

Pivotal leadership: Seminary strategies

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [September 12, 2001](#) issue

Faithful, effective Christian congregations make a difference. They touch people's lives, address profound questions with insight and wisdom, and offer places where the ingredients of a flourishing life can be discovered and nurtured in relationship to the God of Jesus Christ.

What do such congregations look like? In some ways, they are very different from one another—different in size, in denominational tradition, and in their particular histories, opportunities and burdens. Yet effective congregations have much in common: They are able to articulate a theological vision that links people to God and God's presence in and for the world. They offer the experience of vital worship, which draws people together into the praise of God. They have profound intergenerational ties, and draw on the past for the sake of the future. Effective churches have a passion for education and formation that is focused on Christian discipleship throughout life. They offer ministries of outreach and prophetic engagement and understand these activities not simply as "doing good," but as expressions of faithfulness to God. And these congregations connect people's questions, judgments and struggles with their theological convictions and commitments.

Effective congregations share one other feature: wise pastoral leadership. They have had leaders who have helped to cultivate the passions and commitments of congregational life. In turn, such congregations appreciate, support and emphasize the importance of pastoral leaders, for they understand the crucial importance of articulating this theological vision and nourishing it through worship, education and ministries.

Over time, profound synergies develop between a vital congregation and its effective pastors, creating an upward spiral in which congregation, pastors and the wider community flourish. Strong congregations cultivate a life together that inspires

and requires gifted pastoral leaders, who in turn take risks and pose questions that raise the standards for what is possible and needed for congregational life.

We have witnessed this kind of leadership, even in congregations that face daunting sociological challenges. A particularly gifted pastor was assigned to an urban congregation that thought its glory days were in the past. He challenged members to consider their surrounding neighborhoods and to reclaim a vision of ministry in the city. He asked them to think about all of the children of the city as their children. Remarkable things began to happen. Not only did he stir the congregation to thinking about the future instead of the past; he caused the city to take notice. A strong congregation and an imaginative pastor shaped a vital, effective congregational ministry.

So there is much at stake in recruiting, shaping and supporting excellent pastoral leaders. It is imperative that churches identify gifted persons, educate and form them well, and sustain their learning over the course of their ministry. Candidates for pastoral leadership must be persons of character who embody a passionate love of God, sustained learning habits and faithful practice in ministry. There is no substitute for a passionate, learned clergy.

Strong congregations can survive mediocre or poor pastoral leadership, at least for a while. But over time, ineffective pastoral leaders weaken congregations, and weak congregations often attract pastors who reflect and perpetuate mediocrity. The relationship between congregation and pastor then spirals downward into mutual weakness.

We live in a time of much downward spiraling. Yes, every generation thinks there has been a decline from the previous generation. And yes, there has always been a measure of pastoral mediocrity and even incompetence. But there seems to be an increasingly widespread sense that we do not have enough good pastors to sustain congregational ministries at high levels.

This sense emerges from data, admittedly controversial, about the kind of people who are now coming—and not coming—to seminary. Does a decline in the number of Phi Beta Kappas going into the ministry reflect a decline in quality? Does a decline in the social status of the ministry as a profession weaken recruitment? Such data do not tell us as much as we think they do. After all, a ministry shaped by following Jesus Christ ought always to involve some measure of downward mobility, and a

high grade-point average does not automatically translate into pastoral wisdom and effective ministry.

But there are other signs that point to decline, or at least to a crisis of confidence, in the power of the ministry to make a difference. Some of it is anecdotal evidence, such as stories about call committees and bishops who cannot find enough talented clergy to replace retiring clergy. Some of it is cultural evidence, such as TV and film portrayals of clergy as moral reprobates or amiable buffoons. Some of the signs point to clergy's role in the broader culture. Recent studies in several cities suggest a decline in people's perception of the clergy's willingness to offer leadership beyond the walls of the church.

The sense of decline is difficult to describe sociologically, but is experienced all too often in daily life. Our leaders seem to lack the pastoral imagination necessary for addressing the deep yearnings and challenging issues of the time. A poignant example of this failure is the prison chaplain described in Sister Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking*. After an inmate on death row confesses details about murders, rapes and a lifetime of crime—"You know, the heavy stuff"—the chaplain responds: "Have any impure thoughts? Say any obscene words?"

Ironically, this sense of a downward spiral into pastoral mediocrity has been occurring at a time when laypeople are expressing interest in the spiritual life at a new level, and are searching for ways to connect their yearnings with a way of faithful living. This is a time when pastoral leaders have a tremendous opportunity to reclaim the significance of the gospel for daily life. Many of these laypeople are leaders in their own vocations. They are asking profound questions about how they as Christians might better address the challenges they face in their daily life. Yet they do not find enough ministers who are equipped to be, or even interested in being, vital participants in such conversations—and in participating as deeply faithful, learned clergy.

What has gone wrong? At least part of the blame must be borne by theological education. Not that seminaries, and the professors and staff that constitute them, are insufficiently committed to the church and congregations. Most faculties and staff share a deep concern for the church and its ministry. Rather, theological educators have no coherent vision of the difference that clergy with pastoral wisdom and imagination can make in sustaining excellent congregational ministry.

We have too often settled for mediocrity in these ways: 1) We have adopted relatively passive patterns of recruitment, thus weakening the quality and quantity of persons entering ordained ministry; 2) we have watered down the curricula; 3) we have too often offered “convenience” and the transmission of information instead of stressing sacrifice and the importance of formation; and 4) we have retreated from engaging the deep questions and issues raised by people in diverse vocations.

Approximately 30 years ago, a profound shift began. Instead of encouraging their most gifted and talented young people to consider ordained ministry as a vocation, congregations began directing their young people toward business, law or medicine. This weakened the pool of people considering ordained ministry, as well as those who entered. Some extraordinary people have continued to enter ordained ministry—but the overall quality has dropped over time.

Theological schools have not adequately identified or lifted up an exciting and compelling vision of ordained ministry as a vocation, and we have not connected with congregations to encourage them to invite gifted men and women to enter the ministry.

Theological schools have compounded the problem by providing those students who do enroll with a weakened education and formation. We have lowered expectations, and have done a poor job of connecting education in the classical disciplines with practical theological reflection focused on nurturing excellence in congregational life.

This problem is exacerbated by the tendency of many theological schools to emphasize educational convenience. Students can receive a theological education with less time spent on campus and in study, with less demand on their energy, and with fewer expectations. One advertisement for a seminary bragged that the school made it “easier” for the student to complete his or her education. It seemed an odd advertisement for a demanding vocation that is centered in a call to costly discipleship.

Too many theological schools seem to suggest that casual theological education is sufficient for casual ministry. This view fails to acknowledge the damage that poorly prepared clergy can do to congregations. Medical schools are demanding of their students, and include a provision for residencies, precisely because they (and we!) are acutely aware of the damage that incompetent physicians can do. So also with

law schools. Yet churches and seminaries act as if our baseline expectation is an average minister. And we lower the bar of expectations, convincing ourselves that the stakes are not all that high.

In the not too distant past, clergy were seen as pivotal spiritual and intellectual leaders, and theological schools were seen as providing vital leadership for congregational ministry and for grappling with broader intellectual and social issues. In several universities, divinity schools were among the most vibrant sources of ideas and sustained engagement. Several decades ago, for example, Duke Divinity School led the way in racially integrating Duke University.

During this same period, gifted clergy ranked high among the influential leaders of communities. In recent years, however, the trend has been reversed. Clergy are often the source of embarrassment rather than of wisdom; theological schools are in danger of lagging behind other professional schools intellectually. This is occurring despite the fact that theological education has been increasingly shaped by academic standards and goals, and at times even academic self-sufficiency. Furthermore, theological schools have backed off from developing programs of continuing education that would provide sustained intellectual, spiritual and social engagement with the questions and issues being raised by people in diverse vocations.

In recent years, many theological schools have begun to recognize these new challenges. They have begun to link their curricula with excellent congregations, and to recruit people for seminary. Through the leadership of the Lilly Foundation, an attempt is being made to reclaim “the culture of the call.” Several schools are undertaking innovative programs in continuing education, while others are offering new models for contextual education.

Theological educators are beginning to envision a different ecology and environment for theological education. For too long, the model of theological education was like a relay race. It was presumed that denominations would shape and form people for the ministry, and then send them off to seminary to receive the critical education necessary for ordained ministry. The seminary would provide those tools, and then send its graduates out into congregations to serve the denomination.

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of this “relay-race model,” theological educators have rather belatedly discovered that the model has broken down. The

formation of ministerial students in congregations and in the church is no longer taking place. Seminaries must develop new connections with congregations, and see the task of formation and education for ministry as a complex partnership between seminaries and congregations—one that must draw clergy and laity, faculty and students, together on a more regular basis.

With this vision in mind, Duke Divinity School is undertaking a major project on reclaiming and nurturing the importance of pastoral wisdom and imagination. “A Program to Form a Learned Clergy” was developed through a yearlong strategic planning process, and has received \$10 million in support from the Lilly Endowment.

Our effort emphasizes these strategies:

- 1) developing partnerships with 15 “teaching congregations” that will help make connections between excellent congregations, the formation of pastoral wisdom and imagination, and the challenges and opportunities of theological education
- 2) recruiting and supporting a new generation of gifted and talented students for Master of Divinity programs, and nurturing doctoral students who will strengthen teaching in seminaries and divinity schools, especially through stronger links with congregations
- 3) developing faculty leaders who serve as catalysts for reshaping conversations and courses, and who help to think through the institutional strategies necessary for us to address critically important issues across the curriculum
- 4) making the divinity school environment more conducive to conversation, community and worship
- 5) cultivating sustained learning among clergy, laity, faculty and students together

The final emphasis, the cultivation of sustained learning, aims to develop a comprehensive program that enables clergy, laity, faculty and students to think about how Christian faith helps shape congregational life and respond to the challenges that laity face in their vocations. We will do this through interrelated local, regional and national initiatives that aim to stir people’s imaginations and enable them to reshape their habits of practicing Christian faith.

These strategies are not unique to Duke Divinity School. We do hope to draw these strategies together into a coherent program. For example, the students selected

through the scholarship program will serve as apprentices to the senior pastors of our teaching congregations, and will participate in the sustained learning programs. Faculty leaders and doctoral students will also work with congregations and participate in the programs. Faculty members will work with the divinity fellows and doctoral students, and members of the teaching congregations will be encouraged to participate.

We hope this effort will foster a major advance in our theological education, and also nurture important conversations about how best to raise up and sustain the kind of pastoral leadership that makes a difference. We want fewer clergy asking, in response to heartfelt confessions, “Have you had any impure thoughts?” and more clergy and congregations asking themselves what their ministry would look like if all the children in the community were their children. There is too much at stake to strive for anything less.