. Once seen as merely “applied theology” or “helps and hints for church leaders,” the practical theological disciplines now involve critical and original thinking about theologically saturated religious practices. Today teaching the arts of ministry requires a different kind of expertise, a different level of academic training and a different set of credentials. At one time, when a theological school needed a professor of church administration, preaching or worship, it searched the ranks of accomplished clergy. Often these seasoned practitioners did a capable job teaching the lore and wisdom of their craft. But they were sometimes less successful in conducting research, introducing innovations into their fields and participating in ongoing scholarly conversation.

As one theological educator told the Emory team, the older generation of practical theologians was often strong in the “how to” side but weak in history, hermeneutics and theology, while a new generation of practical scholars, emerging in small numbers, combines “the pragmatic with careful attention to the tasks of empirical study, historical description, multilayered interpretation and theological analysis.” In a climate of global awareness, practical theology is not only deeper but also broader. There is an increasing alertness to how the church’s ministries of teaching, worship, preaching, education and leadership connect to the practices of other world religions, to the practices of religious communities throughout history and to parallel practices in the wider culture.

Who will teach pastoral care, religious education, leadership and preaching to the next generation of pastors? Theological schools are looking for a rare commodity: teachers of the ministry arts who are able practitioners as well as well-trained research scholars able to move nimbly across interdisciplinary and even interfaith lines. This raises some eyebrows. Some in the church wonder if this move toward

research scholars in the practical fields represents yet one more instance of the widening gap between the academy and the parish.

Are seminaries biased against church practitioners, preferring university-trained Ph.D.s over skilled pastors who can teach wonderfully practical courses in ministry? No. The new demand for rigorously educated practical theologians is not primarily a function of internal academic standards or intellectual elitism, but rather a product of dramatic changes in both ministry and church. Pastors today are thrown into a complex social environment of colliding cultures, multiple ideologies and competing demands. Ministry must be creatively negotiated in ways undreamed of a generation ago. Teachers of religious education, worship, leadership and preaching who cannot engage in social and cultural analysis, who do not understand the place of their disciplines historically and in interfaith contexts, and who cannot equip their students to do so as well, will leave the next generation of ministers unprepared.

In one sense, the solution to the shortage of such teachers is obvious. Supply will have to rise to meet demand, and graduate schools in religion are simply going to have to produce more Ph.D.s capable of teaching practical theology. There is, however, a third devastating force in the storm. Very few graduate schools are willing or able to do this. On the one hand, the top university programs in religion have not been interested in religious practices or practical theology; in fact, most first-rate university religion departments are militantly nonconfessional and operate in an ethos of objective research. They are wary of any Ph.D. student who expresses a desire to prepare to teach ministry or practical theology.

On the other hand, denominational seminaries, where practical theology more readily finds a home, often lack the finances, the faculty and the interdisciplinary and interfaith resources needed for excellent doctoral programs. Thus the training of practical theologians tends to fall between the educational cracks. Schools that could provide such training won't, and schools that desire to provide it cannot. The 2002 Auburn study found that only five schools in the United States—Catholic University, Claremont, Emory, Garrett/Northwestern and Princeton Seminary—have solid, longstanding commitments to providing research doctorates in the practical fields.

After gathering and analyzing the data, the Emory research team decided that Emory should take a leading role in increasing the supply of teachers of religious practices and practical theology. It was not an easy decision. To begin with, Ph.D.

education is labor intensive and very costly. The Emory faculty knew that any augmentation of the Ph.D. program would require money, and lots of it. In addition, Emory's graduate program in religion is conducted in a strong and hard-won interfaith environment, and any attempt to tilt the program toward an overemphasis on Christian practical theology would be greeted with a healthy suspicion and resistance from many religion professors.

Long, delicate and sometimes difficult conversations were held before it was decided that a new initiative in Ph.D. education in religious practices and practical theology would benefit all without upsetting the interfaith balance. Additional slots for more Ph.D. students would, Emory decided, produce a new wave of better-trained scholars capable of first-rate research in religious practices. Many would become Christian practical theologians, thus addressing the shortage. Others would be trained to teach counseling, preaching or religious education in theological schools of other faiths. Some would be research scholars with their study grounded in religious practices.

Emory's program, which begins this fall, will admit up to eight additional doctoral students a year for five years. A \$10 million grant from the Lilly Endowment supplements Emory's commitment.

But Emory alone cannot produce the number of practical theologians needed to educate a new generation of ministers and priests. We hope that what happens at Emory over the next few years will stimulate discussion, debate and creative ideas at other graduate schools, leading them to take up these challenges in their own ways and build other educational models for preparing practical theologians. Then, when education in religious practices has been strengthened in a number of universities, theological schools seeking superb, well-trained scholars and teachers in the ministry fields will be able to find them.