

Thoughts on the Future of DMin Education¹

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It was a long evening. It was about a new, very well designed, cohort model DMin program that met the ATS Commission on Accrediting standards. There was keen interest in the program being offered in a population area in a nearby state that was separated from the seminary by a mountain range that made commuting difficult. The school petitioned to offer the DMin at an extension site, which the Commission on Accrediting had approved pending approval by the appropriate state agency. The school's president, the state higher education official, and I met for dinner to discuss the degree and the site, which was located in a state that did not have a seminary. I have known many people who were uninformed about theological education, but this official was among the least informed!

After general discussion about theological education and the three-year Master of Divinity—virtually the only three-year professional master's degree in higher education—we began to discuss the DMin as a degree that required the equivalent of one full academic year completed in no fewer than three years. This stumped him. A one-year professional doctorate? Yes, we said, it was built on a three-year program so that the total of post-baccalaureate years of study was four, like many other professional doctorates. Then he asked, "What does it qualify a person to do?" Well, we said, it qualifies the individual to do better what he or she is already doing. He found this unconvincing. Every other professional doctorate he had heard of, from DO to MD to PharmD to PsyD to JD, qualified persons to do something *after* they earned the degree that they could not do *without* the degree. I think he was getting ready to pull out his official "reject" stamp when I mentioned the EdD—especially the kind that is offered on a part-time basis for public school administrators and whose graduates often have the same job after they completed the degree as before. He did know about this kind of professional doctorate for educators. The site was approved, but I left the meeting that evening with a renewed sense of the difficulty of defining the DMin in the context of higher education conventions regarding professional doctorates.

An historical reminder

The DMin began in confusion, so it is no surprise that it continues to evoke difficulty in understanding as it did that evening. The records of the ATS Commission on Accrediting bear witness to the initial difficulties. The degree was actually first offered by a divinity school in a research university. The law school had just ceased granting the Bachelor of Laws degree as the basic professional degree for the practice of law and began offering the Juris Doctor or JD. The divinity school was looking for a parallel move for its Bachelor of Divinity, so it began offering a Doctor of Ministry as the initial degree. The Commission was not sure what to do, and freestanding schools were not sure about a doctorate as the initial degree for ministry.

¹ This essay is drawn from an oral presentation to the annual meeting of the Association of DMin Educators meeting at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, 2015. I want to thank my ATS colleagues Barbara Mutch and Lester Ruiz for their reading and commenting on the text, to Chris Meinzer for his queries of the Commission data base, and Eliza Brown for editorial assistance.

A research university could be much more selective in its admission standards than the typical denominational seminary, so it could consider granting a doctorate as an initial degree. Many denominational schools admitted persons for the first professional degree to whom they were not prepared to grant a professional doctorate.

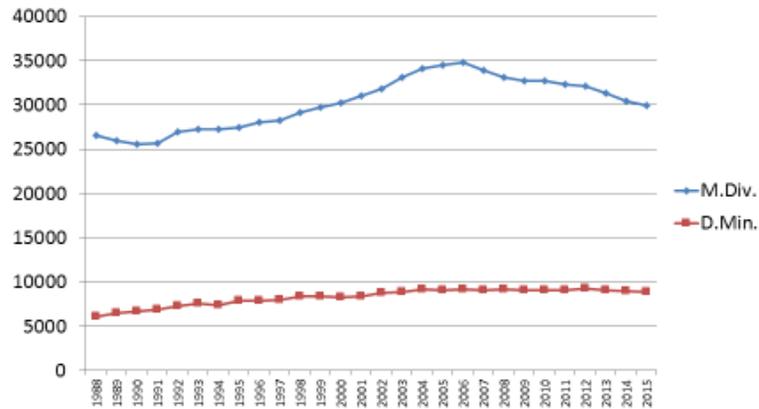
In the end, schools ceased granting the Bachelor of Divinity and began granting the MDiv for essentially the same curriculum and degree requirements. The DMin emerged as a post-MDiv degree. Some schools wanted to grant the degree “in sequence” either as a one-year degree immediately following the MDiv or as a four-year course of study in which the DMin was the only degree offered. Others wanted to offer it after years of ministry following the MDiv. The patterns in which the DMin was offered outpaced the Commission’s ability to write standards for it, and at one time, there were scores of notations for the degree. It took 10 years to normalize the requirements for the degree and provide some public definition. The DMin is one of the few degrees offered by ATS schools that began in controversy. Other new educational practices, like extension or distance education, have invited controversy, but few degrees have.

Current enrollment

I have been working with this degree, in one way or another, for four decades. As a seminary professor, I taught in my school’s DMin program and supervised DMin candidates. Since then, I have worked with the degree in the context of the Commission on Accrediting and its approval of degree programs offered by ATS schools. I have participated in two major revisions of the degree program standard for the DMin. In the context of this work, I have concluded that the DMin can be the best degree offered by ATS schools and it can also be the worst degree. It is the best when it engages equal amounts of serious academic work, critical theological reflection on ministry practice, and the coaching or mentoring that can help good ministers become better at their craft. It is the worst degree when it requires little more than an add-on to an MDiv course, limited theological reading and reflection, and limited efforts to cultivate an advanced level of skills. Both kinds of programs exist, and both purport to meet the DMin standard. Both likely do good, but maintaining high standards for the degree has often been a problem. It is one of the few academic programs among ATS schools where the person given responsibility for administering the program and assuring its academic quality is also the person responsible for recruiting students for the degree program. That is a tough conflict of interest for any sensitive theological educator.

Whatever might be said about program quality, it is clear that the DMin has become an increasingly important degree for ATS schools. Figure 1 shows the MDiv and DMin enrollment in all ATS schools that offer the degrees, and it makes two trends very clear. Across the past decade, the total MDiv enrollment declined from 34,500 in 2005 to 29,990 in 2015 (a 13 percent decline). DMin enrollment also decreased, from 9,059 in 2005 to 8,924 in 2015 (a 1.5 percent decline), but for all practical purposes, DMin enrollment was even across these years. As the MDiv declines and DMin continues even, schools become more dependent on the DMin for tuition revenue, especially since many schools offer limited or no scholarship or tuition forgiveness for DMin students.

Figure 1
MDiv and DMin Enrollment
All ATS Schools



An examination of the DMin enrollment over a longer time frame provides additional information. The enrollment increased as the degree was new, matured, and gained popularity until the early 2000s. Since then the enrollment has been relatively flat. The constituents of this stable enrollment over time, however, have been changing in terms of gender, ecclesial family of the school offering the degree, race, and age.

Figure 2 indicates what has happened to total DMin enrollment in terms of gender. Across the past decade, the number of men enrolled in the DMin has declined more than 6 percent while the number of women has increased more than 16 percent. While the number of men enrolled in the program is almost three times the number of women, the ratio has changed substantially over time.

Another way to look at the enrollment is by the ecclesial families of the schools in which students are enrolled. Figure 3 shows that the number of students enrolled in DMin programs in schools that ATS classifies as mainline Protestant has declined, the number of students in schools that ATS classifies as evangelical Protestant² has increased, and the number in Roman Catholic schools has remained relatively stable. The change is major. More than 60 percent of all DMin students in the 2015–2016 academic year were enrolled in evangelical Protestant schools.

The race and ethnicity of students is another major change over the past decade or so. Figure 4 shows that the number of white students has decreased by almost 20 percent and the number of racial/ethnic students has increased sufficiently to keep the overall enrollment stable.

Finally, Figure 5 shows how the age of DMin students has changed. In 1990, students over 50 comprised the smallest age cohort of students; they now comprise the largest age cohort and approximately 42 percent of all DMin students.

² ATS assigns a classification to member schools as evangelical, mainline, or Roman Catholic/Orthodox. Although these categories are not exhaustive, most ATS schools fit in one of them. While agreement exists about what constitutes mainline Protestant, less agreement exists about what constitutes evangelical Protestant. ATS classifies schools as evangelical if their president or chief executive officer maintains membership in the Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents, an association not affiliated with ATS, or the school identifies itself as evangelical in its self-description.

The composite of these changes shows a roiling reality beneath a calm surface. About the only thing that has not changed significantly in DMin enrollment is the total number of persons enrolled.

Figure 2
DMin Enrollment by Gender

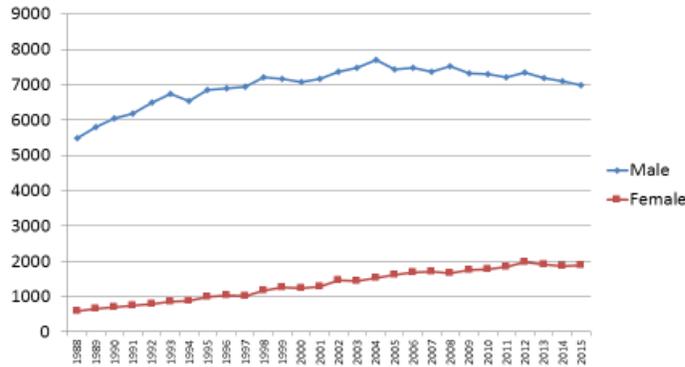
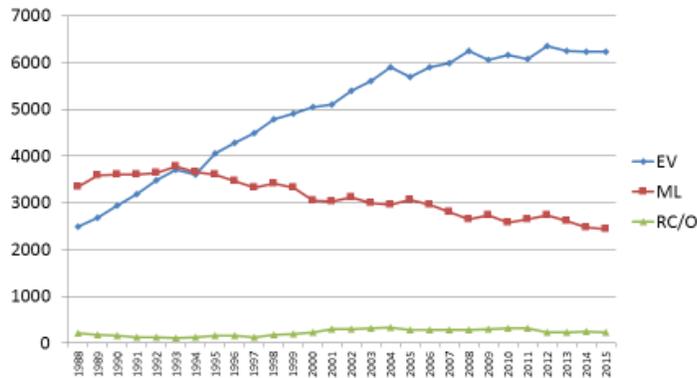


Figure 3
DMin Enrollment by Ecclesial Family



The fundamental characteristics of the DMin student body have changed. Because the DMin is a degree oriented to ministry practice, each of these changes has pedagogical significance. Racial/ethnic students often serve in different kinds of congregations than white students. Women sometimes encounter different issues in ministry than do men. Older students have either served in ministry for many years or completed their MDiv education as the growing cohort of older MDiv students with many years of work or other kinds of experience prior to pursuing education for ministry.

Figure 4
DMin Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

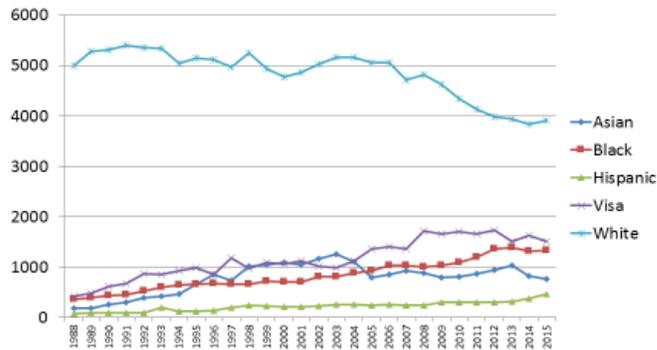
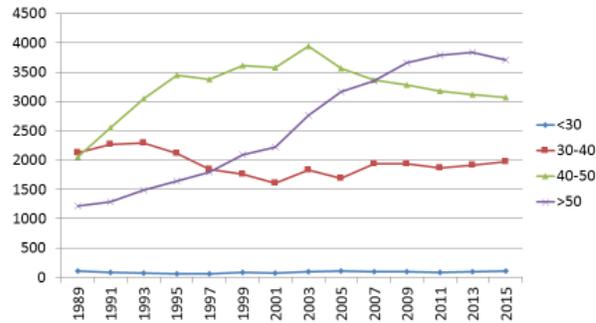


Figure 5
Dmin Enrollment by Age



Because the DMin is an “in-ministry” degree, the changes in enrollment tell us something about changes in the nature of the ministerial workforce—at least the part of it that pursues this degree. It is not possible to estimate how much ministers in DMin programs reflect the characteristics of the total population of ministers, but to the extent that they do, the ministerial workforce is becoming more female, more racially and ethnically diverse, more evangelical Protestant, and older than the preceding generations of ministers. This is highly speculative, but it bears attention if these trends continue.

Changing characteristics of the degree

The DMin degree has moved through many changes in its 50-year history as an approved degree in ATS member schools. The most recent of those changes are evident in the Commission on Accrediting standard approved in 2012, which made three major changes to the requirements for this degree.

The first of these is the location where the residential aspects of the degree are offered. Because the DMin is an in-ministry degree, it has always had limited residential components, and because the resources of the campus were considered important, seminars were required to be conducted on the primary campus

of the school offering the degree, or at an approved extension site. The 2012 standards changed that requirement to one-third of the course work being completed on campus with the possibility that the school could petition for an exception to this requirement. The result of the exception, when offered, is that the DMin does not necessarily have any courses on the main campus of the institution offering the degree; they could be completed in distance-learning courses and sites where a cohort of students would be present. This exception requires the school to attend to several issues, but a degree that has always had limited residential components can now have even fewer.³

The second major change is the required prerequisite degree. The DMin was initially based solely on the MDiv degree or its educational equivalent. The 2012 standard extends this requirement in more specific language by stating that “equivalency” means at least 72 hours of post-baccalaureate study, including the range of disciplines typically included in the MDiv, and a Master’s degree from an accredited institution. This change is significant and gives permission for the DMin to be based on prior master’s level work other than the MDiv.⁴ This change may serve the DMin well in the future. For the past decade, enrollment in the MDiv has been declining, while enrollment in two-year professional master’s and academic master’s degrees has been increasing. If the decline in MDiv continues at the same rate for another decade, and the increase in the MA’s continues at the same rate for the same decade, the number of students enrolled in master’s programs will be greater than the number enrolled in MDiv programs. The change in the prerequisite degree also opens the DMin to an expanded version of what “advanced capacity for ministry” might mean in other areas. Persons with social work or counseling master’s degrees, for example, might have moved over time toward ministry-oriented expressions of their careers and want to use the DMin to clarify and deepen the ministry orientation of an area of professional work that could be practiced in either a secular or ministerial context.

This changing enrollment pattern is significant for all of theological education, not just the DMin. It reflects the increasing number of students who come from evangelical Protestant contexts, many of which are free-church in polity, with no denominational requirements of the MDiv for ordination. It may also reflect the concerns that many have expressed about conventional pastoral ministry as well as the decreasing number of full-time pastoral positions available in many mainline Protestant denominations. The gradual uncoupling of the DMin from the MDiv will make the DMin available to future students who have first entered ministry with either a professional or academic MA, who gain years of ministry experience, and who desire to broaden their education for ministry. It also makes the DMin available to Roman Catholic and other women who may not have been permitted admission to MDiv programs. While the standard changed only a little, the implications are potentially far-reaching.

A third change harkens back to the initial struggles with the identity of the DMin: Is it primarily a degree after several years of ministry or is it an educational extension of the MDiv, without intervening years of ministry experience? The 2012 standard permits schools to admit as many as 20 percent of its students without the required three years of ministry experience between the MDiv or its educational equivalent and beginning the DMin.⁵ Among many reasons, this change is a response to the changing age of DMin students. As I noted previously, persons 50 and older are the largest age cohort of DMin students. These

³ See section E.3.1.1 of the ATS Commission on Accrediting standard for the DMin.

⁴ See sections E.4.1 and E.4.2 of the ATS Commission on Accrediting standard for the DMin.

⁵ See section E.4.3 of the ATS Commission on Accrediting standard for the DMin.

students may have had significant ministry experience before completing the MDiv or its educational equivalent, and the assumption that ministry experience does not begin until after that first degree is completed no longer holds in the way that it did when the degree was initially offered.

The DMin has never been a static degree. While the MDiv has a long history, extending back to the 1930s as ATS made three years of post-baccalaureate study normative, the DMin has been offered in many ways and has changed frequently. These changes have made the degree accessible to different communities of students and have contributed to enhancing the practice of ministry in many ways, but its ongoing changes make it harder to define in publicly useful ways. Is it primarily a sophisticated form of continuing education that results in a degree? Is it primarily a way to develop a specialization in the practice of ministry? Is it advanced ministry education for persons who have come to their present form of ministry from a variety of educational backgrounds? It is, of course, all of these, which is why a definition is difficult.

The future of DMin education

The future of the DMin is as sure as the future of any aspect of theological education in a time of substantive and perhaps transformational change in the church, in higher education, in the ministry, and in theological education. This degree has been both valued and malleable, and that may bode well in a season of so much change. To remain viable, schools, faculty, and DMin educators will need to attend to several issues.

DMin educators, first of all, will need to give ongoing attention to the definition of the degree. On the one hand, the degree must be flexible to meet the needs of students and the ministry contexts in which they serve. On the other hand, it needs to have a sufficiently common core of requirements so that its value can be communicated to and recognized by communities of faith. The definition of this degree has never been easy, as I have argued, and the changes to it will make it harder to define. The changes do not make it a less valuable degree, just harder to define. Second, if the enrollment in the DMin continues to hold steady while overall enrollment in master's level degrees declines, schools will see the DMin—which has a history of often being treated as an adjunct program of the schools—as crucial to the schools' economic viability and begin treating it more centrally. This will put increasing pressure on directors of DMin programs to keep the enrollment up, which simultaneously could put pressure on keeping the quality of DMin students as high as it should be.

These are not problems that will ever be solved once and for all. The academic study of business uses an interesting word for this kind of problem; it calls them “wicked problems.” These are the kind of problems that are never solved. They require ongoing negotiation with an issue, identification of a resolution that works under certain circumstances or for period of time, and then dealing with the same issue again for other circumstances or another period of time. No one definition of the DMin will likely become the once-and-for-all definition. No single balance of enrollment and its economic support for a school with the ability of applicants accepted into the program will ever be achieved. Schools, however, should not stop working on these issues because they are irresolvable. They should work diligently and thoughtfully on them specifically because they are irresolvable

DMin education and the future of theological education

Since colonial days, two major educational models have characterized ministerial education, and I have been arguing that theological education is transitioning to a third model.

The first was evident during colonial times and the early part of our nationhood. In this model, clergy were public intellectuals, and their leadership was expressed as often in civic directions as in ecclesial efforts. They were able to do this, at least in part, because both civic leadership and religious leadership depended on the same kind of knowledge. It was the knowledge of the classics, including Latin and Greek, literature, philosophy, history, and divinity. There were plenty of uneducated clergy around, of course, but the educated clergy knew the canon of the classics. They had no specialized theological education because theological learning was part of the humanities learning that undergirded all advanced education. This pattern continued until the Civil War. Clergy educated in the classics were “learned clergy.”⁶

A change began as theological education separated into freestanding theological schools, showing its tendencies in the last half of the 19th century. Religion practices had advanced significantly, urban congregations had grown larger and more complex, the modern era was dawning, and the church needed leadership educated in more specialized study of scripture, theology, and practices of ministry. Freestanding theological schools provided the setting in which far more specialized disciplines developed. It became less important for pastors to know Cicero or Homer and more important that they know biblical studies, how to organize a church efficiently, and how to guide its growing list of programs and mission activities. This form of theological education reached its full maturity following World War II and understood ministry as a *profession*, like law or medicine, with specialized knowledge and skill.⁷

Much of the 20th century was devoted to a maturing understanding of ministry as a profession and theological education as professional education. ATS grew up as an organization around this model of ministry and the corresponding model of education. It became an accrediting agency in 1936 to advance the professional competence of ministers by increasing the professional capacity of theological schools. By then end of this era, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote about the pastor as “pastoral director” in *Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (1956)⁸ and James Glass wrote *Profession: Minister* (1970).⁹ The Niebuhr book was the report of a study of theological education sponsored by ATS, and the Glass book was written with support from ATS. As such, they reflected a more corporate understanding of ministry as a profession rather than a personal or idiosyncratic perception.

The Doctor of Ministry was perhaps the most unique invention of this perception of ministry as profession. A doctorate invaded territory in theological education that had previously been limited to academic study and, by so doing, argued a case that professional ministerial work was as sophisticated and academically credible as academic work in the theological disciplines. It was a bold claim, and many theological educators argued that it was an inadequate one. Understanding ministry as “profession” (an idea that itself was contested and not endorsed as readily by Roman Catholics and liturgical Protestants as by other Protestants), however, provided the basis for the development of the DMin as a professional

⁶ Glenn Miller, *Piety and Intellect: the Aims and Purposes of Antebellum Theological Education*. (Scholars Press, 1990).

⁷ Glenn Miller, *Piety and Profession: American Protestant Theological Education 1870–1970*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007).

⁸H. Richard Niebuhr. *Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

⁹James Glass, *Profession: Minister* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

doctorate. The introduction of the degree may have represented the high point in understanding ministry as a professional practice in service to communities of faith.

My growing perception is that the professional model is in decline, and perhaps has been for the past few decades, and that theological education is at the beginning of a third model that is very different from the previous two. Like both of them, this model will accommodate itself to changing needs in communities of faith and, like them, does not begin as the other stops. They are overlapping models, at best. What is emerging and will continue to emerge is a formational model that has been in the background and is now coming to the foreground. In this model, the center for religious leadership is not as much the skilled and knowledgeable professional as the person who leads from a deep and abiding sense of faith. In an age of diminishing cultural influence of the church and increasing secularity of the culture at large, religious leaders need to be truly religious and faithful. They need skills from the professional era, of course, but this emerging model assigns skills and knowledge to a secondary role and grants authentic faith the primary role. Both are necessary, but their relative position in the hierarchy of importance has changed.

Henri Nouwen, in the early years of the growing complexity and fragmentation of the current era, argued that “the minister is the one who can make this search for authenticity possible, not by standing to the side as a neutral screen or impartial observer, but as an articulate witness to Christ, who puts his own search at the disposal of others.”¹⁰ Nouwen’s thesis has been critiqued as overly therapeutic—especially the image of the “wounded healer”—and as a model of ministry that does not serve the entrepreneurial leadership needed by struggling congregations. While I think that these concerns are valid, I also think that this image of ministry may have been ahead of its time; it was a leading edge statement. This is a statement of ministry that is far more anchored in Christian and human wholeness than it is in professional skill and knowledge.

A few decades after Nouwen’s book, the ATS accrediting standards adopted in 1996 included a general statement about the theological curriculum that reached in the direction of this emerging model. It states,

In a theological school, the overarching goal is the development of theological understanding, that is, aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith. Comprehended in this overarching goal are others such as deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensibility and character, gaining an intellectual grasp of the tradition of the faith community, and acquiring the abilities requisite to the exercise of ministry in that community.¹¹

That statement remained while other statements in the standards changed in 2010 and 2012. Formational theological education includes educating for an intellectual grasp of theological disciplines and competent pastoral skills, but it undertakes this work with more attention to authentic humanity, relational ability, and spiritual maturity than the older professional model did. In the study of the education for the professions conducted by the Carnegie Foundation a decade ago, formation was identified as central to the education of clergy, and it should be seen as an important way of understanding education for other professions, such as law.¹² Greg Jones and Kevin Armstrong argue

¹⁰ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 103.

¹¹ See section 3.3.1 of ATS Commission on Accrediting standard *The Theological Curriculum: Learning, Teaching, and Research*.

¹² C. R. Foster, L. E. Dahill, L. A. Golemon, and B. W. Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Jossey-Bass, 2006).

that, “insofar as (theological schools) are preparing people for Christian pastoral ministry, they are necessarily involved in formation as well as education, in shaping character as well as conveying content and patterns of thinking, in nurturing holiness as well as equipping people with skills . . .”¹³

What if this hunch about the third wave of theological education is true? If the future center of ministerial work and integrity focuses on the authentic, mature, responsible Christian identity, what is the place of a professional doctorate that focuses on advanced skills and knowledge for the practice of ministry? I think that it will change. The changing character of the DMin that makes it hard to define could become the degree’s most important asset. Might this degree morph into one that focuses at a very advanced level on issues of human wholeness, spiritual and moral maturity, and authenticity in ministry? Could it be the degree that helps people who have sophisticated ministerial skills and knowledge find the spiritual and human resources needed to sustain ministry in the sometimes hostile world of congregations and culturally de-privileged world that religion will increasingly experience in North America? If this more religious identity model of ministry is the model for the future—which of course is debatable—then a very different kind of DMin might be just what is needed to provide communities of faith with the kind of leaders they most need.

What will the future be?

I am surer that we do not know what the future of theological education will be than I am about any future form of theological education. This is a time of transformational change, and by definition, the shape of change that comes from transformation simply can’t be predicted. I have a hunch and think that I see some things, but neither I nor a reader of this essay should take my hunch too seriously. I do know what the past has been. The Christian project has been around for 2,000 years now, and since its earliest days it has been a faith practiced in communities and congregations. And, from their earliest days, these communities have needed leaders. The Christian project is a tradition founded by a teacher, advanced by books, and sustained by intellectual content in addition to faithful practices. And as long as there have been leaders and intellectual content, the church has found ways to educate leaders and study the texts that document the wisdom and advances of the tradition. Justo González has written a concise history of theological education from the Patristic period to the present,¹⁴ and it notes that there simply has not been a time in Christian history when there was not some form of theological education. The forms and approaches have changed, its institutional houses have changed, its forms and expectations have changed, but there has never been a time when the church has not found some way to educate its leaders. This transformational moment in theological education may lead to changes in how ministers are educated, in the institutional houses for that education, in the way their learning is certified, but it will not lead to a time when education is no longer necessary for ministerial leadership and when the right kind of education will not contribute to a more effective and authentic form of ministerial leadership.

¹³ Greg Jones and Kevin Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 121.

¹⁴ Justo González, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015).