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## Guest Editorial: Seminaries Must Balance the “Ought to Learn” and the “Need to Know” in Doctor of Ministry Curricula

Thomson K. Mathew  
*Oral Roberts University*

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## **Seminaries Must Balance the “Ought to Learn” and the “Need to Know” in Doctor of Ministry Curricula**

by

Thomson K. Mathew

The education of clergy has been a subject of some interest in contemporary America, and a recent study by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching started a national dialogue about this topic. This study on how Jewish and Christian seminaries integrate knowledge, skills, moral integrity, and religious commitment examines classroom pedagogies that integrate the cognitive and practical aspects of the profession. The study also identifies the pedagogic resources that inform seminary faculties to maintain the relationship between theory and practice and intellect and commitment. However, the focus of this study is the first professional degree in ministry—the Master of Divinity.

The Master of Divinity (M.Div.) is the first graduate level of formalized theological curriculum and leads to ordination. The Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.), however, is the second professional degree and is available to a pastor with a Master of Divinity and at least three years of post-M.Div. professional experience in ministry. This degree is offered in a continuing education format in most seminaries, and a significant portion of students are mid-career clergy. Currently 130 seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada offer this degree (A.T.S., 2007).

A random review of seminary catalogues reveals that at many seminaries the Doctor of Ministry curriculum—especially generalist D.Min.—appears to be a list of subjects students ought to learn as decided by smart theologians in the academy. However, research studies show that many Doctor of Ministry curricula fail to adequately reflect the post-M.Div. learning needs of ministers (Gamble, 1970; Traylor, 1984; Walker, 1986). There seems to be confusion about the nature and needs of the D.Min. students and the uniqueness of the highest professional degree in ministry.

Educational philosophers in the field of adult education insist that three factors must be considered before programs are developed and implemented (Elias, 1984):

- the nature of the learner and the role of the teacher—as reality
- the content—as truth
- the appropriateness of curriculum—as value

A good professional curriculum should attempt to balance the “ought to learn” and the “need to know” of a particular field. For this balance to take place in the Doctor of Ministry curriculum, planners may have to overcome the apparent fear that responding to the felt needs of D.Min. students might jeopardize the academic quality of the degree. They may also have to acknowledge that academics outside the minister’s immediate world may not know best what the minister needs to know to function well in that world (Nichols, 1978; Olson, 2009).

The learning needs of ministers have been a subject of significant academic study in the past. Unfortunately, a number of these studies are now dated as this has not been the focus of professional development research in recent years (Olson, 2009). According to James Berkley (1984), for instance, generally speaking, ministers need remedial, retooling, and renewing education. Connolly C. Gamble, Jr. (1977) divides ministers’ needs into five categories: (1) knowledge, (2) growth, (3) training in skills, (4) changed support systems, and (5) therapy. Donald Elmer’s (1973) study of mid-career Methodist ministers divides the needs into six

categories and spells out the needs more clearly: (1) improvement in communication skills; (2) educational ministry skills; (3) counseling skills; (4) basic administration skills, such as multiple staff relations; (5) organizational development skills, such as planned change strategy; and (6) current trends in theological development. Other studies from the 1970s have highlighted needs such as group dynamics, combined lay-clergy educational experiences, conflict resolution, and enabling skills (Elmer, 1973; Fortier, 1972). Jimmy Walker (1986) clarifies the needs further in a study of Southern Baptist ministers:

- Counseling
- Leadership and organizational development
- Church growth
- Evangelism
- Personal spiritual development
- Social issues
- Preaching/communication
- Teaching
- Relational skills
- Personal ministry

A national study of post-M.Div. learning needs of ministers using a stratified random sample of 400 professional chaplains (Mathew, 1992) identified 40 continuing education needs of clergy in three major areas: professional skills, knowledge, and personal development. The survey instrument was developed from research studies on the learning needs of parish clergy and pilot testing of professional chaplains, which should make the study relevant to most practitioners of ministry. A careful analysis of the data (using factor analysis) pointed out six factors to which the 40 learning needs clustered: (1) leadership, (2) personal growth and wholeness, (3) pastoral ministry skills, (4) spirituality, (5) administration, and (6) public worship. From a curriculum theory perspective, these factors must be involved in some way in any systematic continuing education of ministers. The doctor of ministry is unique in that it is a professional degree (with academic standards) that is earned by most candidates in some continuing education format. There is no other degree of its kind for comparison. Therefore, seminaries should not be afraid to incorporate non-traditional educational approaches to accomplish the D.Min.'s unique situation.

The time for theory-based D.Min. curriculum development has come. Seminaries have always known what D.Min. students ought to learn in terms of classical theological disciplines because there is clear information on what they also need to know. The challenge is to put the “ought to” and the “need to” together in a responsible way that requires the intentional effort of teachers, learners, and researchers. Courses addressing the six factors and associated learning needs mentioned above must find their way into the D.Min. curriculum. This is especially true of tracked, generalist D. Min. programs that allow minimum or no electives.

The first professional degree in the fields of medicine, dentistry, and law is a doctorate. The D.Min. is different in that it is the second professional degree in its field. This difference should give seminaries some freedom to design a truly non-traditional curriculum. Personal development—not just knowledge and skills—for instance, might be one of the unique aspects to be included in the curriculum. Personal wholeness is a competency issue in ministry. Why shouldn't seminaries recognize it in their doctor of ministry curriculum?

It has been shown that prestige and desire for upward mobility are not the chief motivators of D.Min. students (Carroll, 1988). Instead, they are motivated by learning needs

(Carroll and Wheeler, 1987). Responses to these felt needs and academic expectations of a professional doctorate must guide the development of doctor of ministry curriculum. A curriculum balancing the academic expectations of the faculty (things students ought to learn) and the felt needs of the degree seekers (things they need to know) will benefit the candidates and the ministry.

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**Dr. Thomson K. Mathew** is Professor of Pastoral Care and the Dean of the Oral Roberts University College of Theology and Ministry in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He is a graduate of Yale University (M.Div., S.T.M.), Oral Roberts University (D. Min.), and Oklahoma State University (Ed.D.). He may be reached at [tmathew@oru.edu](mailto:tmathew@oru.edu).

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