

FORMAL PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY: THE 18-30 YEARS

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Graduating someone with a ministry degree does not necessarily increase the number of personnel in permanent ministry. Several factors contribute to significant attrition, especially during the early years of ministry.

Sometimes opportunities come for pursuing other interests that are more financially rewarding. More often, however, leaving the ministry stems from disillusionment, lack of fulfillment, inability to get people to respond to one's leadership, frustration, little sense of progress. Adjusting the manner of preparation will not eliminate the problem, but adjustments in the way we conceive of ministry preparation will preserve for service a greater number of ministerial graduates.

We propose to consciously view the 18-30 years as ministry preparation time. The situation is not one in which four years of college prepares people for ministry and after that they do ministry. Such a conception would be improper on two counts; the ministry mentality and practice must precede graduation. The idea here is hardly new; most people probably agree with it. However, the concept needs to be adopted intentionally and deliberately as the regular expectancy both of churches and young people.

Lengthening the time allows a person to phase into leadership ministry. The normal inadequacies of the early years become parts of growing rather than instances of failure. The "system" must operate in a way that "failures" can occur without destroying. Otherwise, people overreact when ministers do fail. As a result, young ministers get destroyed and church members get disillusioned.

Lengthening the time phases people into ministry because it allows for graduate study, internships, residencies, and associate ministries. In recent years the number of summer and yearlong internships has increased noticeably. More churches have seen the value of taking part in the training of servants and have made the necessary organizational and financial arrangements to do it. Such programs are healthy because they let young ministers regard themselves that way. Many "mistakes" can be avoided because there is someone to talk to and give counsel. Mistakes that do happen are more easily kept in perspective, because mistakes happen when people are learning. Other responsible ministers are present to provide stability.

Not only is the time lengthened, but the lengthened time covers an important period of great change. It gets a person past spouse selection. It allows family to get started as well. The couple has experienced some setbacks and has learned how to relate to each other

“through thick and thin.” In keeping with that, other people have begun to regard them as peers instead of kids. They know from their own experience what it means to be married, what stresses come with raising children, what economic pressures are there.

Regardless of how much American culture prizes its youth, it respects maturity and does not fully grant that respect until people reach late twenties or early thirties. Consequently, it is not realistic for a 22-year-old to expect to lead an intergenerational group. They and the minister sense something unnatural about the situation. Given cases may work, but it goes against the grain and leaves a bad taste for what the ministry is like. The problem may very well have nothing to do with ministry; it may be a procedural problem that lies in the system of ministry preparation.

Stretching out the time lets people phase into ministry and into leadership; it also lets people finish developing into adults. They can learn to enjoy work as well as play, to operate from internal motivation instead of external compulsion, appreciate the importance of group process rather than operate as “mavericks.” A longer preparation time helps remove the youthful idealism that fosters criticism and an all-or-nothing mentality. It also gives an opportunity to practice the skills that cannot easily be taught in formal education.

We want people to enjoy ministry in the long term. By deliberately setting a twelve-year expectancy, we help them settle into a natural progress toward leadership ministry. We believe they and the churches benefit in the long run.