

# Avoiding the "sand trap"—tips for coaching younger theological school graduates in first job searches

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*Faculty and staff at ATS member schools often struggle to advise students approaching graduation who began their studies immediately following their undergraduate years.*

These students often find themselves stuck in the “sand trap”—the challenging position of having a graduate-level education and little to no professional experience. This combination of factors poses unique challenges for students and graduates pursuing their first professional roles following degree completion.

While a graduate theological degree is still the expected credential for many ministry positions, current placement trends show that graduates frequently pursue vocations outside of traditional ministry roles, either by choice or out of necessity. Many entry-level jobs require a bachelor’s degree, and many mid-level professional positions that require a master’s degree also usually require anywhere from two to seven years of demonstrated professional experience. Although many graduate theological school students today are older than in prior eras and already have professional work experience, younger theological school graduates often find themselves in the position of being both “overeducated” and “under-experienced” when searching for that first professional position after seminary or divinity school.

For young graduates going into more traditional ministry roles in the local congregation/parish or related



ministries—even with the graduate degree in hand—many find themselves lacking sufficient professional experience to land that first ministry job. Many young graduates encounter a competitive job market for first call pastors, with full-time professional positions becoming more scarce as a result of changes across the ministerial landscape. Due to these dynamics, the guidance offered below may be helpful for younger theological school graduates, whether they are seeking more traditional career paths or pursuing creative alternative ways to live out their callings.


Below are three helpful tips for coaching younger graduates through this difficult combination of factors:



## **TIP 1: Gain professional experience now**

For younger students, it may be advantageous to use their years in seminary or divinity school to gain professional experience alongside the pursuit of academic studies. While many degree

programs also include field education, practicums, or internships, these hands-on experiences become even more important for students with little to no professional experience. In addition to needing some experiences to add to their resumes, these experiences also have the added benefit of helping younger students with their vocational discernment, as these students may be more prone to lacking a specific vocational direction compared to their older counterparts.



**TIP 2: Set realistic expectations for first job search**

While students approaching graduation and recent graduates are likely excited about landing their first professional roles and beginning to live out their callings, it is important to help them set realistic expectations for their first jobs. As noted earlier, many entry-level professional positions both inside and outside of ministry require a bachelor's degree, so it may be easy for theological school graduates to perceive that they are overqualified for these positions. However, until demonstrating professional competency in a variety of skills and tasks, it is unlikely that an employer would hire someone based on possession of a graduate degree alone. It is helpful to remind students that with a master's degree already in hand, they are likely to be able to move up

to more challenging, higher-level professional positions more quickly, but they will likely still need to prove their capabilities in an entry-level position.



**TIP 3: Explore residencies and fellowships**

For students and recent graduates who lack significant professional experience, pursuing a structured opportunity for education and further formation may be an excellent option. Residency and fellowship opportunities are offered by a number of denominations, local churches, nonprofit organizations, and higher education institutions. Additionally, a residency program in clinical pastoral education may be another helpful choice for individuals preparing for positions in ministry. These opportunities often come with a salaried professional or para-professional role that provides experience in practical skills and leadership while also offering participants mentoring, guidance, and further development of their professional identities. These opportunities are usually designed for individuals coming straight out of seminary or divinity school, and can significantly strengthen the resume, professional skill set, and confidence of individuals who complete these programs.



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