

Learned behavior: Skills for ministry

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

Several years ago I was part of a discussion of theological education which tackled two sets of questions: First, what skills does one need in order to be an effective clergyperson? What does one need to know? Second, how does one learn the skills and procure the knowledge? Where is it learned and procured? Who teaches?

The participants in that study concluded that a classic theological education—the essence of which has not changed much for centuries—is necessary. In other words, people need to study the Bible, theology and church history, and the more rigorous the study the better. But the skills necessary for effective ministry are learned elsewhere.

We talked at length about the dilemma [Tom Long underscores](#) in this issue: while courses in what we have learned to call church “praxis” are part of the solution, scholars in those fields have trouble getting themselves and their courses taken seriously in the academy. Edward Farley has observed: “The very structure of theological studies alienates the whole enterprise from praxis. Hence proposals on behalf of praxis made to that structure are quickly and easily absorbed and trivialized. Practical theology never has existed and does not now exist. The closest it ever came was a gleam in Schleiermacher’s eye” (“Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm,” in *Practical Theology*, edited by Don S. Browning [Harper & Row, 1983]).

My experience in that group helped me identify how I learned to be a minister. My divinity school offered one course, at the very end, which tried to cover everything we would need to know. But the school also provided for a full year of internship between the middler and senior years, complete with mentoring and writing assignments. That made a huge difference. I learned by doing, and by apprenticing myself, almost unconsciously, to ministers I respected.

The church desperately needs scholars and teachers of practical theology, as Long argues. It also needs more creative thinking about the place of mentoring and apprenticing, which in the end constitute the ways that people learn to be ministers.