

## **What Can Be Done to Increase the Number of Clergy Who at Least Graduate College?**

**by George W. Farmer Jr.**

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I have attended and participated actively in churches everywhere I have lived. One thing has always been constant—the debate over the qualifications clergy need to serve in the Church, especially in the position of pastor. The debate continues today—with a significant shift. The demand for clergy with a college education has become almost ubiquitous, with a significant number of congregations insisting upon graduate level degrees before they will consider any other factors.

Over the years, scholars, and anyone who attended black churches on a regular basis, have noted that the black preacher and black pastors often were the most articulate and often the best-educated people in the Black Church, no matter how much or how little formal education they had. This was particularly true in the rural church, where most members did not get the opportunity to study and expand their education beyond basic rudimentary learning. This phenomenon began to fade in the urban churches of the 1940s–1960s as black congregants were more apt to have benefited from improved primary and secondary education.

As educational opportunities improved across the board, and especially as more and more black churchgoers began to obtain college educations, the self-taught or informally trained preacher started to operate at a disadvantage. Indeed, as we transitioned into the twenty-first century, even rural churches with memberships of less than fifty members started to demand degrees, including the Master of Divinity degree, before they would even consider an application from pastoral candidates (although these churches were seldom willing or able to pay a living wage to a pastor).

In today's world, the person aspiring to a career in ministry faces the reality that he or she will lose credibility (rightly or wrongly) if he or she does not have a bachelor's degree at minimum—and ideally an advanced degree in ministry or religion. This is a reality, but the real question is what does a college degree of any kind do to help a person function as a member of the clergy?

**If the Call to Preach Also Means the Call to Prepare, How Does the Proper Preparation Look?**

There is no question that a person who is called to ministry can find quality programs at accredited universities where he or she can study the Bible, religion, and other topics related to the ministry of God's word. Universities such as Hampton currently offer academic programs tailored to the student who wants to focus on religious studies.

However, those aspiring to ministry, along with churches seeking qualified clergy, must address a sobering reality. That reality is that our institutions of higher learning seldom cover the areas that clergy need to master if they are to be successful as professionals in this most challenging field. Unfortunately, none of the mainline denominations has done anything to rectify this.

Given that the call to prepare is critical to the person who aspires to please God in his or her ministry, the relevant question is what is the proper level of preparation? First, we must agree that any person who intends to be and remain effective—in whatever field of endeavor—must remain in a learning mode all his or her life. This is particularly important for those pursuing careers in ministry.

Anyone who reads the Bible knows that each time one picks up the Word of God new insights come leaping off the pages. This reality calls for more than just diligent study. It calls for formal, dedicated, guided, and intense study—not the type that can be garnered in a weekly Bible class or a periodic workshop or conference. The type of study that a truly dedicated minister should achieve requires that he or she not only sit “at the feet” of wise and experienced teachers, but also that he or she rub elbows with other aspiring students of the word and emulate the powerful words of Proverbs 27:17: “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” (KJV). The best place to do this is in a seminary or divinity school—ideally one that is accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

However, the best seminaries and divinity schools are graduate institutions. Therefore, the aspiring minister of God should obtain foundational education—ideally in a four-year college or university. This is where the individual starts to gain the breadth of educational exposure that will provide insights into language, social issues and social entities, and organizational skills. While gaining a bachelor's degree, the aspiring minister should begin to focus on digging more deeply to obtain depth of knowledge in theological issues, although this focus is better developed in graduate school.

Overall, the primary purpose of the bachelor's degree for the aspiring minister is to build a base of knowledge upon which he or she can erect his or her professional building—that of a career as minister of God. For example, every minister should be equipped to help people deal with the problems they face on a day-to-day basis. This does not mean that each minister should be a certified counselor, but it does mean that every minister should have some quality, college-level instruction in several areas of counseling (grief, marriage, finances, etc.). Having such

instruction helps the minister avoid counseling in a vacuum or applying Scriptures out of context, and hopefully the instruction lets them quickly know when they need to make a referral to a professional counselor.

Just as we would hesitate to let a physician or dentist treat us without evidence of his or her professional education and evidence of appropriate certifications, we should be even more concerned about the professional development and certification of a person who claims to be a minister of God. The stakes actually are much higher when we consider the damage that a bad or ill-equipped minister can do. Indeed, Jesus, when comparing the damage that Satan could possibly do, declared, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28-29, KJV).

### **How Does One Apply Preparation (Education) Properly?**

The most reasonable way to prepare a minister for service is for the person aspiring to this profession to treat it as a profession for which he or she should have a divine calling. Once the calling is clear, the individual should prepare just as though he or she were preparing to become a lawyer, a dentist, or a physician. In other words, a person who is truly serious about being a professional minister of God should embark upon the same path of applying the skills learned in college as any other person seeking to excel in any chosen profession.

There is a fly in the ointment of this approach to applying new skills. That fly is the unfortunate reality that most often, the aspiring clergyperson must design and build the curriculum to gain the proper level of academic preparation to lead a congregation on his or her own. This can be done, but the person who would lead a congregation effectively should know beforehand that no seminary is geared to prepare a person to be a competent pastor (I speak from experience). Nonetheless, the person who would become a quality professional can do so by melding the resources available today.

He or she must do what professionals in other fields do. The aspiring clergy professional should become aligned with seasoned, successful, professional clergy who can mentor and develop them, teaching them in a practical way the things that institutions can never teach them. This is where churches across the country become most important. Churches and senior pastors should systematically train and develop new clergy! They should show them “the ropes,” so to speak, giving them opportunities to acquire the skills and experiences that will enable them to translate the academic tools they have acquired into usable talents that will enable them to serve and lead congregations under a variety of challenges and circumstances. Doing this will help these aspiring clergy professionals face the most important aspect of their profession. They will learn

what they lack for this challenging profession. This mentorship, coupled with a solid education, a quality circle of feedback from peers, and continuing education, in some form, is all, needed.

### **Does the Call to Preach Have Precedence Over Formal Education?**

The call to the ministry of God is critical. Indeed, for many denominations, the ability to describe one's call is the "*sine qua non*"—the key issue that can short-circuit a person's desire to enter ministry. One reason why the "call" is critical is that this profession—and it is a profession—is a most difficult one. A minister must be able to encourage those who are discouraged, disappointed, and in despair, and must do so at the risk of being blamed if things don't turn out well—a daunting task, one without much prospect for success for many. A minister—especially a pastor—must be able to organize and guide church activities in a manner very much comparable to what a good CEO does for a business enterprise, while at the same time ensuring that grace and mercy are the primary foci of all church activities—encountering the apparent paradox that those two approaches seem to be mutually exclusive.

All the education in the world cannot make up for a divine call. The only true buffer against the trials and tests that can drop a minister of God deep into the "miry clay" that so often plagues clergy is the knowledge that God called that person, in a direct and personal manner, to do the work of a minister. Armed with this knowledge a minister can step out with the full understanding—the faith, that greater level of knowledge—that God not only has his or her back but that God will carry the minister when he or she has run out of the strength and the will to go on.

Knowing that God called him or her to the ministry is a foundation that will sustain the minister of God through the worst trials and tests. However, this knowledge gives another perspective to the minister. When he or she knows that God called him or her, he or she also knows that he or she is responsible directly to God first, and foremost. Therefore, the driving motivation that every minister must have is never to be an embarrassment to God! **Thus, the mantra of every minister called by God should be this: the call to preach is also a call to prepare.** That is why the churches of today should both require and then support the efforts of aspiring clergy to get the maximum amount of academic preparation and then buttress that preparation with effective apprenticeships under the tutelage of seasoned and effective senior pastors who have learned how to turn academic theory into successful practice.