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I view the church most often these days through the eyes and experiences of theological students. They come to us from the church and mostly they return to the church at graduation.

We talk of their call to ministry and healthy lives and relationships. Some of our students have decades of experiences in churches as laity, while a growing number come straight from college. They are diverse in nationality, ethnicity, denomination, and theology. They fuss at each other and at us as they form themselves into a community of worship and learning. They want to make a difference and they believe in the goodness of possibility.

We assume that preparation for ministry requires real strength of character. We want to send healthy, whole, learned individuals to the church in the broken world. This is complex and demanding on us all.

At a recent faculty meeting, six of our Master of Divinity students reflected with us on their experience in their supervised-ministry settings. Each was in a very interesting situation where they work 10-12 hours weekly and then spend additional time at Drew reflecting on the learning that comes from the setting. Two were in New York City, one at the National Council of Churches and another at a local church. Another was in a growing suburban congregation that was about to add projector and screen to the sanctuary, while another was part of a new church start.

Many of our students work with youth in their settings and as the students were asked about the questions that are coming out of their settings, youth and culture was a common theme. A Korean student was leading a group of youth that included new immigrants, children of immigrant parents and youth born of Korean American parents. The complexity of world view, language and youth culture is very real whenever the group gathers.

Another student spoke of the challenge of understanding leadership in his setting where some are hoping for change and others are working for things to remain the same. As their dean I was awed by the responsibility that they already have for the spiritual development of individuals and the nurturing of groups in these ministry setting. I know that at any given time over half of our students are caring for ministry in a local congregation.

I remember a conversation with a student a few years ago that revealed that he was leading his congregation in a building project during this last semester at seminary. My response was “did we teach you how to do that?” He seemed confident and indeed has had a successful ministry while at Drew and since.

As a faculty we have recently worked on this list of outcomes that we feel are essential for all of our M.Div. students to have as they graduate.

1. The ability to see the holy in all life – the entirety of creation.

2. The ability to read and interpret Scripture and other sacred texts with cultural sensitivity, ethical awareness, and a critical understanding of their application in church and society.
3. The ability to think theologically with imagination, openness, and analytical insight.
4. The ability to interpret histories of Christian thought and practice critically and creatively, engaging the otherness of the past while also rendering it relevant to current contexts and emerging possibilities.
5. The ability to hear God's call to recognize and address injustice and inequality in the social structures of gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexual identity.
6. The capacity to exercise effective leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts through such activities as preaching, teaching, pastoral care, worship, and outreach to the marginalized
7. The acquisition of communal and personal practices that nourish spiritual and moral well-being.
8. Experiences during the seminary years of transformative engagement with religious pluralism and cultural difference in the classroom, on cross-cultural trips, and in community life.

The faculty discussions that brought us to these outcomes always revealed the complexity of the expectations on clergy in the church of today and the struggle to keep a curriculum tuned in to that reality. Every church seems a cross-cultural appointment with multiple skills necessary to flourish and bring the risen Christ.

As I follow these students through their first appointments and the ordination process I rejoice in their strength but also worry about the demands, brokenness, and dysfunction that come at them as they lead on.