

Voices: Dear seminary student, ministry is preeminently practical

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When I was preparing to graduate in 2020 with my Master of Divinity degree from Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, I had plans of going into the pastorate or hopefully ending up in a Ph.D. program—preferably in New Testament or perhaps historical theology.

Things did not go according to plan when I graduated. I did not end up in a pastorate or a Ph.D. program. I desperately pieced together temporary and part-time jobs as I clambered for an economic foothold in the middle of a global pandemic. At one point, I was working in a grocery store.

Eventually, however, I ended up working at Waco Center for Youth, a residential psychiatric treatment facility for teenagers, first as a psychiatric nursing assistant, now as a chaplaincy services assistant.

This experience has profoundly changed how I view my three years in seminary.

Working with teenagers

In October 2020, after a few months of stringing together various jobs, I had an interview to be a psychiatric nursing assistant at Waco Center for Youth. I got the job and started November 1. It wasn't my "dream job," but it was full time, made use of my undergraduate psychology major and felt more meaningful to me than stocking bologna on store shelves.

Ever since then, especially as I transitioned to my current role as a

chaplaincy services assistant this summer, my appraisal of my attitude during seminary has changed drastically. Providing full-time psychiatric, pastoral and emotional care to teenagers who struggle with mental illness will affect your philosophy of ministry significantly.

During the chapel services we offer to our patients, I must keep my sermons 10 minutes long or shorter. When talking to patients, I am obligated professionally as a chaplain to focus on their beliefs instead of my own. If a patient is having an emotional meltdown, I must focus on therapeutic interventions that have little or nothing to do with John Calvin or the Greek aorist tense.

I have made most significant progress with patients, not by discussing theology or biblical exegesis, but by listening empathetically and talking to them about their experiences and struggles. Some of the best pastoral care I have given has not involved discussing religion at all.

If I could redo seminary

If I could redo my time at Truett Seminary, I would put much more time and energy into my ministry classes, and I would take more electives on subjects like pastoral care. Do I regret taking courses on Greek exegesis and early Christian heresies? Not at all. But I do regret neglecting practical ministry courses as much as I did.

There are many aspiring and current seminary students who might be thinking, “Duh,” as they read my words. But there also are many seminarians like me; they have a passion for academics. That is good and right; we need such seminarians.

But I would offer this advice to them: Give your required ministry classes the attention they deserve. Unless you are committed absolutely to Ph.D. studies and “purely academic” ministry, reserve plenty of elective hours for

ministry classes. The future “you” working in full-time ministry—and the people to whom you minister—will thank you.

What classes to take?

Not all seminaries offer exactly the same courses, but most of the “practical theology” courses offered at Truett almost certainly will have analogous courses offered at most other seminaries.

At Truett, students have the option to take either “Leadership for Ministry” or “Introduction to Pastoral Care” as part of Truett’s required “Christian Ministry” classes for Master of Divinity students. I took “Leadership for Ministry.” However, that semester I foolishly dedicated most of my focus and time to my more “academic” classes. (Sorry, Dr. Creech.)

I wish, in addition to putting more energy into my leadership class, I had chosen to take “Introduction to Pastoral Care” as an elective. While three semesters of upper-level Greek were fun and edifying, I could and probably should have given up one of those slots to pastoral care.

Truett also offers a variety of electives in the area of Christian ministry, such as “Life and Work of the Pastor,” “Formation for Congregations and their Leaders,” “Leading Small Groups and Retreats” and more. Truett also allows students to take electives in other departments at Baylor, such as “Loss and Mourning” in the Garland School of Social Work.

I am sure I could have freed up at least one or two other elective slots for courses such as these, instead of taking yet another exegesis or theology course. But I didn’t, and I would encourage other seminarians not to make my mistake.

Should seminarians take advanced electives in biblical studies and theology? Absolutely. But not to the near or total exclusion of ministry

classes.

Clinical Pastoral Education

When I was a college student, one of my ministry professors strongly urged those of us looking at seminary to consider taking a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. CPE is a supervised clinical internship in a hospital or similar institution for chaplains in training. Most seminaries will allow—or even encourage—students to take CPE for seminary course credit.

My professor, who never worked as a hospital chaplain but spent decades as a local church pastor, told us taking CPE was one of the best educational decisions he ever made and that it greatly enhanced his pastoral ministry.

At Truett, I had the opportunity to take CPE. I'll give you three guesses as to whether I did.

Now that I work in an entry-level chaplaincy position, I am kicking myself for not taking such a great opportunity when I had the chance. While CPE is more of a time, labor and credit-hour commitment than a single ministry elective, it provides supervised hands-on ministry training you ordinarily cannot get in a regular class.

The bottom line, however, is this: Most seminaries—particularly Truett Theological Seminary—will offer a variety of opportunities for students to study practical ministry. Any seminarian hoping to minister to people in any significant capacity ought to make sure she or he takes full advantage of such opportunities.

I wish I had.

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