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Higher Education and the Ministry
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It is not often remembered these days, but some of the United States' best (and earliest) universities were founded not as institutions of general education, but as seminaries for training ministers. Harvard and Princeton, to name a couple, spent their early decades training clergy. When students graduated, they went out to serve a church, which in the period before and just after 1776 was usually located in a village or small town. In this circumstance, the minister's formal education far outstripped that of nearly every other member of the community. And that difference formed a key aspect of their relationship. The minister was respected not just as a man of God, but also as "the educated man."

In the past century or so, the "education differential" of the relationship between minister and congregation has undergone a series of important changes, which has affected how the minister is seen by his (and now her) congregants.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, access to higher education began to broaden significantly. Many people began to attend colleges and universities and earn bachelor's degrees in a wide variety of subjects, from engineering to English literature. The minister was no longer THE educated man of his congregation, but only one of a growing group of educated people. It was during this time that ministerial training began to change. In the mainstream denominations, it moved from an undergraduate level to a graduate level. If the pastor was not THE educated man of the community, then he was the MOST educated person.

But this did not last. With the G.I. Bill following World War II and the increase in the number of public universities and colleges, the mid-twentieth century saw a large growth in the number of people graduating with bachelor's degrees, and many of them even began earning master's degrees. With the usual ministerial degree now fixed as a Master of Divinity, ministers no longer found themselves distinguished from their congregants by their amount of education. They were just one of the many, or

even the majority, of the community's adults with higher degrees. Instead of being the most educated, a minister could now claim only to be the most educated in religion.

But even this was destined to change. In the 1960s, departments of religious studies began to spring up in colleges and universities throughout the United States. It is not that departments of religion had never existed, but these largely had served as training grounds for students going on to ministerial training or missionary work, or supplied the courses for a school's required course(s) in religion. These new departments taught comparative religions, or world religions, in addition to Christianity. They were not aimed at people wanting to become ministers, but toward students wishing a liberal arts degree, who might otherwise take majors such as history, literature or anthropology.

As people with religious studies majors have graduated and entered society at large, they have added a further dynamic to the education aspect of ministers' relationships with their communities. Now ministers are no longer the experts in religion in general, but experts only in their own religion.

None of this has affected a minister's standing as a person of God, as a representative of his or her church, as an effective community leader, or as a person of moral authority. Ministers find they have more in common with their parishioners now that both groups are equally educated. The gulf between them has lessened, they share more interests, and can better understand and empathize with each other.