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What Matters in a 21st Century M.Div.?

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As “Chief Academic Officers” (CAO) theological school deans provide oversight for the development of an effective curriculum. They are challenged to lead Faculty to develop a course of study that can *demonstrably* prepare clergy and church leaders for the current, and future, needs and challenges of the Church and church-related ministries. That’s no small challenge in this liminal epoch. Deans lead institutionally conservative organizations with industrial age structures and methods in an era of globalization and rapid technological change that is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, chaos and ambiguity (or, VUCA to use the acronym created by the U.S. Military Academy to describe the world of the 21st century). As professional schools, theological schools may be hampered by the prevalent model that emulates the technical rationality of higher education. Herbert Simon believed that all professional practice is centrally concerned with what he called “design,” by which he meant the process of “changing existing situations into preferred ones.”

(1) The dilemma is that “design” in this sense is precisely what professional schools do not teach well, if at all, claims Donald A. Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*.

(2) Innovative deans struggle to lead their faculties to address the changing needs of both Church and students (future congregational and ministry leaders) through the process of education delivered through a course of study, the curriculum. How do you balance the traditional theological curriculum with the current, and future, realities that are being

redefined, including, among others:

- The changing nature of teaching and learning in both schools and professions
- The increasingly fragile institutional structures that support theological education
- The perceived (negative) value of an extended formal advanced theological degree
- The characteristics and needs of changing student demographics
- The pressures of uncertain economic realities in theological institutions
- The impact of compliance issues from non-theological accrediting bodies
- The isoquant changes brought about by educational technologies.

One curricular tension in theological education is finding the balance between scholarship and formation (perhaps more accurately, between “academics” and formation). I recently heard one seminary president actually confess to an audience, “We know this is not the best way to prepare ministers, but we do the best we can.” To what extent can a scholarship-oriented Faculty help prepare seminarians for the realities they will face in non-academic contexts of ministry? Can the traditional theological-classical Faculty create and pull off the curriculum needed for the 21st century? One challenge, of course, is that the M.Div. has become an “academic-professional” degree which is situated primarily and largely in an academic context and framework. Attempts at unlinking purpose and outcomes from that traditional context is not easy for a variety of reasons. A common liability for Faculty when engaging in curriculum revision is self-referencing, believing that what it values most in scholarship is what is most important in a ministry degree program. Scholarship is important—that’s not the issue, nor the question. The question at hand is: what is needed for a 21st century M.Div.? Below is information that may be helpful to consider as Faculty makes decisions about the creating “an M.Div. for the 21st century.” One informing framework for this task is: “What actually makes a difference in being effective in ministry?” Trilling and Fadel, in *21st Century Skills, Learning for life in our times* (2009) cite the study from Conference Board, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, & Society for Human Resource Management, 2006, that lists eight essential skills for the 21st century leader. They are:

- Oral and written communication
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Professionalism and work ethic
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Working with diverse teams and partners
- Applying technology
- Leadership and project management
- Emotional Intelligence.

From the *Journal of Religious Leadership* (vol. 10, no. 1, spring 2011), which identified six dimensions of leadership success:

Organizational leadership

1. Public leadership

2. Collaborative and connected leadership
3. Reconciling leadership (conflict resolution)
4. Resourced leadership (integration of scripture, church history and tradition, local history, personal stories with organizational theory and best practices in local church conflict, ongoing change dynamics, strategic planning processes)
5. Learning leadership (ongoing formal and informal learning through writing, reading, reflection that guides and directs leadership in situations of change and conflict. Capacity for self-awareness and feedback from congregations and other social networks for discipleship and faithfulness) (p. 57).

An article in the *Journal of Religious Leadership* (vol. 11, no. 2, fall 2012), identified five epochs and relationships that make up “the ecology of clergy vocation.” One related directly to the seminary education experience. The others provide challenges and resources to seminaries in addressing clergy formation issues:

1. Formative faith experiences (family of origin, and the congregation of formation provides a mental model of Christian vocation)
2. One’s experience of faith during college
3. The congregation of call
4. The nexus of organizations that shape a student during seminary years
5. The initial experiences as they move into ministry (first call).

The Clergy Vocational Competencies identified by the Virginia Conference, UMC (<http://www.vaumc.org/>) include:

- **Evangelism and Discipleship:** Demonstrates the ability to lead the congregation in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.
- **Ministry Development:** Demonstrates a willingness to lead the congregation in establishing ministries of nurture, outreach, and witness.
- **Proclamation:** Possesses and articulates a working knowledge of biblical faith; demonstrates the ability to communicate and apply the gospel of Jesus Christ in culturally relevant ways to the diverse population groups of our conference.
- **Commitment to Inclusivity:** Models and embraces inclusiveness, demonstrating sensitivity to diversity.
- **Visioning and Implementation Skills:** Demonstrates the ability to partner with laity in identifying and articulating the vision plus the assessment and administrative ability to make the vision become reality.
- **Inspirational and Motivational Skills:** Relates to others in a way that inspires and encourages them in their life of faith.
- **Administration: Demonstrates administrative, management, and supervisory skills.**
- **Pastoral Care:** Devotes time for pastoral care appropriate to the ministry setting, encourages and equips laity for the ministry of pastoral care, establishes and adheres to

visitation priorities appropriate to the ministry setting.

- **Conflict Management:** Demonstrates the ability to handle complaints, settle disputes and resolve conflicts.

And, finally, from Jill Hudson offered, "Twelve Characteristics for Effective 21st-Century Ministry," in *Congregations* (Summer 2010, Number 3).

1. The ability to maintain personal, professional, and spiritual balance
2. The ability to guide a transformational faith experience (conversion)
3. The ability to motivate and develop a congregation to be a "mission outpost
4. The ability to develop and communicate a vision
5. The ability to interpret and lead change
6. The ability to promote and lead spiritual formation for church members
7. The ability to provide leadership for high-quality, relevant worship experiences
8. The ability to identify, develop, and support lay leaders
9. The ability to build, inspire, and lead a "team" of both staff and volunteers
10. The ability to manage conflict
11. The ability to navigate successfully the world of technology
12. The ability to be a lifelong learner.

Given these findings about what makes for effectiveness in ministry how might you lead your Faculty to explore questions like:

- Comparing these lists with our M.Div. program goals, to what extent are we actually preparing people to succeed in ministry?
- Given the competencies listed, do we have the Faculty we need to provide an M.Div. for the 21 st century?
- How well and to what extent does our curriculum address these identified competencies and qualities?
- How well and to what extent are we able to provide for these competencies and qualities in our course of study?
- What might we need to let go in our current curriculum in order to provide for what is needed?
- What might our M.Div. course of study look like if these competencies became the primary degree program goals and outcomes?
- How would we need to change our program and teaching if these competencies were the basis for assessing curricular effectiveness?

(1) See Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972), p. 55. (2) Donal A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (Basic

Books Inc., 1983).

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