

The ministry label: who claims it, who doesn't?

By CHRISTOPHER M. THE

When alums describe their work years after graduation, the word “ministry” does not always travel with them or reflect their context. The gaps among vocational identity, employer expectations, and work setting invite theological schools to ask how formation—and your school’s impact—might continue beyond commencement.

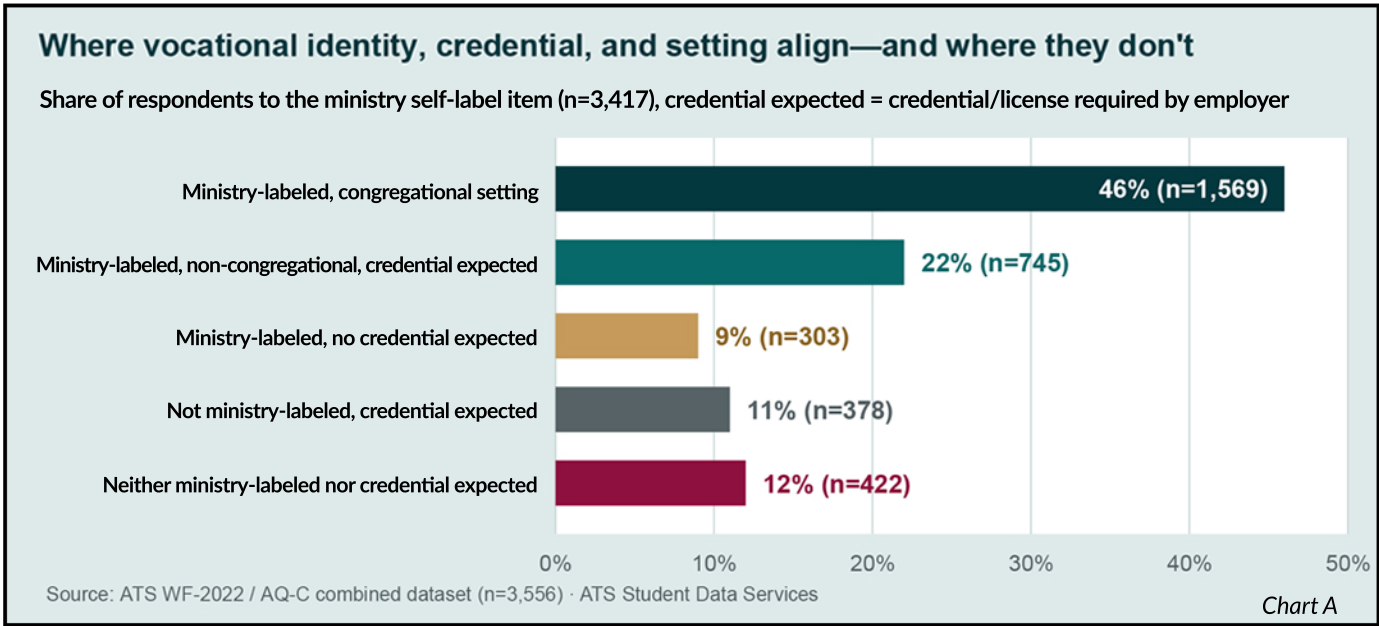
Who do your alums say they are, and how do they describe what they do? The [ATS Mapping the Workforce](#) study, last administered in 2022–23 as an addendum to the Alumni Questionnaire, asked ATS graduates, “Would you use the word ‘ministry’ to describe your current job?” Of the 3,400-plus alums who answered the ministry-label question, an overwhelming majority said yes (77 percent)—across three graduating cohorts (2010–11, 2014–15, 2019–20) and roughly 48 percent of the ATS membership (129 participating ATS schools).



That headline finding tells only part of the story a few years into the pandemic. ATS also asked whether an employer expected a specific graduate degree or credential, as well as the setting in which the alum worked. Taken together¹, these variables produce a five-grouping typology (see chart A). Although these data are not a census of every living alum, they are robust enough to reveal meaningful patterns.

The strongest signals for ministry

For a plurality of respondents, the self-designated label of ministry aligns with a congregational setting. The largest grouping in our typology at 46 percent, this congregational-ministry profile very often entails an employer-expected credential or license—with fewer than 200 alums in this



profile reporting no need for credentialing (n=196, or 13 percent of congregational- ministry subsample).²

How about alums working in non-congregational settings with credential requirements who also consider what they do to be ministry? They appear in the (distant) runner-up profile at 22 percent. Collectively, then, the two largest groupings account for nearly two-thirds (n=2,118) of respondents endorsing the ministry self-label and job-required credentialing.

What to make of mismatches

The five-grouping typology further shows that nine percent of respondents call their work ministry even though they report no corresponding employer degree or credential expectation. These alums include workers in multivocational, nonprofit, parachurch, and community-based roles where ministerial identity may well accompany but be less established than industry norms. Moving in the other direction, 11 percent report an employer-expected credential/degree but do not refer to what they do as ministry. Here we observe that chaplaincy, teaching, counseling, and administration are among the settings in which professional credentialing and ministerial nomenclature coincide far less often.

What to make of these nine percent and 11 percent so-called mismatch profiles? Neither pattern is necessarily a failure of vocational formation. An alum may understand public service or clinical care as a vocation without describing it as ministry, while another may understand ordinary employment through a ministerial calling even when their employer requires no (theological) credentialing. Collectively, however, these two mismatch groupings invite member schools to examine whether current curricular language, vocational advising, and alum relations categories sufficiently recognize the diversity of work performed by one in five ATS graduates—and their own understandings of it. While vocational labels alone do not define a given field, they may signal who feels visible within these current structures and frameworks, along with the value offered in such spaces by the education that ATS member institutions provide.

Demographic and religious factors

The representational distributions in this section deepen our questions without settling any.³ Among alums identifying as male, 53 percent locate themselves in the congregational-ministry grouping, compared with 36 percent of respondents identifying as female. Women graduates appear more often in the credentialed-non-congregational-ministry grouping at 25 percent, compared with 20 percent of men respondents. In the credentialed-but-not-ministry-labeled grouping, twice as many are women at 15 percent versus men at eight percent.

Theological educational context provides another lens. The congregational-ministry profile accounts for nearly 54 percent of alums from Mainline Protestant schools and 43 percent from Evangelical schools—compared to 30 percent of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish institutional respondents when pooled. Within this much smaller pool (n=309), credentialed-non-congregational-ministry is somewhat more common at 34 percent. No single explanation of differences is possible, yet they appear to reflect distinct, traditioned pathways into clergy, chaplaincy, religious education, and other forms of community service or religious leadership.

Racial/ethnic identifiers show descriptive differences, as well. The congregational-ministry grouping includes nearly 49 percent of White-identifying respondents, 39 percent of Black/African participants, 38 percent of Hispanic/Latiné graduates, and nearly 37 percent of Asian-descent/Pacific Islander alums. Conversely, the credentialed-non-congregational-ministry profile ranges in share from 20 percent of White, 26 percent Black/African, 25 percent Hispanic/Latiné, and 29 percent Asian-descent/Pacific Islander.

In light of these factors, ATS member schools continue to ask: What social forces make certain forms of work legible as ministry? How do gendered, racialized, and confessional identifiers affect whether a graduate chooses to claim—or decline—the ministry label? How are North American theological schools preparing students for non-ministry settings?

Toward an understanding of workplace fulfillment

The fifth profile is larger than either mismatch grouping above, with roughly one in eight respondents saying that their work carries neither a ministry self-label nor an employer-required credential (n=422). Of this neither-nor, alternative alignment profile, about 67 percent agree that their work sufficiently uses their skills and talents—which is much lower than the nearly 95 percent of alums in the congregational-ministry profile. Similarly, 68 percent report having ready access to colleagues and mentors—in contrast with the congregational-ministry grouping at 92 percent (see chart B below).

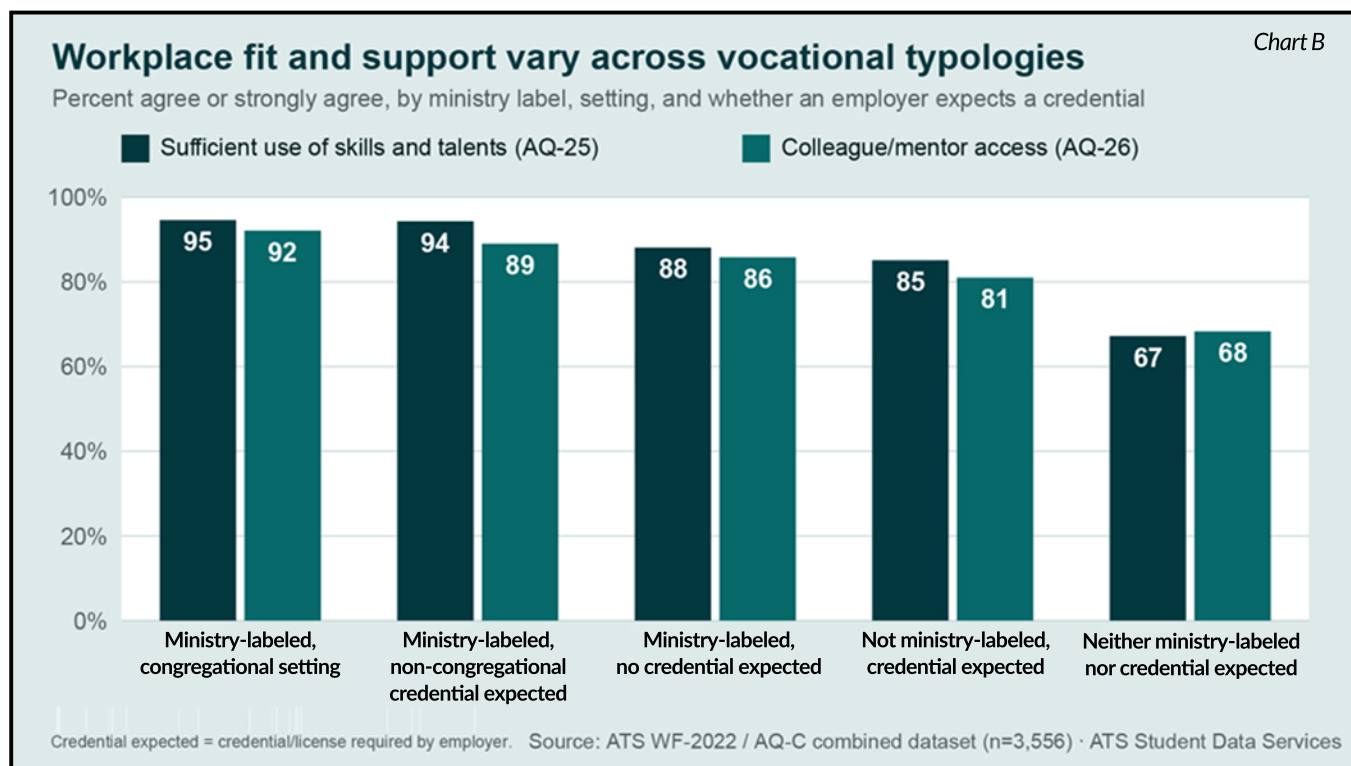
The differences are wide between those who consider their congregational work to be ministry and alums who neither consider their work as ministry nor report a need for any employer-expected credential—for both skill/talent use (28-point gap) and colleague/mentor access (24-point gap). These gaps, while glaring, invite interpretive caution. We cannot tell whether vocational misalignment contributes negatively to a sense of workplace fulfillment (so to speak) or whether lower levels of fit and support in the workforce inform our working definition of vocational

alignment; we are also unable to say what other factor(s) might influence both notions. Financial pressure, family responsibilities, feelings of discrimination, geographical realities, and even deliberate career pivots may all matter—and are likely to appear differently for your alums than what we find in these membership-wide figures.

What this may mean for your school

Our analysis does not paint the portrait of a generation of ATS alums abandoning congregations or ministry. Rather, we are glimpsing a durable minority of graduates across each cohort surveyed who are carrying theological formation into places where definitions of ministry are complex and contested. These observations raise several questions:

1. How well do your vocational discernment efforts help learners imagine multiple forms of ministry and vocation, including trajectories that may not involve congregations, carry time-honored titles, or require theological credentials?
2. Do curricular offerings and student-services programs effectively equip your students to transfer and translate their theological formation into assets that employers—and graduates themselves—meaningfully value?



3. When should vocational counseling begin, who participates, and how does ongoing career discernment emerge and continue as plans change, for students and alums alike? In Christian terms, what about the "tent-makers" (e.g., Acts 18:1-3)?
4. For graduates whose formational relationship with your school effectively ended at commencement, what opportunities for continuing connection exist? How might we all better serve alums whose vocational reality diverges from the ministerial identity many ATS programs in the last century had assumed?

Some answers—and more questions

As ATS features more findings from the 2022 Alumni Questionnaire/Mapping the Workforce Study in forth-

coming issues of *Colloquy* this fall, you may be wondering how your school can participate in the next survey round in spring 2027—at no cost to eligible participating schools, made possible by generous support from Lilly Endowment Inc. Contact your chief academic officer for participation preparation information that ATS is sending directly to them, or contact us at Qmail@ats.edu today.

¹Items WF-01f–h, WF-02, and AQ-17.

²As a shorthand, employer-expected credentialing would include ordained or ordination track; commissioned; a teaching license or credential, chaplaincy license, or other license; spiritual direction/life coach or inventory coaching; domestic/child abuse certified or other certification; or clinical pastoral education (CPE) units (item WF-02).

³Subsets too small for confidence are not reported here.



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