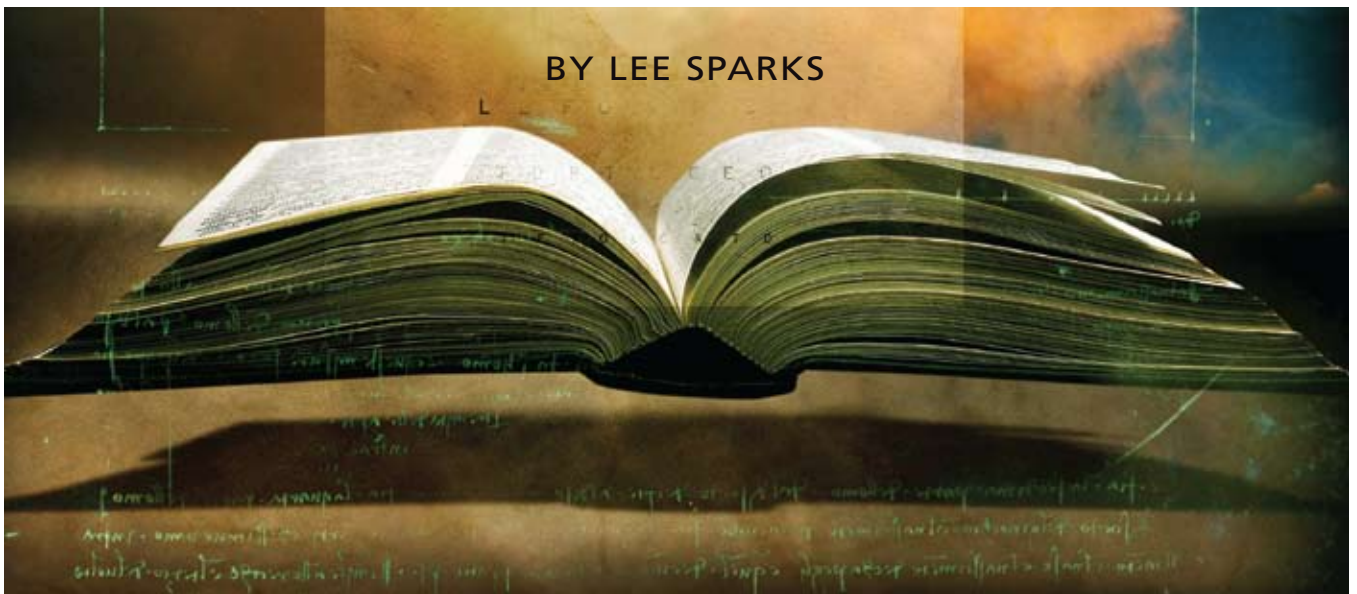


DO YOU REALLY NEED A DOCTOR OF MINISTRY?

An Open Letter to Seminary Deans About Doctoral Programs

BY LEE SPARKS



Dear Seminary Deans,

I confess upfront that I'm an education "junkie." If I were independently wealthy, I would stay in school for years and years, until making myself practically unemployable. Few things in life give me a surge of adrenaline as the first few days of a semester, when I receive class syllabi and imagine all the learning I will experience in the upcoming semester. I've earned a Bachelor of Arts, a Juris Doctor, and a Master of Divinity. (And still making monthly payments on consolidated student loans.) Graduate schools can "see me coming" as I gaze wistfully upon their ivory towers.

It's been nearly 10 years since I earned a Master of Divinity degree and was ordained into pastoral ministry. I loved the moment at commencement when the faculty "hooded" me with the red-colored cloth that symbolizes divinity.

I was happy with the education I'd received. When I graduated, I was confident I'd been spiritually formed, intellectually challenged, and practically prepared to begin life as pastor of growing and vibrant congregations. I expected to take my place as the resident theologian of said congregations.

My ordination service was one of the highlights of my life. I traveled back to the local congregation in which I'd grown up. I felt like David returning victorious from battle to the cheers of adoring fans. I received symbols of the pastoral office: a liturgical robe, a chalice and paten, and a Bible presented by my mother. I was one of the very few "Timothies" the congregation had produced. I believed that I was responding to God's call. Professors, other pastors, family and friends—some of whom had traveled great distances—joined me in consecrating my life for ministry on that memorable July Sunday morning.

Oh, how fast fortunes can turn!

On Monday afternoon *the day after* my ordination, I received a phone call from our volunteer youth worker at the church I was serving in another state. In his youthful zeal and exuberance (and in my absence), he felt God had led him to perform an impromptu baptism of some teenagers after a youth group meeting and called "just to let me know." His call was then followed by calls from a couple of highly agitated church elders who demanded to know whether I had authorized the youth worker to conduct a baptism and to demand a meeting to discuss the "future course of youth ministry at our church." The elders' calls were followed by those of other concerned church members who wanted me to know that "a lot of people were upset" and to be prepared for a lot of hard feelings and conflict when I got back from my ordination.

As I flew back the next day to face the hot war waging in my congregation, I suddenly felt a *lot* less competent than I thought a seminary-trained newly ordained pastor should feel. The truth is, since the day after my ordination, I have never felt totally confident in pastoral ministry. At first, I felt as if I had been cheated by bothering to earn the M.Div. Much of the classroom discussions had centered on the Jesus Seminar, the "synoptic problem," source theories of the Old Testament, the validity of various theological viewpoints (such as liberation, feminism, narrative, neo-classical, the social gospel, postmodernism, and on and on, endlessly), and the warts in church history. Comparatively little time was spent on dealing with the realities of congregational life together. I was trained to be a "chaplain" of sorts, giving pastoral care as requested, preaching erudite sermons, and teaching in a critically reflective style. The skills I had to learn in the "school of congregational hard knocks" was dealing with deep-rooted congregational schisms, how to *lead* versus merely managing the status quo, how to transform a congregation from maintenance to mission, how to equip the non-paid ministers (aka volunteers), how to live with a constant shortage of funds, and how to deal with a stewardship theology of stinginess disguised as frugality.

All that being said, would I do the M.Div. again? Absolutely. However, be forewarned that as I approach the possibility of undertaking a D.Min. at your seminary, I'll be using the skills of critical reflection so highly valued in theological education to critically evaluate *your* program.

Be prepared to respond to the following major questions.

Q1: Is your doctoral program relevant?

I don't want "more of the same" type of education that I earned with the M.Div. I don't want to hear diatribes either for or against the Jesus Seminar. I don't want to hear about whether Kings David and Solomon as portrayed in the Bible are historically accurate. I am exhausted and exasperated with the unrelenting agendas of extreme liberals *and* their extreme conservative opponents. Show me how your D.Min. program will make a significant difference in relating well with the culture in which most people live, both inside and outside the church. Help me shake free of dysfunctional ministry practices. Help me discern my calling today in pastoral ministry and retool for the future. It's okay to stress critical reflection, but please don't be needlessly negative. Help me develop a sense of realistic hope for the future.



Q2 : Is your doctoral program worth the investment of time and money?

I assume that I will not make more money by earning a D.Min. No problem, since I never got into ministry to make money anyway. But I don't want to be financially ruined, either. When I look through your volumes of catalogs and other marketing materials, it becomes readily apparent that I will be looking at about \$10,000 to \$15,000 in tuition alone for the D.Min., plus books, fees, travel, housing while visiting campus, and so on. It also appears that scholarships and grants are fairly rare among D.Min. programs. I know that funding for *all* of theological education is limited, and reserved primarily for the M.Div. students. So, to be blunt, is your program the best use of the pittance that most congregations set aside in their budgets for the continuing education of their pastors? Will your program bring more bang for the buck than your non-seminary competitors offering intensive seminars, online training, practical skills workshops, and so on? When I look at the thousands and thousands of dollars for the total tab for a doctorate, would I be any better off if I were to simply use those funds to purchase pastoral magazines, journals, books, and other media, and make my library the envy of my pastor friends in town? Don't bother bringing up the topic of student loans. Other prospective students might bite at that bait, but not me. Not again.


Q3 : Is your program organized coherently?

After looking at dozens of seminary catalogs and Web sites, there's a huge diversity of program goals, structures, course offerings, and so on. Much more so than M.Div. programs. Your programs seem to split along the lines of "generalist" versus specific "tracks" (such as preaching, pastoral care, or Christian education). That being said, I was surprised at the fairly large number of seminary Web sites that could not coherently describe their D.Min. programs, much less their current course offerings. The printed catalogs were not that much better. At this stage in my life and ministry, I'm not looking for chaos in a doctoral program. Even if yours is a "generalist" program, you'll need to be able to tell me what to expect in the next three to six years before I pony up my time and money (or the money of generous benefactors). Put current and accurate information on your Web site, including the specific requirements for the dissertation or other research project. If you offer specific tracks for the D.Min., tell me upfront which faculty members will be involved in it, and whether they will be on their sabbatical at any point during the time of my D.Min. For example, if you have a "star" preaching professor, please tell me when your star will be gone on sabbatical and who will be teaching the star's D.Min. classes in the star's absence.

Q4 : Is your D.Min. program a high priority among your faculty?

Your seminary's first priority, of course, is the preparation of students in your Master of Divinity programs. The Master of Divinity is your primary purpose to exist, your bread and butter, and the church's first expectation of you. Fine. But where in the food chain are your doctoral programs? Are the faculty assigned to the doctoral programs devoted to them as their *first* priority in a long list of commitments? Or is it an ugly stepchild of faculty devoted primarily to their M.Div. students and their own research and writing? I am aware of a 1987 study published by Auburn Theological Seminary and Hartford Seminary in which seminary faculty members at that time agreed that doctoral programs have helped improve public relations among clergy, congregations, and the public by showing a significant commitment to the continuing education of pastors. However, the same study showed that faculty believed doctoral programs were "stretching them thin" and "consuming time that should have been used for research and writing." The study also indicated D.Min. programs were a small stream of total revenue for seminaries. Have things changed much in the last 20 years? Enrollment in D.Min. programs in 1984 was 6,721. In 2005, D.Min. program enrollment had mushroomed to 9,045. Do faculty still feel stretched too thin due to their D.Min. involvement? Is the financial return to your seminary still relatively small? If so, is the attention given to the program also relatively small? Not being critical—just asking.

As I stated at the beginning, I am an education junkie. But after having earned a college degree and two professional degrees, I am aware of the hazards of my addiction. No more school just for school. Still, I sincerely want to know about your D.Min. programs, and I know that I'm not alone in my curiosity. Our Rev! Magazine research indicates that about two-thirds of our readers have earned their M.Div. Please show us how your programs will be relevant, affordable, and worth the time of your faculty and us students.

Thanks for considering my open letter. I look forward to hearing from you. My email address is shown below. 



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How Do I Find the Right D.Min. Program for Me?

It's important in planning your D.Min. to gather information from a variety of schools to compare their offerings and determine which comes closest to meeting *your own particular continuing education needs*. There's no "best" program for everyone. Some key questions to guide your planning:

- ***Do I want to sharpen a particular ministry skill or concentrate more on analysis and critical reflection about ministry in general?***
- ***Do I already have an interest in a particular area of ministerial concern that I would like to deepen and research, or do I want to be a generalist?***
- ***For what do I want to use this work and degree? Being a better field education supervisor? Organizing my ministry work more coherently? Preparing for a specialized ministry? Working out my own theological***

understanding? Getting a better job?

- ***Is being on the main campus itself for a time important, or is an extension program just as good for me?***
- ***How much peer-based learning and interaction do I want, as compared to more traditional instruction?***
- ***How much time can I devote to D.Min. work and for how many years to complete the degree?***
- ***How strongly does the faculty of a school support and participate in its D.Min.?***

These are but a few of the leading questions to bring to the information you receive about various D.Min. programs. The main thing to seek is a combination of your individual needs and the characteristics of a particular program that seems to get the best fit for an exciting and demanding educational experience.

Source: Princeton Theological Seminary www.ptsem.edu