

## **Rebooted: A Fresh Start for a Seasoned Degree**

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### **Introduction:**

The Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree was first approved by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) in 1970. Standards for the degree came two years later. Despite some initial reluctance to accept the degree, by the mid-1970s many theological schools had begun to offer the degree. The 1980's and 90's saw an expansion in the number of schools offering the degree with some schools having well over 100 students in the degree program. While the degree is still a viable component of the curriculum of many theological schools, other seminaries have reshaped, suspended and in some cases dropped the degree. Given the decline in seminary enrollments over the past decade and the financial struggles many seminaries are facing, the uncertainties surrounding the Doctor of Ministry degree are understandable. As we move toward the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the degree, I believe that the present state of the church and the seminaries that serve the church make this the appropriate time for the ITC and other seminaries to look again at the degree and ascertain its relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. My perspective on the degree is perhaps revealed in the title I have chosen for this article: "Rebooted: A Fresh Start for a Seasoned Degree."

I believe the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree can, and perhaps should be, an important part of a theological seminary's curriculum. However, I am also aware that the degree has limitations that must be recognized. I will attempt to discuss "the Uniqueness Value and Limitations of the Degree" in my opening section of the article. The second section of this presentation will focus on "What Makes an Effective Doctor of Ministry Degree." While that section represents my personal perspective, that perspective is informed by almost 20 years of direct involvement with DMin Programs. The third section of this article will seek to explore "The Dangers of a DMin Emphasis." The last substantive portion of this paper will discuss what I consider to be "The Benefits of a Well-Executed DMin Degree." Here I intend to suggest the benefits for

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the students, the school, the local congregation and for the broader church and world. The final section will be a brief conclusion. It is my sincere hope that the reader will find this article to be informative and compelling in support of rebooting and giving a fresh start to a degree that is almost 50 years old.

### **The Uniqueness, Value and Limitations of the Doctor of Ministry Degree**

The Doctor of Ministry degree is unique to theological schools and to the ministry. It was envisioned as a terminal degree for persons who were actively engaged in some form of ministry. It was designed to provide persons in ministry with the opportunity to critically assess the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and challenges of the context where they were carrying out their ministry. The DMin student was then expected to design and implement a theologically grounded project that addressed an issue that the analysis of the context had revealed might be critical to the transformation of that context.

The value of the Doctor of Ministry degree is multi-layered. It provides the student with the opportunity to more fully develop a wide range of skills that are essential to effective ministry. It also affords the opportunity for the student, who is also a practitioner, to engage in theological reflection that is rarely available while a person is actively engaged in ministry. The value is also to the locale where the ministry is being carried out. Because the DMin project is designed for a particular context, that context benefits from the insights and practical applications that emerge from the project. Even if a well designed and implemented project does not produce all the desired outcomes, the assessment of where the project was deficient and the systematic analysis of the circumstances that helped create the less than desirable outcomes can provide valuable information for better outcomes in the future.

Depending on the structure of the Doctor of Ministry program, the DMin can also provide the students with peers in their cohort group that can produce new relationships that have the potential to create ministerial support systems that last long after the degree has been obtained. Due to the stress and the loneliness of ministry, the value of such relationships cannot be overestimated. To be able to talk openly and honestly to persons

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with whom a minister has developed a deep trusting relationship may help stem the tide of ministerial depression and tragic suicides.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to the DMin degree that must be recognized. Perhaps the most important limitation is in the nature of the degree itself. The Doctor of Ministry degree was not designed nor is it intended to be a substitute for the Doctor of Philosophy degree. The Ph.D. is a research, teaching degree. The DMin is a degree in practical ministry. As such, the DMin cannot be used as a short cut to a tenured position on the faculty of most theological seminaries. While the DMin may allow the recipient to serve on the faculty of some schools in the area of practical theology, it is not generally accepted as being on par with the Ph.D. by theological faculties.

Another limitation of the DMin is related to the fact that the Doctor of Ministry students are practicing their vocation in the midst of their academic program. That makes it difficult for the typical student to be able to handle a regular course schedule. How and when courses are taught has to take under consideration the work schedules of DMin students in ways that might not usually be a consideration for other theological degrees. That consideration can create pressure on the faculty, the administration and the institution to identify a course structure and delivery system that finds a workable compromise for all who are involved in the program.

### **What makes an Effective Doctor of Ministry Program?**

There are no doubt many effective DMin programs currently operating and I would suspect from the ones with which I am familiar, that those programs vary greatly. Nevertheless, I would suggest that despite a great deal of difference in DMin programs, there are some elements that are essential to an effective DMin program. Among those qualities is the ability to find the right balance between theory and praxis. The right balance requires the student to learn how to analyze the context and develop a sound and defensible theological foundation for the project. The right balance also demands that the student demonstrate organizational skills in the identification, development and implementation of a quality project worthy of the terminal professional degree. On one hand, the requirements for the DMin degree should not amount to a mini-Ph.D. On the other hand, however, the degree should require the student to

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demonstrate that the theory informs and is evident in the practical integration of theory with praxis in the project.

The nature of the DMin degree and the ability to integrate theory and praxis demand that an effective DMin program must seek out capable, dedicated students whose current ministry gives evidence of their gifts. Not everyone in ministry is a candidate for the Doctor of Ministry degree. Every person in ministry can and should seek to improve his/her ministerial skills, but not everyone in ministry is prepared to do the rigorous academic work needed to integrate theory and praxis. Additionally, not everyone is willing to dedicate the time, energy and effort needed to benefit from a quality program. Capable, committed students who want to improve their skills and are willing to make the necessary sacrifice to achieve their goal will help create the atmosphere that produces an effective DMin program. The standards of the DMin program cannot be set so low that it accommodates everyone. Reducing the DMin to the lowest common denominator is a formula for disaster. This is not to be viewed as elitist. Rather this is a reasonable expectation for a terminal degree.

A quality faculty that appreciates the value of the Doctor of Ministry degree is also essential to the creation and maintenance of an effective DMin program. This includes the teaching faculty as well as the administrative faculty that oversees the program. Faculty who teach in the program as a way of supplementing their salary but who either do not appreciate the value of the degree or who are so overextended with other duties that they are unable to commit the time needed for the proper execution of their responsibilities will help destroy a DMin program. Ineffective administrators who do not do their tasks well will also create ineffective DMin programs.

Whether the DMin program employs the regular faculty, an adjunct faculty comprised of practitioners with terminal degrees or some combination of the two, the DMin faculty must have an appreciation for the church and the ministry of the DMin student. The faculty should also be conversant with congregational systems so that they can provide adequate informed direction to students as the project is envisioned and then developed. There is a strong argument for teaming academicians with practitioners throughout the DMin program. Whether or not that is done, the insights gained from both theory and praxis must be evident in the

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teaching and mentoring process if the DMin program is to be effective in reaching the learning outcomes that are identified and desired.

### **The Dangers of a Doctor of Ministry Emphasis**

I believe the Doctor of Ministry degree is an important degree for theological seminaries. However, an emphasis on the DMin can create problems for a school. Among the most prevalent dangers is the mistaken notion that the DMin is a “cash cow” and an automatic solution to a school’s enrollment and income challenges. While a well-run program can increase enrollment and tuition income, it is easy for an institution to calculate the positives without accurately assessing the costs associated with the DMin program. Such things as the increase in salary for faculty, especially if resident faculty have to be paid for course overloads, the cost of additional adjunct faculty and or lecturers, the cost of travel, meals and lodging for any faculty and/or lecturers that are brought in from out of town, as well as the cost of such intangibles as space usage and utilities can greatly increase expenses and subsequently reduce anticipated income. All the costs associated with providing a quality program must be carefully and thoughtfully calculated in order to determine what the tuition for the DMin program must be to avoid the program being a burden on already stressed seminary budgets.

The dangers of a DMin emphasis also include a lack of attention that can lead to a dysfunctional program. Admission standards must be clearly identified and then consistently applied. Course work, especially those conducted by persons other than the regular faculty, must be monitored so that the quality is consistent. Course syllabi should be reviewed regularly and faculty should be required to participate in well planned orientations as well as being required to report absences and inferior student performances so that appropriate interventions can be made early in a student’s journey through the DMin course requirements.

A process must also be developed that allows student projects to be assessed prior to implementation, critiqued as they are implemented and seriously evaluated once the project is completed. The desire to graduate on the part of students, the tendency of faculty to sometimes be more lenient on students who have been in the program for several years and the pressure administrators may exert to move people through the program can undermine the integrity and effectiveness of the degree.

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The aforementioned dangers point to the need for the regular faculty of the institution to monitor and have ownership of the Doctor of Ministry program. The demands on the faculty of most theological schools can be overwhelming. Therefore, it is understandable how the regular faculty can feel that the DMin program is not their concern or that those associated with the program should have the responsibility for monitoring and overseeing the program. That is a mistake. The entire faculty must protect and be concerned about the academic integrity of every degree program granted by their theological school. Without that attention, the reputation of the entire academic program will be questioned and negatively impacted.

### **The Benefits of a Well-Executed Doctor of Ministry Program**

The benefits of a well-executed DMin program are, in my opinion, too numerous to list. However, there are some key benefits for the student, the institution, the local church, the broader Christian community and the world that I would like to identify.

No Master of Divinity degree can fully prepare a minister to fulfill all the expectations and requirements of ministry, no matter what that ministry is. Therefore, the Doctor of Ministry provides the opportunity for practicing ministers to increase their knowledge and their skills as they relate to ministry. The fact that persons must have had some time serving in a particular ministry before enrolling in a DMin, program allows the student to be more aware of her/his strengths and weaknesses so that the DMin program can help the student be more effective after participating in the program than they were previously.

A quality DMin program is also very beneficial to the sponsoring theological school. To be sure, enrollment can be increased and because few, if any, DMin programs provide scholarships, the income can be helpful to a school's bottom line. However, a quality DMin program can also help refocus a theological seminary on its relationship to the church as opposed to an overly aggressive identification with the academy. Engaging in the teaching/learning enterprise that is essential to the DMin degree helps the seminary faculty to once again recognize the need for theory and praxis to be part of their teaching methodology and their commitment.

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Projects that are implemented with integrity benefit the local congregation or the ministry of the student in several ways. Perhaps most importantly, DMin projects are designed to address an identified need either in the context itself or in the broader context outside the institution where the student's ministry takes place. When implemented well, the project positively impacts the internal functions of a ministry, creates new and innovative ministries within the context or develops a ministry outside the institution that might not have been possible apart from the DMin project.

Another benefit to the context is that DMin projects most often require the use of laity in new and expanded ways. When executed well, the project increases both the confidence and the skill set of all those engaged in the project. This allows the institution to have an increased number of leaders within the context who can carry out the program whether the DMin student remains in that context or not.

The benefits of a well-executed DMin program may not be as obvious for the broader Christian community and the world. Nevertheless, the unity of the Church leads me to the conclusion that any effective project is both transferable and useful to the broader church. The prevalence of social media and the ability for persons to learn about and benefit from the sharing of information increases the likelihood that effective projects will be adopted, adjusted and implemented in other contexts. That possibility allows the work of a student in a particular context to provide an opportunity to enhance a ministry in another context thus positively impacting the whole church.

### **Conclusion**

I am convinced that the Doctor of Ministry degree is or can be an important component of the curriculum of a theological seminary. However, it is time for the degree to be critically assessed in order to be rebooted. Like any degree, the DMin can be improved and strengthened but that will require a new commitment to the degree that is grounded in a clear appreciation of the value that the degree has and can have. Finding the appropriate balance between theory and praxis is essential to the future of the degree as is the recruitment of capable, committed students supported by a quality faculty.

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The rebooting of the DMin degree will also require theological schools to avoid seeing the DMin as a “cash cow” or as having the ability to single-handedly reverse declining enrollments without a considerable investment of time and resources. Last, but certainly not the least consideration, the faculty must provide oversight for the DMin program to protect the academic integrity of the program.

Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will require ministers to be innovative, transformative, capable, committed, spiritually grounded, adaptable leaders. A well designed, effective DMin can help students improve those characteristics. The DMin provides the opportunity for practitioners to integrate theory and praxis in ways that allow the student to become more effective in the work of transforming institutions and communities. The ITC is one of the theological schools that is committed to rebooting the DMin in service to the church and the world. We welcome the opportunity and privilege of providing a fresh start for a seasoned degree.