Shifting Vocational Identity in Theological Education: Insights from the ATS Student Questionnaires

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ABSTRACT: For more than two decades, The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has used the Entering and Graduating Student and Alumni/ae Questionnaires to track vocational trajectories and to understand the different ways that students use theological education to prepare for ministry. Dan Aleshire not only oversaw the management and adaptation of these instruments during his tenure at ATS, but he also used their findings to inform his insights about the future of theological education in his 2008 book, Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools. *This article builds on those insights to challenge how theological schools are adapting to a rapidly advancing future.*

The ATS Student Questionnaires (the Qs) have attempted to capture the vocational plans of incoming seminary students, graduates, and alumni/ae since 1996. Created in a time when ministry was just beginning to professionalize and diversify, the Qs began with 21 potential ministry positions from which students could choose. Titles for the positions varied, and many focused on the locations where students would be serving: parish ministry, campus ministry, inner-city ministry, hospital chaplaincy, college/university teaching, foreign missions, etc. Others focused on specialized approaches to ministry: pastoral counseling, social services, church planting/evangelism, youth ministry, etc. All of them, except perhaps social work/services, focused on teaching or ministry. Anything outside these two realms was categorized as "other."

A major revision of the Qs took place in 2001, but only one addition was made to the list of possible vocational goals: church administration. However, the 2001 questionnaires allowed graduates and alumni/ae to report whether they planned on working full- or part-time after graduation. This change reflected a growing awareness of the number of pastors

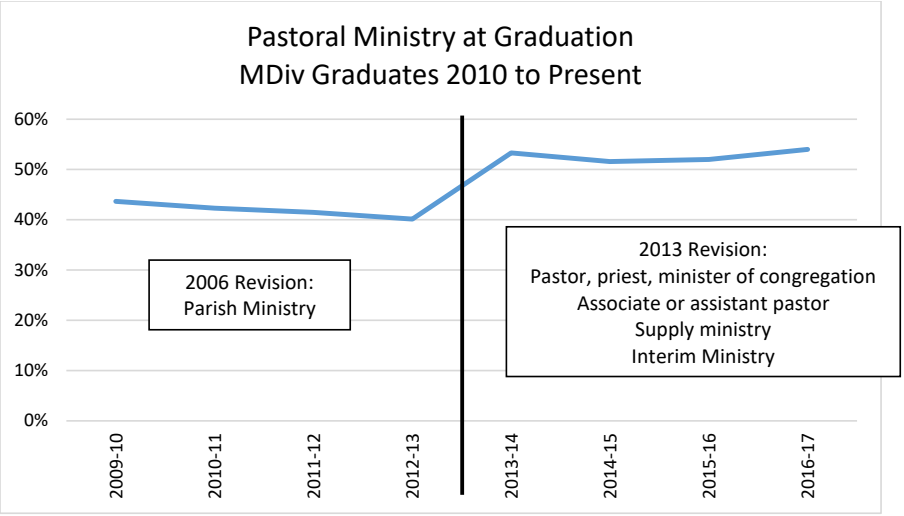
serving bi-vocationally or in under-resourced congregations that could not afford a full-time minister.

While there was a second revision to the Qs in 2006, no changes were made to the questions regarding vocational goals at that time. Major changes would not be made until the third revision in 2013. The 2013 revision was the first to include a list of potential positions outside of traditional ministry or teaching settings. These included clerical/office/sales, medicine/engineering/law, full-time homemaking or childcare, and executive/administrator in a for-profit business. In addition, ministry positions were divided into two categories: ministry in a congregation/parish or ministry in an "other" setting.

This second change reflected the growing perception that graduates of theological schools were no longer serving in traditional ministry settings. The assumption was that many students were attending seminary for the purpose of personal growth rather than for professional development. In addition, the questionnaires attempted to reflect shifts in the understanding of the nature of ministry. No longer limited to the role of pastor or priest within a congregation or parish, students began to pursue a variety of specialized ministries both within congregations and outside of congregations in a variety of settings including educational institutions, nonprofits, and community service organizations.

In addition to adding positions outside of ministry, the questionnaire added several new ministry categories including supply ministry, interim ministry, military chaplaincy, prison ministry, and religious or parachurch agency/organization. Perhaps the most significant additions were the categories "associate or assistant pastor, priest, or minister" and "unsure what position within a congregation/parish." The Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) also altered the language of the question itself from "What position will you have after graduation?" to "What position do you anticipate having after graduation?" These two categories, along with a slight change to the wording of the question, significantly changed how students answered the questionnaires and provided new insights into the vocational goals of students.

Prior to 2013, the assumption was that the number of students pursuing congregational ministry was rapidly declining. With the addition of these two new categories, the number of students pursuing congregational ministry increased significantly. Students were not leaving congregational ministry; they were either not yet placed or were pursuing ministry in



Source: ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire

ways that did not fit our old categories. In some cases, they were pursuing nontraditional ministries, but many of them were still planning on congregational ministry. However, they were unsure of what that ministry would look like. The option to choose a more open-ended role like "associate or assistant pastor, priest, or minister" or "unsure what position within a congregation/parish" helped clarify for us that more students were planning on congregational ministry than we previously thought.

The 2013 revision also recognized that many students were already serving in congregations. Entering students were directly asked if they were currently serving in ministerial work and whether or not they planned to continue working in that same position while pursuing their degrees. In the GSQ, students were given the option to choose "ministry in the same congregation/parish where I served before graduation" when describing their vocational goals. In fall 2017, 49% of entering master's students reported current engagement in ministerial work, with 76% planning on continuing in that work while in seminary. Among 2017 master's graduates, 61% reported plans to serve in a congregation or parish at graduation.

In addition, while bi-vocational ministry was hinted at in the 2001 revision when the category "part-time" was added as a qualifier to the vocational goals of students, it was not until 2013 that a specific question was asked about bi-vocational ministry. Entering and graduating students were asked if they had any plans to go into bi-vocational ministry after

graduation. In 2017, 30% of all graduates reported plans to serve in bi-vocational ministry. Percentages were higher among Black/Non-Hispanic graduates (57%) and Hispanic/Latino(a) graduates (41%).

Revisions of the ATS Student Questionnaires highlight changes in student vocational trajectories. They also help us understand the different ways that students are using theological education to prepare for ministry. We'll look at these areas in more depth, but we'll begin by exploring how theological education itself actually shapes those trajectories by looking at the impact MDiv programs have on a student's call to serve in a congregation.

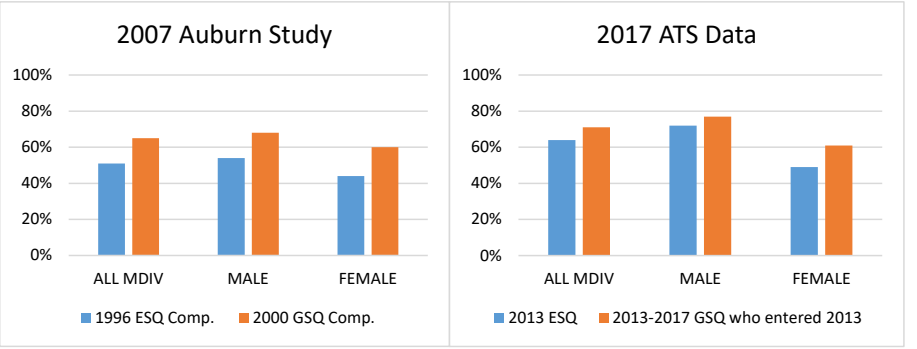
The impact of MDiv programs on a call to ministry

In 1996, 47% of all students responding to the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) reported that they were planning on parish ministry at graduation. By 2012, that number had dropped to 31%. The decline in students pursuing parish ministry over the years caused some people to wonder if theological schools were discouraging students from pursuing pastoral ministry.

In 2007, the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education published a study titled, "How are We Doing? The Effectiveness of Theological Schools as Measured by the Vocations and Views of Graduates." Coauthored by Daniel Aleshire, Sharon Miller, and Barbara Wheeler, the study attempted to measure the impact theological schools had on the vocational trajectories of students by comparing data on MDiv students from the 1996 ATS Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ) with data on MDiv students from the 2000 GSQ. The report showed that MDiv students were more likely to plan on serving in a congregation or parish setting at graduation than they were when they entered seminary.[1]

More recent data comparing MDiv students who completed the ESQ in 2013 with those who completed the GSQ from 2013 to 2017 and who reported starting seminary in 2013 also show that MDiv students are more likely to plan on serving in a congregation or parish setting at graduation. However, the difference is not as extreme.

1 Daniel Aleshire, Sharon Miller, and Barbara Wheeler, "How are We Doing? The Effectiveness of Theological Schools as Measured by the Vocations and Views of Graduates," The Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, 2007, 3.

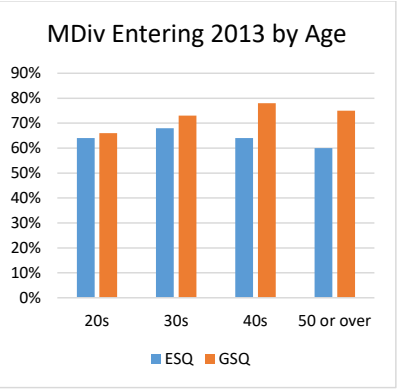


The Auburn data showed that from the time they entered seminary to the time they graduated, 14% more students planned on pursuing ministry in a congregation. In 2013, that percentage dropped to 8%. This drop, however, is partially offset by an increase in the percentage of MDiv students planning to pursue congregational ministry when they enter seminary from 51% in 1996 to 64% in 2013.

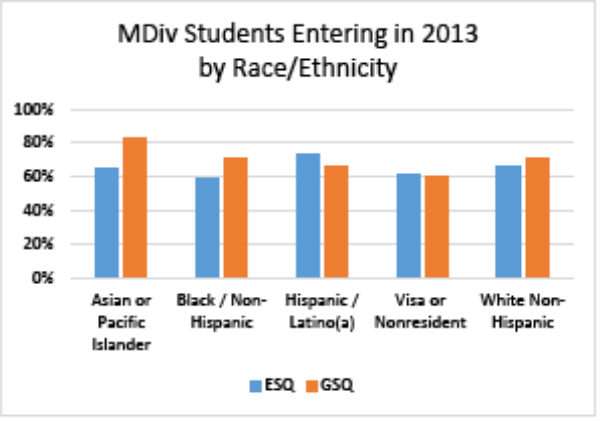
The Auburn study noted that "the rate of increase of women's interest during their theological school years is as much as—in fact, slightly more than—men's."[2] In 2013, the difference was even greater, with the percentage of female students considering congregational ministry increasing by approximately 12% and the percentage of male students increasing by just 5%. This suggests that theological schools have a more significant impact on the vocational trajectories of female MDiv students towards congregational ministry. However, there is not a corresponding increase in the overall percentage of female graduates pursuing congregational ministry. In fact, the percentage of female MDiv students pursuing congregational ministry at graduation has remained fairly steady at 60 to 61% since 1996 while the percentage of male students increased from 68% to 77%.

Among MDiv students who entered in 2013, differences were also seen by individual factors such as age and race/ethnicity as well whether or not the school is located in the United States or Canada.

2 Ibid.

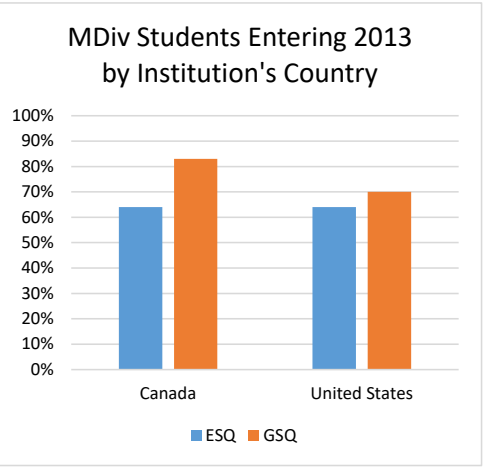


Note that a higher percentage of students in their 30s enter seminary planning on congregational/parish ministry. However, a higher percentage of students older than 40 are likely to shift their vocational trajectories in seminary to congregational/parish ministry, suggesting that seminary has a greater impact on the vocational goals of older students.



In terms of race/ethnicity, Asian/Pacific Islander and Black/Non-Hispanic students were more likely to shift their vocational trajectories toward congregational ministry during seminary than were their White, Hispanic/Latino(a) or Visa/Nonresident counterparts. In fact, Hispanic/Latino(a) students were the only students who were less likely to pursue congregational ministry at graduation than when entering seminary. A number of possible reasons might be posited for this trend among Hispanic/Latino(a) students. On the positive side, perhaps they are being encouraged to pursue doctoral studies. It's possible, though, that theological education

does not form Hispanic/Latino(a) students for the congregations that exist within their own communities.



Perhaps the greatest difference is seen when considering theological schools in the United States or Canada. While the same percentage (64%) of MDiv students who completed the ESQ at institutions in the United States and in Canada planned on congregational/parish ministry, a much larger percentage from Canadian institutions (83 vs. 70%) plan on congregational ministry at graduation.

The data suggests that theological schools have an impact on the vocational trajectories of students encouraging them to pursue ministry in a congregation or parish setting.[3] Many of these students will end up in bi-vocational ministry. Data from the GSQ indicates that almost one-third of 2017 graduates are planning on bi-vocational ministry. Percentages are even higher for Black/Non-Hispanic (57%) and Hispanic/Latino(a) (41%) graduates. For some, bi-vocational ministry is a way of expressing a call that believes a pastor can best serve the church by also being involved in a secular career or in the local community. For others, it is a way of expressing multiple vocational goals. For many, though, bi-vocational ministry is a response to the financial needs of a community or congregation.

3 It is also possible that some of this data reflects the fact that students who are not planning on ministry in a congregation or parish are less likely to graduate or take longer to graduate from seminary.

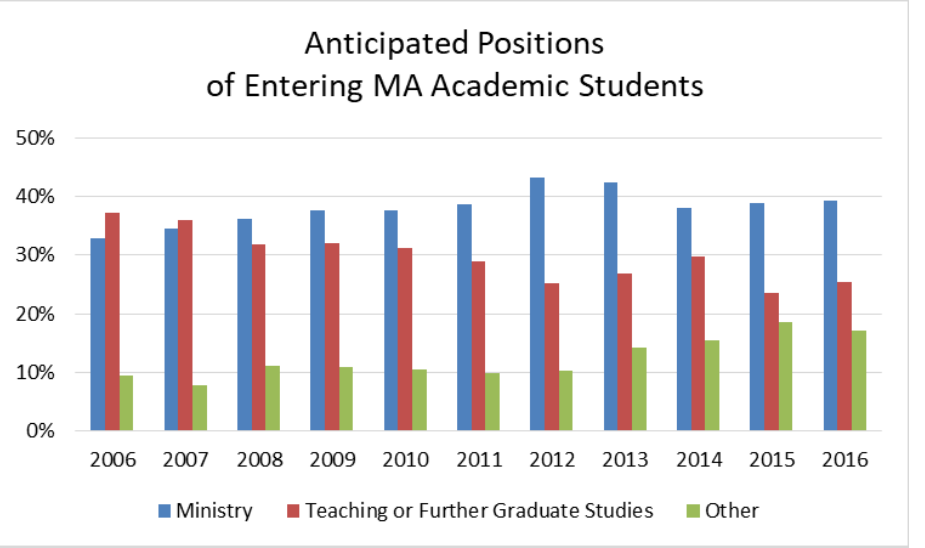
The growing number of graduates going into bi-vocational ministry raises several questions about theological education. The first is an ethical one. Do theological schools need to create educational and financial models that will allow students to graduate without educational debt, allowing them to consider positions in congregations that cannot afford full-time pastors? The second question is more educational and formational. What are the unique skills needed to prepare someone for bi-vocational ministry? Are there particular ways of thinking that need to be cultivated? Are there ways to help students develop a portfolio of skills that will allow them to structure a bi-vocational life that can support them financially? Should theological schools develop part-time programs that intentionally teach students how to live and think bi-vocationally as they balance work and school?

Shifting purpose: using the MA academic degree to prepare for ministry

In his book, *Earthen Vessels*, Dan Aleshire writes, "Learning in theological schools has historically been intended for two different vocational uses, either professional ministry or academic mastery."[4] Much emphasis has been given to changes in the number of students pursuing professional ministry, but what is happening among those students attending seminary to pursue academic mastery?

The master's degrees normally associated with academic mastery are grouped under the title "MA Academic" in the ESQ. Data from the ESQ between 2006 and 2016 shows a decrease in MA Academic students intending to pursue teaching or further graduate studies from 47% to 26%. This is a significant change, not only in the percentage of students pursuing teaching or graduate studies but also in the way students are using the MA Academic degree. Rather than pursuing teaching, a growing number of students are using the degree to prepare for ministry or other vocations.

4 Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and the Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 39.



There are many possibilities for this shift. The MA Academic degree is a shorter degree that often allows for more flexibility. This is important for the growing number of students who are already in ministry when they enter seminary. Flexibility is also increasingly important for younger students who expect student-centered learning that is customized to their needs and learning styles. Students who come to seminary with years of ministerial experience are often not seeking to improve their pastoral skills, but rather to increase knowledge that will serve their preaching and teaching.

In *Earthen Vessels*, Aleshire noted this change. Writing from the institutional perspective, he noted that the "differentiation between professional and academic degrees has been getting muddier."[5] He goes on to say "the academic-professional distinction is based on an educational assumption that the nature of learning to function in a complex role is different from learning the various subjects that inform that role. The wall between these two kinds of theological learning, however, is paper-thin."[6] Aleshire suggested that an MA Academic degree may not be adequate[7] to prepare a student for ministry. "Not only does practice require different intellectual effort, some indicators suggest that it requires multiple kinds of intellectual

5 Ibid., 40.

6 Ibid., 41.

7 Ibid., 43.

effort, and the different between superior and inferior pastoral work is that good pastors combine social, emotional, and intellectual patterns of intelligence in the practices of effective pastoral leadership. Professionally focused education seeks to attend to all the ways that ministerial practitioners need to learn."[8]

What does it mean when students pursue a degree for purposes other than those intended by an institution? Are institutional learning goals connected to a vocational trajectory? Are the standards of accreditation, particularly the degree standards, tied to vocational trajectories? The standards do seem to presume such end goals. Does this mean that theological schools need to steer students pursuing ministry away from MA Academic degrees?

Perhaps, more significantly, the number of students using the MA Academic degree to prepare for ministry suggests that some students may no longer feel that the MDiv is the best preparation for such a role. Theological schools are no longer the perceived experts when it comes to many of the practices associated with ministry. Students feel they can go elsewhere for training in preaching, teaching, and leadership that is more relevant and often cheaper than seminary tuition.

Maybe theological schools are not connecting their teaching to the current contexts in which students are serving. They are leaving students to do the translation and integration work that will allow them to apply what they are learning to their ministry contexts. So, rather than enrolling in longer degrees that emphasize professional ministry, they opt for academic degrees and do their integrative work outside the seminary context.

Such a disconnect between the purposes of students and the stated purposes of institutions regarding the MA Academic degree suggests a need to rethink how that degree is defined and what learning goals are associated with the degree. It also suggests a need to rethink how theological education understands its role in preparing ministers, particularly those who bring with them a wealth of experience.

8 Ibid.

Theological school for personal learning

In *Earthen Vessels*, Aleshire suggested that, in addition to preparing students for professional ministry or academic mastery, a third use was emerging: personal enrichment.[9] Data from the GSQ, however, does not reveal such a trend, at least not among ATS schools located in the United States. In fact, of the 174 schools that used the GSQ from 2013 to 2016, only 20 schools (11%) had 10% or more of their graduates indicate that they attended seminary for personal enrichment. Fourteen of those 20 schools were located in Canada.

From 2013 to 2016, there were 960 graduates who reported that they "earned the degree for personal enrichment." A majority of these graduates were distributed among various master's degrees, including 45% who completed an MA Academic degree, 17% who completed the MDiv degree, and 16% who completed the MA Professional degree.

It is possible that the GSQ is simply not capturing the students who attend seminary for personal enrichment. Data from the questionnaire is underrepresented in terms of part-time, non-residential, and older students who are not enrolled in degree programs. However, it is also possible that the economic downturn of 2008 made attending seminary for personal enrichment unaffordable for many potential students. Data from the questionnaires suggest, however, that most students attend seminary for some particular purpose, whether an opportunity to study, intellectual interest, or the desire to serve.

When asked to rank various influences on their decisions to attend theological school, entering students ranked the following five factors highest on a scale of 1 to 5.

Top Five Answers	
Experienced a call from God	4.4
Opportunity for study and growth	4.4
Desire to serve others	4.4
Intellectual interest in religious/theological questions	4.2
Desire to make a difference in life of church	4.2

9 Ibid., 9.

Reasons such as "promise of spiritual fulfillment" or "search for meaning in life" appeared much lower on the list. It could be that students attend seminary for personal enrichment, but it is a particular kind of personal enrichment connected to intellectual interests or the desire to make a difference in the life of the church.

Do these students actually go into ministry?

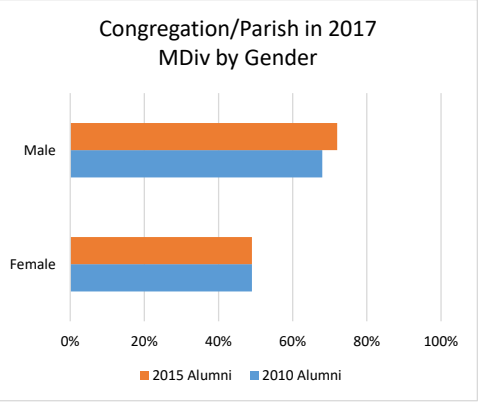
While GSQ data provides information about where graduates anticipate serving, data from the Alumni/ae Questionnaire (AQ) provides data as to where they actually end up working. In 2017, ATS completed a large survey of alumni/ae from a representative sample of ATS member schools. The survey was sent to students who graduated in 2011 and 2015, and reflects the jobs they held in early 2017. Data from the 42 participating schools and more than 940 alumni/ae provided insights as to where our graduates are serving.

Just over half (52%) of the alumni/ae reported that they were currently working in a congregation or parish in 2017. Among MDiv graduates, that number increased to 63%. This percentage was lower than the 71% of 2017 students surveyed who anticipated serving in a congregation or parish setting at graduation. Percentages for male and female MDiv alumni/ae serving in congregational ministry were also lower than among their counterparts at graduation.

	Graduating Student Questionnaire	**Alumni/ae Questionnaire**
All MDiv Students	71%	63%
Male MDiv Graduates	77%	70%
Female MDiv Graduates	61%	49%

As the chart indicates, more students anticipate going into congregational ministry at graduation than actually end up serving in those positions one to five years out of seminary. Possibly the most striking difference is among female students. Female students enter seminary less likely to plan on going into congregational ministry (49%). During seminary, they are more likely to change their career trajectories and by graduation 61% plan on congregational ministry. However, only 49% actually end up in

congregations during their first five years out of seminary. Are seminaries preparing women for ministry positions that don't exist? Or for congregations that are not prepared to receive them? It is not simply an issue of not finding placement right after seminary. Comparing alumni/ae from 2010 and 2015 shows that while male graduates are more likely to move into congregational ministry five years after graduation, there is no similar change among female graduates.



Where are the graduates who do not serve in congregations?

Theological schools still primarily train students for pastoral ministry in a congregation and for teaching. However, the number of entering students pursuing other positions has increased from 10% to 17% in the last 10 years. Where are these students serving?

The ESQ gives us little insight into the other vocational goals students plan to pursue. In fact, when tracing the vocational goals of entering students from 1996 to 2016, one is struck by how little has changed in the last 20 years. With few exceptions, the proportion of students pursuing various vocational goals has only changed two or three percentage points. The greatest changes are seen in the following two categories: Other (4% increase) and Other teaching or administration in higher education (4% decrease).

Changes in vocational goals over the last two decades did not differ greatly based on gender and/or marital status with the following exceptions.

- While the percentage of students planning on teaching or administration in higher education dropped by 4% from 1996 to 2016, the drop

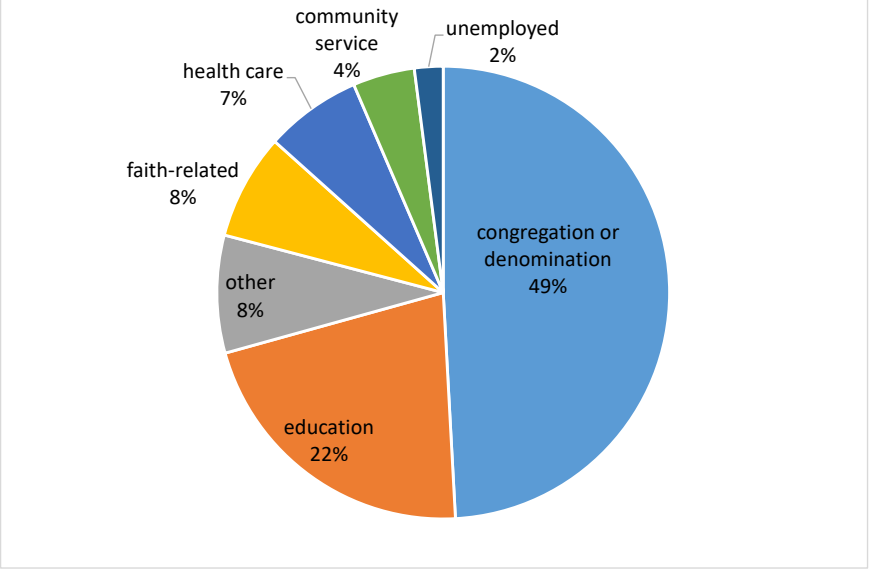
was greater among male students (-5%) than among female students (-1%).

- From 1996 to 2016, the percentage of female students planning on becoming a pastor, priest or minister dropped by 5%, while the percentage of male students increased by 4%. The greatest decreases were among married women (-7%).

Again, our data points to changes in the vocational goals traditionally associated with theological education, but what about those pursuing other vocational goals?

The alumni/ae survey completed in 2017 expanded on the existing AQ and asked students to provide their job titles as well as the names of the organizations where they were serving. Those titles were coded to give us a better idea of where alumni/ae were serving in the first five years after graduation.

A majority of alumni/ae were serving in congregational or denominational contexts (49%) or educational settings (22%). The remaining alumni served in faith-related organizations (8%), healthcare settings (7%) most often as chaplains, and community service organizations (4%). The largest group, however, served in settings that could only be categorized as "other."



Similar data was found in the GSQ. Graduates from 2014 to 2017 not serving in congregational settings were most likely to serve in faith-based organizations, but a large percentage were serving in "other" settings. MDiv students not serving in congregations were most likely to serve in faith-based ministries. MA Academics and MA Professionals were more likely to serve in faith-based ministries, nonprofits, and "other" settings.

	MDiv	MA Academic/ ThM	MA Professional	DMin	Other
Faith-based	47%	19%	32%	48%	24%
Education	20%	36%	16%	22%	14%
Nonprofit	8%	11%	22%	8%	22%
For Profit	3%	6%	2%	1%	5%
Other	11%	17%	20%	15%	27%
Undecided	10%	11%	8%	6%	9%

Conclusion

For many years, it has been clear that the nature of ministry, religion, and their relationships to theological education in the United States and Canada have been changing. With the millennial generation entering the workforce, ministry has been redefined outside of traditional institutions. The gig economy combined with the decline in the economic vitality of congregations has increased the number of bi-vocational pastors. The rise of the religiously unaffiliated spiritual seekers has led to an increase in those pursuing theology for personal enrichment.

Amidst all these changes, however, theological education still seems to be forming most students for traditional congregational ministry—at least those are the students who are being captured in the ATS student

questionnaires. And if the data is even partially correct, those are the students who are being attracted to theological schools. A majority of students arrive with a commitment to congregational ministry that only deepens while they are in seminary—a commitment that, for some, cannot be sustained after graduation whether due to lack of placement opportunities or for some other reason.

Not only are theological schools struggling to reach these new emerging forms of ministry leaders and spiritual seekers, but they are even seeing a decline in students pursuing one of the major goals of theological education—academic mastery for the purpose of teaching.

For some, this continued commitment to congregational ministry is a positive sign that theological schools are remaining committed to their purposes and missions. For others, this commitment indicates a lack of understanding of the current landscape of ministry in the United States and Canada.

When schools do reach into these new emerging markets, they often do so outside of the traditional curriculum, outside of master's or doctoral degrees, or outside of the programs addressed in the ATS Standards of Accreditation. Even within the current degree structures, students are challenging the very definitions of the degrees and using—especially the academic MA programs—in ways not addressed by the Standards.

The ATS student questionnaires are—at the moment—highlighting some of the limits of our current form of graduate theological education, but they are also beginning to provide some insight into how we might move forward. Students are challenging us to think deeply about the purpose of theological education for someone who brings a wealth of ministry experience. They are challenging us to think of the forms of theological education that can best prepare bi-vocational ministers, forms that can in and of themselves be part of the education process. And they are reminding us of the effectiveness theological education has in shaping the vocational trajectory of students, challenging us to point those trajectories not toward ministry as it was in the past, but as it will be in the future.

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