

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE...*CHURCH*?!

“Should I pursue a doctorate?...” Many pastors and others in ministry with a theological masters degree have asked themselves that question. I struggled with this question myself, and over the past two decades since I received my doctorate, I have walked alongside others as they worked through their own answers with the Lord. I have found that often two additional questions arise when considering doctoral studies: “What kind of doctorate should I pursue?...a Doctor of Philosophy (or Theology; Ph.D./D.Phil./Th.D.) or a Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.)? Where should I do my degree?...at a seminary or a university?”

Since I have a somewhat distinctive perspective on these questions as someone with a Ph.D. (Ecclesiastical History from the University of St. Andrews), who has primarily served as a pastor, and has directed and taught in a D.Min. Program for almost a decade, let me share some thoughts that have helped me and others in this discernment process. If you will indulge me as a church historian, let me delay answering these personal questions to ask a more foundational historical question: Why does the church need doctors of any kind in the first place? We don't expect the architect who designs our church to have a doctorate, why would anyone think that the pastor who preaches in it should?!

Part of the answer comes from understanding what “doctor” means, which basically is “teacher” (from Latin *docere*, to teach: doctrine/indoctrinate, etc.). The early and Medieval church designated great theologians such as Augustine, Ambrose, or Jerome as a *doctor ecclesiae*, a “doctor of the church.” John Calvin developed this role more fully in distinguishing the doctors of the church as a fourth office of the church alongside deacons, elders, and pastors. These doctors were to “teach sound doctrine to the faithful” and “prepare youth for the ministry” to ensure that the “purity of the Gospel be not corrupted and to defend the Church from injury by fault of pastors.”

Now that you know why the church needs doctors in the first place, you're ready to go back to your original question, “What kind of doctorate should I pursue?...” or as we can now rephrase it, “What kind of doctor *of* the church is Christ calling me to become? A doctor *for* the church...namely a Ph.D.? Or a doctor *in* the church...namely a D.Min.?” Both are valid; both are needed; both are equally doctorates; but they do have different designs and demands.

Begin with the end in mind: Do you want to teach full-time in a college, university, or seminary? If so, then you should pursue a Ph.D. since its emphasis on doing original research for the academy is foundational to serve as a professor. While there are a few exceptions of professors who have D.Min.s, this is not the purpose of that degree; and of course, there are many Ph.D.s who are not professors, either by preference (as I was during most of my pastoral career) or by the

Darwinian character of the academic job market where dozens to hundreds of Ph.D.s apply for every opening.

The bottom line is that if you want to teach full-time, you need to have a Ph.D., but having this most glorified union card in the world is no guarantee of employment! Keep this in mind as you weigh the costs in money, time, and effort of Ph.D. studies. A typical American program will require several years of class work, followed by comprehensive exams (including languages such as German, French, Latin, etc.) and then several more years of writing your dissertation (on average only half finish). British programs usually don't involve the same level of preliminary work, but provide less support financially and personally in the often lonely process of research and writing. Unless you are working in a field such as missions or preaching, a university context generally is viewed as superior to seminary Ph.D. programs.

Regardless of where you pursue your Ph.D., the most important factor in considering a program is who your dissertation supervisor will be. Since this person will be the primary person you relate to, will ultimately determine if you pass or fail, and will provide the references that will probably be most decisive in landing you a job, you want to make sure it is someone you respect, can work with, and who has good connections in your field.

If you're saying to yourself, "I don't want to go through all that! I want to become more effective in my ministry and maybe do a little part-time teaching.", then the D.Min. is the degree for you. The church needs far more teachers *in* the church than *for* the church.

A D.Min. is primarily a professional degree, not a research degree –more like an M.D. than a Ph.D. It is distinctive in being built upon the basic professional degree for ministry, the Masters of Divinity (M.Div.) or its equivalent (a theological masters degree and supplemental seminary course work of at least 72 credit hours). Ironically, those without a theological masters degree might find it easier to be accepted into a Ph.D. program, and I've had to tell Ph.D.s without a theological masters degree that they didn't qualify for a D.Min.!

I describe the purpose of our D.Min. program as nurturing passionate, reflective practitioners. We want our graduates to be more passionate about Christ and their ministry, to build up a base of knowledge and relationships that will help them reflect upon their life and ministry more incisively, and to be more effective at doing their ministry in the long, as well as the short term. Most other seminary D.Min. programs share similar goals.

D.Min. programs differ about how they structure their course work. Some, such as the one I direct, have a "set menu" where you study with the same students and faculty mentors in a preset curriculum over three years. This cohort model encourages students to build strong relationships and to delve deeply into a

particular specialized area of ministry interest (e.g. preaching, leadership, counseling), but it is not very flexible. Other programs go with an “a la carte” approach where students choose different courses with different sets of students and professors, similar to most masters programs. What may be lost in depth is gained in choice.

Other factors to consider in selecting a D.Min. program include how frequently students are in residency. My program generally has only one 2-week residency per year, which reduces travel costs, particularly for international students. Most of the work is done through pre-residency assignments during the six months prior and through a post-residency project in the six months afterwards. Other programs will meet multiple times during the year, which can make it easier for some to get away and which spreads out the work, but multiplies expenses.

Proximity to campus is less important than for masters students. I often counsel D.Min. students to try to go at least a 4-5 hour drive away so that ministry commitments don’t impinge upon the intensive demands of a residency. It’s much easier to explain that you are too far away to do a funeral than that you have a presentation to make in your D.Min. class scheduled then.

As appealing as exclusively “on-line” D.Min. programs might seem in terms of cost, travel and flexibility, you should remember that ministry is inherently isolating in general, so I think it is worth the extra time and money to develop face-to-face relationships with peers. I often say that our D.Min. program is distance education for 50 weeks out of the year, since that’s when most of the reading and writing occurs! Time together is too precious to dispense with; the internet can supplement, but not replace these real time relationships.

Another consideration in selecting a program includes whether or not you want to deepen your own denominational ties by going to a denominational school or “get out of the bubble” by going to a seminary from another denomination or a multi-denominational school. In addition, you might also keep in mind that D.Min. programs at seminaries that have Ph.D. or other doctoral programs can sometimes seem like the “ugly step-sister” or the “slow reading group” in terms of faculty engagement or institutional investment.

I hope these reflections, gleaned from my studies of church history and my own experience as a doctoral student and director have helped you reflect on your own situation. History has shown us that healthy churches need good teachers just as healthy bodies need good physicians, so asking yourself if you should pursue a doctorate can be a good and godly inquiry. Most of all, remember that no one is more invested in the health of Christ’s Body than the Head, so you can trust that He will guide you through these and any other questions involved in your discernment process.

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For more information about Gordon-Conwell's Doctor of Ministry Program: <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/doctor-ministry/>