

How much education does a pastor need?

## **There's an uncomfortable truth for us pastors: we're not academics with sacraments.**

By [David Kamphuis](#)

July 20, 2018

Luther Seminary has received a donation of \$21.4 million dollars in order [to pursue a pilot program for a two-year Master of Divinity degree](#). Since the M.Div degree is usually a four-year program in the Lutheran church, cutting two years is a major change.

After this followed the inevitable and probably necessary debate about whether this was a good thing. In particular, many people in my circles voiced concerns about how the academic side of the degree was being watered down. The familiar refrain was then repeated: the pastor's job is becoming less theology and more community organizer with sacraments. This line is nothing new. Our own presiding bishop has said something similar several times.

A year or two ago I went to [the Gamaliel Network's National Leadership Training](#). It's basically boot camp for community organizers. I tell you the truth, brothers and sisters, I haven't failed so badly since I failed handwriting in the fourth grade. I was not good at what they were training me for. This is not to say that the two calls cannot be reconciled. One need look no further than Martin Luther King Jr. and the many who worked with him. All I am saying is that I would not be a good community organizer.

And I am sympathetic to the complaint that the pastor's role in a congregation has become far too muddled. My official letter of call states that I am called to word and sacrament, but often I am also thrown into the role of nonprofit CEO or maintenance worker or driver. We often do treat word and sacrament like the "additional duties as required" section of the job description and not as the heart of it all.

With all that said, there is an uncomfortable truth we pastors also refuse to accept. As much as we are not community organizers or social workers with sacraments, pastors are also not academics with sacraments.

For a very long time pastors have been treated with the same respect that other academic professionals have been treated. Lawyers and pastors in particular went together, as both professions required advanced degrees that then led into positions practiced in the real world. Since the early middle ages priests and lawyers went together. Both could read in an illiterate society, both advised the king, both helped and led their communities. Heck, they even dressed the same. For the roughly 1,500 years of Christendom, priests were on an equal pedestal with doctors and lawyers (even after the medieval world came crashing down).

And so priests and pastors designed their academic degree to be one that would garner respect from the other academic and professional classes. However, today the church finds itself with two problems: one, there is no longer enough money to sustain such expensive programs. Two, while there are still important academic parts to a pastor's job, we live in a world that no longer looks at the pastor with the same respect as a doctor or lawyer.

The first problem is simple enough. There is no longer enough money to sustain the expense of hard-nose theological degrees for pastors. Ages ago seminary was virtually paid for by the church and what wasn't paid for could be paid off with a well-paying job. As churches have declined so has support to seminaries and the costs of higher education have ballooned. M.Div programs now require tens of thousands of dollars. Put simply, few people have the money for that anymore.

The second problem is more subtle. Even if we had the money, the world of institutionalized cultural support for Christianity is dead or dying. We live in a world where, depending on your generation, many have never had an encounter with pastor or priest. The pastor is, at best, an odd duck in this world and we will probably not receive the same cultural respect we did in days past.

So all that leaves the pastorate in an odd place: no longer able to support the infrastructure necessary for everyone to be an academic and not quite sure that is what God is calling us to be anyway. The days of the pastor researching for hours on end in his (and it was usually "his") study, reading Barth by day and attending the Rotary Club by night, is a thing that is passing away. That passing away means we

must rethink what we wish to accomplish in the training of our pastors.

I have no easy answers to these questions. Only the sense that I think the traditional seminary with the traditional master's degree is going to be a rare thing. After all, there is nothing in all of scripture that mandates a seminary education. It is a tool of the church and if that tool is no longer effective than it must change.

We must remember that seminary education is not the way pastors were always prepared. St. Ambrose of Milan went from being the unbaptized mayor to bishop in the space of week. No seminary there. Pastors are not social workers with sacraments as our presiding bishop says, but neither are we academics with sacraments. We are pastors, called to a ministry that almost eludes definition. Perhaps that is good, for what one age needs is different from another.

What remains constant is word and sacrament. Fortunately, those things do not depend on our efforts but on the work and grace of Christ. If Christ is leading us to a place where the preparation of leaders in his church is changed, then who am I to disagree?

*Originally posted at [The Fire Escape](#)*