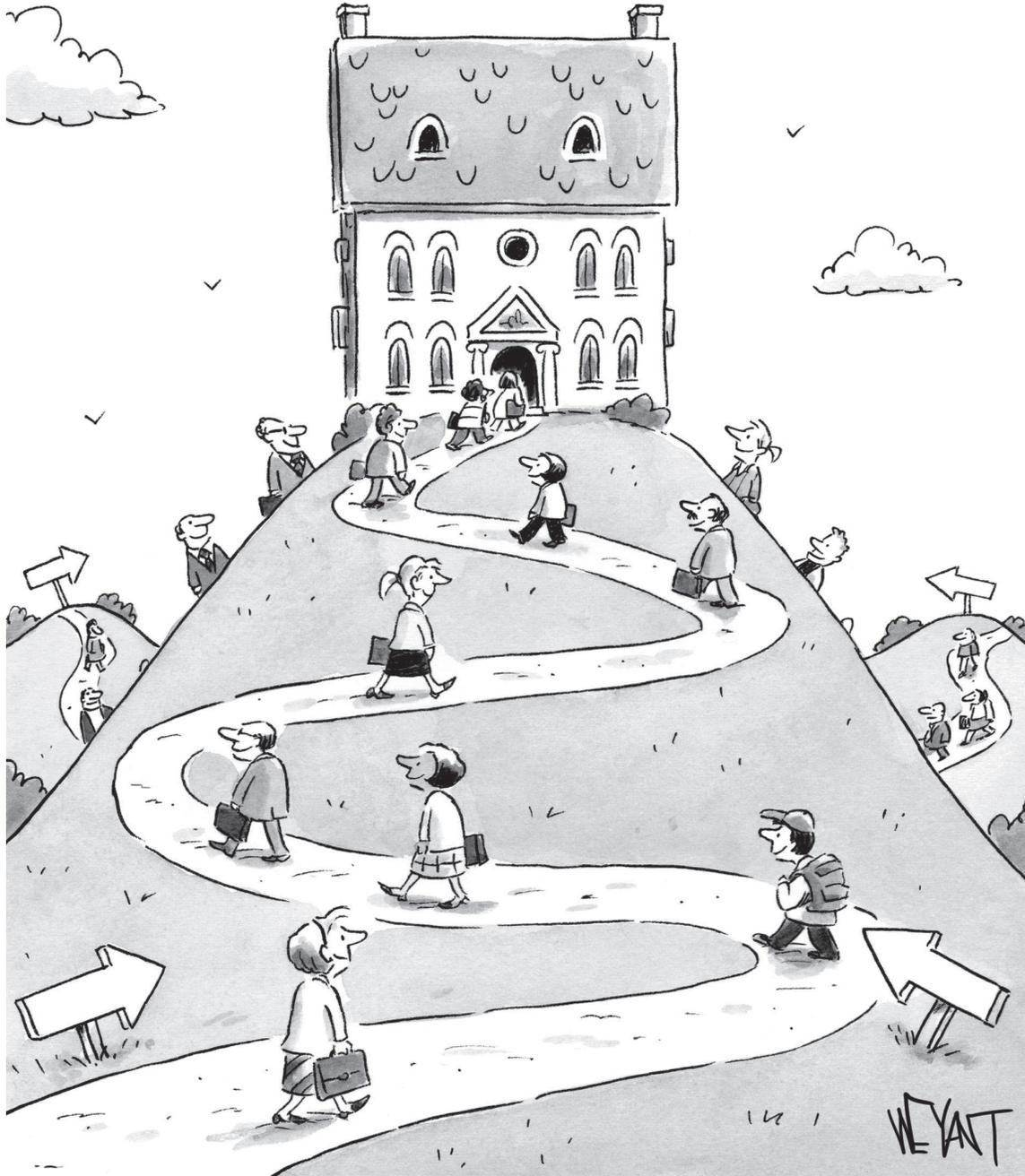


Auburn Studies



# On Our Way

A Study of Students' Paths to Seminary

Report by Barbara G. Wheeler | Based on research and analysis by Barbara G. Wheeler,  
Sharon L. Miller, Anthony T. Ruger, Helen M. Blier, and Melissa Wiginton | February 2014

## About this Issue

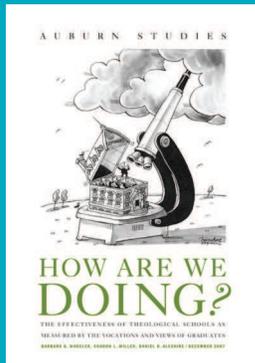
Students usually begin their path to theological or rabbinical school long before they first appear on the radar of most schools. They have been nurtured along the way by parents and professors, churches and clergy, and their interest in ministry often begins at an early age. Recruiting the best students for the future will require long-term strategies and major investment on the part of seminaries, denominations, and religious communities. *Theological Student Enrollment: A Special Report from the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education* is a companion piece to this report.

DEDICATION:

### Niculae Asciu, 1942-2013

Regular readers of Auburn Studies will notice something different about this issue: this is the first that does not have a cover by Niculae Asciu. Asciu, who produced 15 cover drawings for the Auburn Center's research reports over a 20-year period, died on March 3, 2013. He was 70 years old.

Mr. Asciu, who fled from his native Romania in 1974, published hundreds of cartoons illustrating articles in numerous publications, including *The New Yorker* and



*The Wall Street Journal*. His work appeared most frequently in *The New York Times*, where it was a familiar feature of the Op-Ed page. Mr. Asciu's great gift was his ability rapidly to figure out the main point of a text and translate it into an engaging picture. He turned out

Auburn Studies covers—always offering several options—in no time at all. Often we wished we could use more than one. His art helped to shape the character of the Auburn Center's publications, and we are grateful that a new cartoonist, Christopher Weyant, is carrying on the tradition Mr. Asciu began. This issue of Auburn Studies is dedicated to Niculae Asciu.

# On Our Way

## A Study of Students' Paths to Seminary

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“I think looking back in my story, the main event or the catalyst that really started this whole journey for me was my childhood friend passing away. When I was in sixth grade, so middle school, just pre-adolescent, he passed away in a tragic bus accident. He and my brother were riding their bikes to a friend's house to go trade some video games, and coming down a hill he got hit by a bus. My brother survived and he didn't.”

Sovann (a pseudonym) was about to graduate from an evangelical Protestant seminary when he told an interviewer the complicated story of his path to seminary. He and his family were immigrants from Southeast Asia. They had fled a murderous regime in their native country, living first as refugees in another Asian country, then coming to the United States, where they settled in a small ethnic enclave. Sovann's father was a Buddhist priest and quickly became the community leader. Sovann joined a Christian Bible study as a child because it seemed like fun. His parents did not mind: they saw it as a way for him meet friends and stay out of trouble, though they encouraged him not to believe what he was told there. But when his friend's death “really jolted my system...at 11, you don't ask what life is really about, you just live,” the

woman who organized the group took special care of him and addressed his “existential questions” about God, life and death.

Actually I would say she disciplined me. She was the one who just showed me an aspect of faith that was contagious. She wasn't a Bible thumper or anything like that. She lived out her life in a way that was captivating. Just the way that she was very patient with us kids, she was very nurturing and I knew that she was a Christian. In that time when I was really feeling that part of me was lost with the death of my friend, I felt like she was there to nurture me.

The experience did not immediately make Sovann a Christian. While he was an excellent student, he also became a rebel, hanging out with friends of whom his parents would not

approve: “The only way I knew to ease the pain was to get in trouble with the guys.” In a spasm of guilt, he said:

I remember going home, walking to my room, it was pitch black and it was silent and my ears began to ring, that kind of silence and it’s noisy silence—it’s kind of a weird paradox but it’s like—and you begin to hear your own inner noise and in that process I kind of did this foxhole prayer. I said, “God if you really are who you say you are,” and this is from the framework of the Christian framework that I heard from Bible club. I said, “If you’re the God that you say you are, really take away this pain, this hurt that I’ve been feeling and I will change my life around.”

After his conversion, Sovann decided to be baptized, without his parents’ knowledge. But the baptismal certificate was sent to his home by mistake, and his parents opened it. They were at first dismayed, then decided that he would grow out of this rebellious phase. Meanwhile, he excelled in high school, becoming a leader in sports and president of his senior class. He earned high grades in math and science, which fulfilled his parents’ high expectations for their oldest child. He participated secretly in a Christian youth group but, in deference to his parents, did not attend church on Sunday.

Sovann went to college, first to a public university to study computer science. After a year he transferred to a Christian college and became a Biblical studies major, which deeply upset and disappointed his parents. His mother wanted him to do well, professionally and economically, so that “the family that went through this atrocity” could find hope in the success of their children. His father, however, finally admitted that his opposition to his son’s interest in ministry was based not on that fact that it was Christian but on his knowledge from his own experience of how hard a life in ministry can be.

Encouraged by his father’s sympathy, Sovann changed his career goal to ministry.

For me, I always felt like the reason why computer science didn’t sit well with me...was that because of what I had experienced with my friend passing away, I was really in tune to people’s pain. I was really able to sit and listen to people and process with them. I found out really early that that was one of my strengths...being able to help people process...life.

Once Sovann could be open about his faith and vocational aspirations, college was a rich experience for him. He relished opportunities to speak and act on his faith and especially his relationships with other young people who shared it.

**Table 1: Demographics of Interviewees (N=261)**

<b>Age</b>	30 years and younger: 72%	Over 30 years: 28%			
<b>Gender</b>	Male: 52.5%	Female: 47.5%			
<b>Degree</b>	M.Div.: 80%	MA: 11%	Rabbinate: 7%	Other: 2%	
<b>Religious Tradition of School</b>	Mainline Protestant: 45%	Catholic & Orthodox: 12%	Evangelical Protestant: 35%	Jewish: 7%	
<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>	White: 74%	Hispanic: 4%	African American: 9%	Asian American: 6%	International: 6%

I was involved with Campus Life where they did mission trips. The house I lived in with a bunch of guys was the prayer and worship house. We would go and do prayer and worship throughout campus. And so I was really involved in the community life. College was a fun time for me. It was good to just be able to find community and really grow and understand who I was and how faith connected with that. And in college, I continued to excel.

After college, Sovann spent a year as a youth minister in a congregation. He married a college classmate who resisted the idea of becoming a “tag-along” pastor’s wife, so they jointly applied to become campus ministers in Eastern Europe. They were accepted. Sovann taught and his wife ran a leadership development program. They believed they had found their callings.

My wife and I decided that this was what we wanted to do: work with college students and higher education. We saw great transformation in the lives of our students. Being there for three years you get to see an entire class come through and see kids come in as freshmen and just how much they develop cognitively, socially, spiritually.... And so we felt like this is something we can see ourselves doing.

Back in the United States to prepare for their future work, Sovann applied to seminaries and his wife to master’s programs in higher education. They moved to the city where both had been accepted by schools they wanted to attend. Seminary was a profound experience for Sovann. He came to understand his native culture as “sacred” and to believe in God’s intention to deliver his people from their suffering, whether or not they became Christians.

He decided to get a counseling degree after he finished his master of divinity program, because “so much forgiveness and healing” needed to happen in a community that had experienced genocide and was still ravaged by its aftermath. He could not say for certain what shape his future ministry would take. On the verge of graduation at age 29, he had agreed to minister part-time (while also studying for his counseling credentials full-time) in a pan-Asian church whose members had had experiences like those of his own people. As for the more distant future, he said:

I know education is going to be a big part of it. I know that’s what transforms culture. I know that for me also working with rediscovery of the soul of [my] people. If that means leading and building and pastoring a church—I don’t know—I could be there too if that’s what it is. Healing and helping families process through their pain. I told you pain is a big deal in my story.... I can’t really make it concrete for you because I’m still in this fog myself. I know these are the markers in my story that I see that God has marked along the way. Dealing with pain, education, and transformation.

Most of all, Sovann wanted to show his parents that as a Christian he had not abandoned his community and could be part of the project to heal his people: “It is exciting to tell my parents that I haven’t lost my [cultural identity], that I’m actually embracing it. That has made all the difference.”

Sovann’s story is unique; few seminary students have borne such a heavy load of tragedy and crossed so many cultural and religious divides in their first decades of life. At the same time, he was in many ways typical of the group of students on which this study focused: those students designated by the theological schools in which they are enrolled as the best students, whom the schools are happiest to have attracted.

The centerpiece of the current study was interviews with Sovann and more than 250 other students in 24 theological and rabbinical schools in North America. Although the schools and students were widely diverse, almost all the students told stories with remarkably similar features. For most, the pathway to seminary began at home, in a stable, religiously enmeshed family whose values the student deeply admired. Whatever the pattern of schooling (public schools for most Protestants and Jews, religious schools for many Catholics and some Eastern Orthodox and evangelical students), students were heavily involved in religious youth activities. Most attended private colleges, many of which were religiously affiliated. Along the way, they were impelled toward theological study and ministry by the example—and often the encouragement—of exemplary practitioners of ministry. Most found a group of peers that understood, supported, and sometimes shared their vocational goals. At some point in this process, a significant number had a deeply challenging and upsetting experience that changed and enriched their picture of the world, and that increased their motivation to serve and heal through some kind of ministry.

Seminary was most often described as a period of spiritual as well as intellectual growth, and many changed their specific vocational direction while enrolled in seminary. The most common change was from lack of interest in or doubt about congregational ministry to openness to that possibility. In all these ways, Sovann, distinctive as his path had been, was typical of the whole group of interviewees. He resembled them in another way as well. To a remarkable extent, this student—loved by his family, touched early by grief, committed to his troubled ethnic group, mentored in the faith—seemed to have pulled together all the elements of his personal history into a coherent view of ministry. Many of the students interviewed had

also found graceful patterns in their experience and told their stories in compelling terms.

In the report that follows, each of these elements of the trajectory that good students usually traced on their way to seminary is described and illustrated in some detail. Taken together, the elements reinforce the major conclusion of this research: *The pathway to seminary is the long, slow nurture of faith in community.* Most of the best students (and probably many of the total population of seminary students, though data about them are much less detailed<sup>1</sup>) were first oriented to theological study and religious leadership at an early age and were consistently reinforced in those interests at every stage of their development.

In one sense, this discovery was not surprising. In a culture in which church and ministry are no longer as salient as they once were, it becomes increasingly unlikely that the decision to go to seminary will be made casually, without prior experiences that provide images of the roles to which it might lead. To attract more good students, religious communities and theological institutions need to know more about the backgrounds of the persons they hope to attract and the influences that orient prospective students to ministry.

The interviews with the 261 students identified by their schools as the “best” students provide richly detailed information about the students schools value most. For information about the larger population of students, this study relied chiefly on the data set of weighted responses to the 2009 ESQ and 2010 GSQ administered by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and comparisons with survey data collected by the Auburn Center ten years ago. The survey data included responses from a

## How the Study Was Conducted

The first years of the twenty-first century have presented major challenges for theological schools in the United States and Canada.

Against a backdrop of wider decline in organized religion—fewer North Americans claiming a religious affiliation and participating in the life of religious communities—seminary enrollments are declining. For most of the last decade, there have been annual losses in the total numbers of students and in full-time equivalent enrollments, especially in programs that are longer in duration, such as the master of divinity. In the forums where seminary leaders meet, there is candid conversation about enrollment decline, which is deeply demoralizing as well as financially draining for the schools that experience it.

At the same time, seminary presidents and deans report that their schools still attract some very good students. In some schools this has included increasing numbers of recent college graduates, which is a population whose interest in attending seminary had diminished sharply since the mid-twentieth century. The continuing stream of good students suggests that the future is not as bleak as straight-line enrollment trends might indicate. These students became the special focus of this research project, which was designed by the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education to follow up its initial research on seminary students in 2001.<sup>2</sup>

The study had several segments.

- *Enrollment trends* are analyzed in detail in a companion report, *Enrollment: A Special Report*. Data on students were supplied by the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).<sup>3</sup>
- *Characteristics, background, prior experiences, and views of the total population of students* were analyzed using the 2009-2010 responses to two questionnaires administered by the ATS for many of its member schools on a fee basis. The Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ 2009; 6616 responses) and Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ 2010; 5699 responses) were augmented to include questions from the Auburn Center's survey of entering seminary students in 1998. Because the ESQ and GSQ respondents do not constitute a total population or a random sample, the responses were weighted to be more representative.<sup>4</sup>
- *Portraits of those "very good students" of whom seminary leaders speak admiringly* were obtained by interviews. Twenty-four schools were invited to identify between five and twenty of their best entering and graduating students (the number depended on student body size). Schools were chosen for variety of religious tradition, size, and type. The only uniform requirement for school selection was a significant number of younger students (if the schools had been selected at random, many would have few or no students in this category, because the younger students are concentrated in a minority of institutions). No definition of "best" was provided: schools were asked to choose the master's level students they were most pleased to have and

who showed most promise for some form of ministry. Those students were then invited to be interviewed by a member of the research team.<sup>5</sup> Not all accepted or were available. Women were more likely to say yes and were overrepresented in the group of interviewees, as were younger students because of the mode of school selection. Otherwise, the group of interviewees contained considerable variety in race, religious tradition, and national background. In total, 261 interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. (A statistical description of the students is provided in Table 1 on page 2.) A few schools, for reasons of feasibility, arranged interviews with typical rather than outstanding students, but most of the students interviewed seemed to the researchers to qualify as strong and promising. Individual interviews were supplemented with group interviews of seminary students and graduates selected on the basis of merit to participate in programs of the Fund for Theological Education.

■ *Information about teenage participants in special programs focused on theology and ministry* was obtained from a brief survey questionnaire. A dozen programs that were part of Lilly Endowment's Theological Programs for High School Youth sent the questionnaire to former participants. Although the total number of questionnaires distributed was not available, 653 responses were received, from those who participated in the period 1995-2010. To a remarkable degree, the respondents were engaged in or headed toward ministry or some other form of service. It is likely that such participants were more motivated to respond and that the responses represent a subset highly interested in and

committed to ministry rather than the whole population of youth program participants.

These sources produced a mountain of data, but they have some significant limitations. The decision to interview on the main campuses of institutions meant that the "best" students selected were mostly residential. Some commuters were selected and available, but very few part-time students, and no students pursuing their degrees at extension centers or primarily online, were included. These categories of students are growing, and further study is needed to determine whether the students in those categories fit the profile that has emerged from the present research.

Though the format of interviews—a single session lasting thirty minutes to one hour—produced rich material, it was not designed to bring sensitive subjects to the surface. However, a surprising number of students told highly personal, sometimes searing stories about their lives and experiences. Some mentioned broken relationships, substance abuse, and more generally, a period in their life when they had not lived "like a Christian." Some topics, however, were rarely mentioned. Sexual orientation was one. Very few students self-identified as gay in the interviews, and the survey questionnaires did not offer that opportunity. Thus, this report cannot shed light on the issues particular to gay students; it is also likely that information about other highly personal passages in students' lives was incomplete.<sup>6</sup>

much larger and (after weighting) representative sample, but the information they yielded was quantitative and “thin,” as survey data tend to be. A much fuller picture emerged from the smaller number of interviews. Therefore, this study yielded more useful findings about “very good students” than about the student population as a whole. There are some indicators of ways that schools can increase the quantity of students they enroll, but the most significant findings bear on the question of student quality.

The remainder of this report traces step-by-step the pathways students take to seminary, using information from the interviews and surveys. In the final section, the implications for religious communities and theological schools

are explored. The findings offer both hope and challenge. Mapping the pathways to seminary suggests where to look for future religious leaders. But because religious organizations today have limited influence on the majority of North Americans, especially young people, the students whom seminaries most hope to attract come from a minority—those powerfully formed in a religious family and culture and involved over time in religious institutions. Attracting those students (who will be heavily recruited by other altruistic professions as well) will not be easy. Educating them to minister in a wider culture very different from the religious enclaves of which they have been a part will be more difficult still.

## Pathways: How Students Get to Seminary

### A. Origins

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“They do not come from nowhere.” That is how a member of the team of researchers that conducted interviews for this study summed up the dominant theme of the early life histories of the interview subjects. Most students identified as “best” by their schools have been nurtured in the faith and socialized in church institutions for many years before applying to seminary. The majority were deeply embedded in family, community, and religious life from childhood. For many, interest in and even commitment to ministry dated from childhood or early adolescence. For others, a long series of life and educational experiences led them to choose seminary and ministry as the most compelling of several options. In virtually every case, however, the decisions to go to seminary and consider ministry were the result of extended formation in religious value systems and enculturation in church life. None of them fell into seminary by accident or chose ministry casually.

It was difficult to determine with certainty whether this pattern of being embedded deeply in religious family life and church institutions was as prevalent in the whole student body as it was for those “best” students selected for interview. Auburn and ATS questionnaires provided scant information about students’ early lives, so it is difficult to tell whether students in general have the same experiences of early formation as the interviewees.<sup>7</sup> The few questionnaire responses that made comparison possible suggest—as will be shown—that “typical” students also were very likely to have been nurtured and guided toward religious service over a long period that began early in their lives. In other words, they resembled the interviewees more than they did the society around them, in which early religious formation has become less common.

## Family

Interviewees came from remarkably stable families with strong values. In a day when half of all children grow up in families affected by divorce, only 10 percent of interviewees enrolled in Roman Catholic or Orthodox schools, 14 percent of interviewees in mainline Protestant schools, 17 percent of those in evangelical seminaries, and none of those at rabbinical schools had birth parents who had divorced. Fewer than one in five of the interviewees reported serious trouble or disruption in their home during their childhood and teenage years. Significant numbers of parents modeled lives of service for the interviewees in their own choice of occupation: one-third of mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox interviewees had fathers in ministry or another helping profession (education, health care, social work, public service); half of interviewees in evangelical schools had fathers in this category, and one in five was the child of a minister. Almost 40 percent of Protestant mothers and two-thirds of Roman Catholic and Orthodox mothers worked in a helping profession (most often teaching) or some form of ministry. Parental commitment seems to have been passed on to many of the interviewees. Later in this report, some extraordinary testimonies from interviewees about the impact of parents' example and guidance lend support to this conclusion.

Not all the students interviewed fit the pattern just described. Older interviewees were more likely to report problems in their family of origin, though such problems did not occur at high rates. That might indicate that—if information were available about the early lives of the total student population—there would be more variation in levels of family stability and parental orientation to service than was evident

in the narratives of younger interviewees. Data confirm that older students—who are a larger portion of the total student population than they are of our interviewees—did not have backgrounds as privileged as those of the younger interviewees. Although data on parental occupation were not collected in Auburn or ATS student surveys, those questionnaires addressed parental education. Almost half of questionnaire respondents' fathers (46 percent) did not attend college, so it is unlikely that as many of them worked as professionals as the interviewees' fathers (about 75 percent of whom were professionals).

The interview data suggest that family religiosity and stability, though important factors in setting many students on the path to seminary, are not essential in all cases. Some of the most impressive students we interviewed (especially non-white students) grew up in very modest circumstances, even poverty, or had disruptive early experiences. Interviewees from African American, Hispanic, and Asian families were twice as likely to have experienced some form of family difficulty. Almost all of these had integrated their experiences of difficulty or deprivation into a mature sense of call.

## Church/Religious Life

Interviewees grew up in church-going homes or were immersed in synagogue and other aspects of Jewish life. Almost all (90 percent) reported that their parents had at least “some” church or synagogue involvement, and two-thirds said that their parents were heavily involved in church life. By contrast, fewer teenage respondents to the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR) seem to have come from homes where

**Table 2: Percentage of Interviewees' Parents Involved in Religious Life When Interviewees Were Young, by Tradition of School**

	<i>Mainline Protestant</i>	<i>Evangelical Protestant</i>	<i>Roman Catholic/ Orthodox</i>	<i>Jewish</i>
None	5	22	0	0
Some	38	7	41	7
Significant	61	44	53	7
Parent in ministry	11	23	6	26

worship attendance was the norm. From the responses to the NSYR questions about the frequency of worship attendance and with whom the respondent attended, it appears that about one-third of teens did not attend worship services or did so very rarely. Even more, almost 40 percent, said that God was never discussed in their homes.<sup>8</sup> Interviewees from the current study painted a different picture. Many said that they were in church “every time the door was open” and described their homes as Christian or observant and their parents as religiously committed.

Table 2 shows the percentages of parents’ religious involvement at different levels. The patterns are different for interviewees in different traditions. All the Jewish, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, and almost all the mainline Protestant interviewees, came from homes where the parents had at least some religious involvement, but almost one-quarter of the interviewees in evangelical seminaries said that neither parent was religiously involved at all.<sup>9</sup>

By the time they were teenagers, however, almost all the interviewees (80 percent) were involved in church/religious activity, and there were no differences by religious tradition. That suggests that evangelicals have mechanisms that other groups do not for involving young people

from non-religious homes. This conclusion was borne out in the narratives of interviewees, who were more likely to mention involvement in a youth group as they told the story of how they got to seminary. Along with Jewish interviewees, they were significantly more likely to mention religious camp experiences. The high percentage of all interviewees who were involved in some kind of religious activities during their teenage years lends support to one of the major conclusions of this study: *The younger students whom theological schools are most eager to enroll were set on the path to seminary and ministry early in life.* For Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, mainline Protestants, Jews, and some evangelicals, religiously observant families initiated the process. For a subset of evangelicals, early recruitment by a Christian youth organization seemed to have as powerful an effect.

One group was a partial exception to the correlation between parents’ religiosity and early orientation to ministry. Both African Americans and Hispanics were less likely than other groups to have had a religiously-involved

parent (they were also less likely to come from homes free of major disruptive events). Yet these two groups are fast-growing sectors of seminary enrollments, while whites—whose levels of parental commitment and family stability were high—are declining in numbers. The present study indicates that the paths that African American and Hispanic students take to seminary are distinctive, but neither the interviews nor the survey data provided sufficient data to describe them in detail. The factors that steer students in these groups toward seminary will need to be studied further.

For some of the interviewees, early immersion in religious life and organizations resulted in a definitive call to ministry at a very young age. One in ten of the interviewees reported a call or certain sense of a religious vocation between the ages of five and thirteen. Some of these reports may have been a response to the invitation by the interviewer to construct a coherent “how you got here” narrative.<sup>10</sup> Quite a few, however, could cite a specific moment or incident in childhood or early adolescence that set them on this path.

For Roman Catholics, the first inklings of a vocation were often associated with participation in the Mass:

*I grew up in a parish in which I did a lot of serving at Mass. And so there was a sense of being drawn to be at the table. [I had a] younger brother...I think the parish utilized my brother and me for weddings and funerals...because one phone call you got two servers, and it was done, right? And like it or not, I think that I developed a familiarity with that space that, I think, encouraged that desire.* MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 37\*

*I think it was sixth grade, seventh grade that I kind of felt a call, some sort of pull towards discerning a religious—not a religious life, but a vocation to the priesthood. Spending more time doing the serving that I was doing at that point, one of the teachers had a sacramentary [an ancient book containing the priest’s parts of worship services]...and I would kind of look at it. I was interested in just what was going on with the Mass, what the priest was saying, things that you wouldn’t normally be able to look at... And the teacher was very, “No, no, go-ahead; take a look at it. Be careful with it but take a look at it.”* MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 30

Many Protestants who said they were called early reported the influence of a person within the religious community, usually a family member, who oriented them to ministry at a young age. One student, a twenty-three-year-old man who said that he was “at the evangelical end of the scale,” was inspired by his aunt, a United Methodist pastor who was “always there.” Being a pastor was “always in my head and I didn’t really know what to do with it being so young. And so I emailed her and began some of that dialogue, and she just encouraged me to stay faithful in the church and stay active and just see where God leads.” He went on to study at a mainline Protestant seminary. An older student (40), an immigrant in a mainline Protestant school, cited the “strong faith” of his mother, who was an orphan, as the major factor in his desire from the age of seven to be a Roman Catholic priest. Another student, now over 60 years old, wanted to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather.

\* Religious traditions used to identify quotes are the traditions of the schools the quoted student is attending. Usually, but not always, the quoted student belongs to the same broad religious tradition as the school she or he is attending. The exceptions are a handful of students with evangelical leanings who are enrolled in mainline Protestant schools. The number after the school’s tradition indicates the age of the interviewee.

Well, I told my grandfather when I was younger I was going to be a priest like him. But he said, you know you need to be called. So I was waiting for that. And then when I was, I guess, about five, maybe six years old my dad took me to an airshow. And as soon as I saw those airplanes I decided I was gonna fly. I was going to be a pilot.

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 61

He did become a pilot, in the armed forces. Eventually, a chaplain strongly urged him to consider seminary. After ten years of discernment about whether he had a call, he decided to go.

For other mainline Protestants, the decision was made in the setting of organized group activities:

I began to feel called in sixth grade, actually, at a confirmation retreat. The pastor was preaching and at some point he was like some of you are gonna be doctors and some of you will be lawyers and some of you will be preachers, and that sort of hit me funny, and I thought ‘Maybe that’s supposed to be me.’ And I became vocal about that, I guess, in the ninth grade and it’s sort of been attractive since then.

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

Church camp was where I definitely felt my sense of call.... Yeah. It was like from first grade when we have a day camp.

People come [to lead sessions] and I would say, “I want to do that when I grow up.”

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 22

Evangelical Protestantism offers specific opportunities for “decisions”—to follow Christ, and, for some of our interviewees, to devote their lives to the service of God.

I was twelve years old and I—we were in a missionary service at my church. It was a Saturday night service. I just really felt an instinctive calling from the Lord. Not an audible voice kind of thing, but just a sureness in my spirit that He would want me to do missions [or some form of] ministry.

FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 23

A male student grew up in a family deeply engrained in an evangelical Protestant denomination. His mother was an accountant, his father an attorney, but they were so thoroughly involved in the life of their church that the student described himself as “almost a pastor’s kid.” The denomination provided multiple opportunities to hear a call. The first came at the age of twelve, at a national denominational meeting:

I remember at the service very particularly ... thinking, “I wonder what it would be like to be a pastor?” Or, feel like I could be good at it, something like that. And I remember at this particular service...a typical message, and there was kind of this call—there were missionaries who are leaving the field and they need to retire, and it’s time for new people to take up the cross. And so... the crosses wired up all around the stadium, and the people just bringing ‘em down to the front, and I didn’t get up to get one. I was twelve, so I think there’s always a little hesitation at that point to leave your family, but I do remember feeling at that very moment, “I am supposed to go pick up one of those crosses. I don’t know why.”

A very strong moment in my life.... I didn’t say anything about it.

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 25

Shortly after, he went to camp:

And at the youth camp, once again, I was just still kind of struggling with this thought. During a service at—these camps tend to be pretty evangelical and so we had testimony time.... I knew I was supposed to get up and make this known that this was my calling...and I'm gonna respond to it. And so I responded to the call full-time the next year. I was twelve years old. Came home to my parents, told them, told the pastor, and it was sort of exciting.

His father cried when he heard about the son's decision, both because he was pleased and because he knew how hard the life of a pastor could be.

Some of the most remarkable reports of early calls came from women in denominations that, during the interviewees' childhood, either refused to ordain women or discouraged women from entering the ministry.

Well I started thinking about going into ministry when I was about five.... But at that point women couldn't go into ministry in our church. And so I was told that I couldn't do that...by my mom.... She said, like, "I don't want you to think you can do something when you're not going to be able to do it. I don't want to give you false expectations because you can't be a minister in our church." So that was that. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 50

I remember [as a young teen] saying, "You know what? If I had been born a boy I would become a minister. But I'm not, so I'm going to be teacher...." And that seemed quite logical and okay with them. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 44

Because Auburn and ATS surveys yielded no information about the religious involvements of parents or the early religious experiences of respondents, it was not clear how typical the religious backgrounds of the interviewees may be. The total student population was considerably older than the group of interviewees. Studies from other fields have shown that those who feel strongly called to a particular pursuit relatively early tended to ignore discouraging advice about pursuing that calling, even if it was given by a trusted mentor.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that the interviewees took the direct route to seminary (in contrast to older students in the wider student population, who did something else first) because of their early calls that were grounded in more intense religious formation in childhood. The majority of older interviewees (about 60 percent), however, had at least one parent who was highly involved in religious activities. (About 70 percent of younger interviewees had at least one religiously involved parent.) This fragmentary evidence seems to indicate that the total population of seminary students had more early religious formation than the general population but somewhat less than the deep religious immersion of most of the interviewees.

*Patterns of embeddedness.* Three different patterns of religious embeddedness were evident in the early life histories of interviewees. There were the *totally immersed*—most of the Orthodox Christians, the denominational evangelicals and some Roman Catholic and Jewish students were in this group. They came to seminary from a religious *cul-de-sac*, having spent their whole lives in a religious world held together and sealed off from the rest of society by ethnic ties

or separatist principles. Students in this group grew up knowing almost no one outside their own religious tradition. Home, school, and extracurricular activities formed, in the words of one student, a “seamless web.”

A second pattern might be labeled the *organizationally hooked*. Most interviewees in mainline Protestant and Jewish institutions, and substantial numbers in Roman Catholic and evangelical schools as well, did not live in comprehensive religious worlds. They had one foot in religious life and the other outside it. They participated in congregations and church activities, but at the same time they attended public schools and took part in programs and organizations unrelated to their religious group. What kept them latched to the faith were well-organized religious activities for young people—youth groups, camps, and mission trips for Protestants, vocations and service programs for Catholics. All these played a major role in keeping this half-and-half group on the path to religious commitment and eventually to seminary. Here was how the Methodists did that for one young woman:

I grew up going to church every Sunday. When I was young, my parents took me, and as I got to about sixth grade, they let me make the decision whether or not I wanted to go, and I kept choosing to go. They went with me. There were a couple of times I drug them to church. They didn't really want to get up and go, but I did. And so, our family continued to go to the First United Methodist Church.... We were there, I guess, about 16 years I attended that church. And I was an

active member of the youth group there. I was on the Conference Council for Youth Ministries for [the state]. I was on the JYT team for [Methodist] Jurisdiction, on which I served as the Youth Empowerment Advocate. So, I grew up in the church until I graduated from high school. In college, I attended the United Methodist church in town, and I was also on the Religious Life Council at the college [which was United Methodist]. I served as Outreach Chair for that. Attended chapel regularly throughout school and participated in small group activities. And church camp had a huge impact on me. I have never just felt the continued presence of God more than in that place and in that camp. And it was real interesting because I made connections to people that I never realized were going to be so important [when I applied to seminary], throughout the Conference, and then the Jurisdiction.

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

A third pattern of connection, best labeled *enculturation*, was evident in the histories of students who grew up in certain sectors of evangelicalism, including the African American church. They were tied not into an ethnic group or an organized denomination and its institutions, but rather into a strong religious culture—theological ideas, language patterns, music, worship styles, books and iconic leaders—shared across congregations of many denominations, or none, and parachurch organizations as well. Even though these students and their families floated from one congregation to another, often across denominational boundaries, that strong culture kept them tied to a tradition almost as tightly as if they had been part of an enclosed ethnic group or a highly organized denomination.

## School

The majority of interviewees (69 percent) graduated from public high schools. As Table 3 shows, however, the patterns of school attendance were different for students of different traditions.

Most mainline Protestant interviewees attended public school. A majority of interviewees in evangelical Protestant schools did too, though one-quarter of them completed their secondary education in Christian schools or home-schooling arrangements. Religious high schools played a very prominent role in the education of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox students. Half of these students graduated from church schools.

Patterns of college attendance look quite different. Figure 1 shows percentages of interviewees and 2009 ESQ respondents who graduated from colleges of different types.

■ **Evangelical Protestants:** Interviewees and ESQ respondents attending evangelical seminaries were the most likely of all groups to have graduated from Christian or church-related colleges.

■ **Mainline Protestants:** The majority of mainline Protestants, both interviewees and respondents to the ESQ survey, attended private colleges. A significant minority of the interviewees—almost all of whom graduated from public high schools—gravitated toward church-related or Christian colleges (47 percent).

■ **Roman Catholic/Eastern Orthodox:** The pattern for college was largely the same as for high school, with a fairly even division between public and religious institutions.

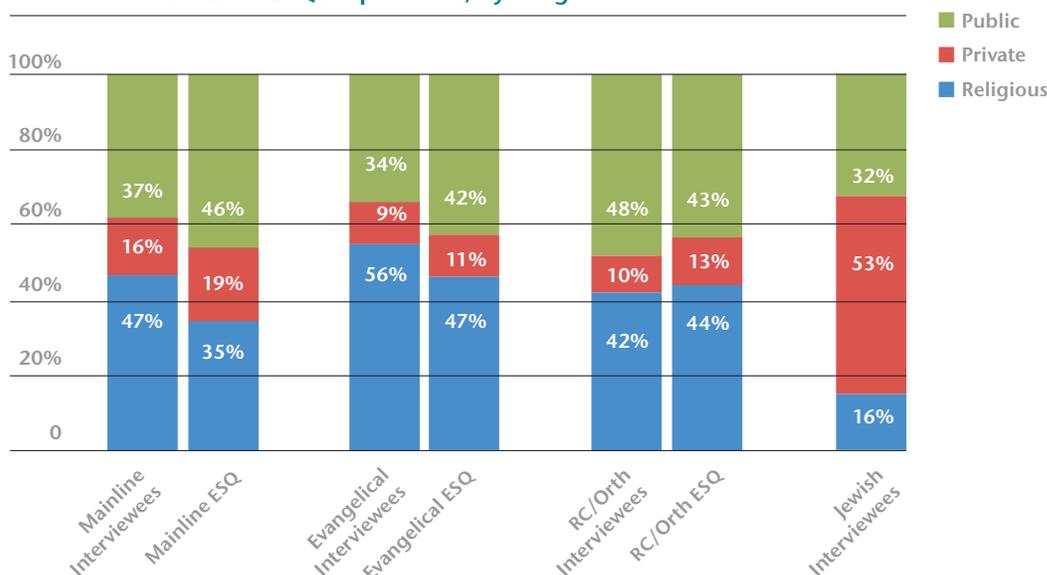
In every case except Roman Catholics/Eastern Orthodox, the larger population of ESQ respondents was more likely than the interviewees to attend public institutions, which gives some additional weight to the hypothesis that the total population of seminary students was not as deeply embedded in religious activities and institutions before coming to seminary as the specially selected interviewees.

At the same time, the ESQ respondents were less likely to graduate from public institutions than the general population of the US. Only 43 percent of ESQ respondents graduated from public universities; by contrast, 54 percent of all 2010 bachelor's degrees were awarded by public institutions.<sup>13</sup> No doubt seminary students were also more likely to have attended religiously-related undergraduate institutions (though comparable data were not available). Christian and church-related colleges played a very significant role in setting or keeping students on the path to ministry. About one-quarter of interviewees and survey respondents majored in theology, religion or philosophy, but nearly half of those attending Christian and church-related colleges did so, as compared with 5 percent of those who graduated from public institutions and 13 percent of the graduates of non-religious private colleges.

**Table 3: Percentage of Interviewees Graduating from High Schools of Different Types, by Tradition of School<sup>12</sup>**

	<i>Mainline Protestant</i>	<i>Evangelical Protestant</i>	<i>Roman Catholic/Orthodox</i>
Private Religious	1	13	50
Private Independent	13	8	5
Public	83	68	46
Home-schooled	3	13	0

**Figure 1: Types of Colleges from Which Master’s Students Graduated, Interviewees and 2009 ESQ Respondents, by Religious Tradition**



Sources: Auburn Interviews and Entering Student Questionnaire, 2009, The Association of Theological Schools

## Pathways: How Students Get to Seminary

### B. Influences | Persons

Along the path to seminary that threaded through (mostly) strongly religious families, congregations, and religious organizations, the people who eventually became seminary students met a variety of persons who helped to shape their sense of vocation. These persons played two roles. Some provided explicit encouragement, suggesting ministry as a life path and offering guidance and support as the student considered the option. Some served as role models by embodying ministry and service in ways that the student admired and hoped to emulate. In some cases, the same person played both roles; in others, the parts were taken by different persons.

Information about influences came from two sources. The best measure of who gave explicit encouragement came from the ESQ 2009 (the questionnaire administered to

entering students), which asked “What role did the following play in your decision to attend seminary?” and offered these options for response: parents, spouse/partner, clergy/leaders in campus or youth organization, clergy in congregation/parish, teacher or mentor, and friends. This section describes those persons, in ascending order of the importance of their influence as indicated by the responses to the 2009 ESQ, though it should be noted that none of these groups was ranked unimportant in the survey data. The interviews provided numerous illustrations of explicit encouragement and descriptions of role models who prompted students to aspire to ministry.

## Family of Origin

Half of the 2009 ESQ respondents said that their families “encouraged” their decision to attend seminary. Few (6 percent) said that they were actively discouraged. The remaining 40 percent responded that family had no influence in their decision to attend seminary. Interviewees’ reports of families’ impact on their decisions were similar.

However, a high percentage of interviewees (80 percent) said that their families were supportive of the decision they eventually made. Most of the rest reported indifference or ambivalence rather than active opposition on the part of their families. A striking number of interviewees identified their parents as role models and said that they chose ministry as a way to live out the values implanted by their parents. Several of their testimonials are powerful and moving.

For some, such as this young son of a Pentecostal minister, the modeling of ministry and its core values was very explicit:

I don’t know if it was because of his [seminary] education...or whatever factors it was—maybe just his own personality. The way he raised us was very—I would say very balanced.... So my experience in the church was one that was very healthy and beneficial, because I was able to see my father, our senior pastor, as someone who was a man of integrity. Who was the same behind the pulpit and at home. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 26

Many students identified parents who were not ministry professionals as nevertheless providing a model of a life of service that impelled the students toward ministry. This student, a Mennonite studying in a non-Mennonite theological school, gave his parents credit for connecting him to a tradition:

I think it was important to my parents to connect me with a community. And so it wasn’t just about instilling religious ideals or teaching me what it meant to be a Christian, but it was about giving me a support system, a network. You know, adults who could be mentors and a place where I could be active and involved from a very young age and, I think, develop some skills out of that experience.... My church didn’t spend a whole lot of time necessarily preaching the gospel or evangelizing, you might say, but it was very important to live a life that was an example of a follower of Christ. And the way you figured that out was by looking at the people around you. By seeing who, what they were modeling for you, and I think both my parents and my church community did a good job of doing that. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 28

This student, who was preparing for the Roman Catholic priesthood, gave his parents credit as examples of service and self-giving; he also cited a more specific family role model:

But I think my parents’ example through just the —like the way that they raised us and then also their service in Marriage Encounter.... I realized that having watched the time that they put into maintaining their marriage, but then also sharing that with others that they really modeled that kind of service as a lifestyle. Not like, “All right, it’s 4:30. I’m gonna go do some service down in this other part of town. And then I’m gonna come back, and I’m gonna make dinner for the kids.” [And then having a Jesuit] as my uncle—going back to when I was growing up, I had a poster of Oscar Romero on my door. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 25

Another Roman Catholic, a woman in her 40s, described a matriarchal tradition that led her first into poverty law and then into ministry:

My mom was a really good and holy person...the most generous, other-centered person. And I'm saying that not just because I'm her daughter but because it really is—she was a remarkable woman. She passed away... and right until the end, she was just good.... She poured out her life for community, family, friends, neighbors.... I have a large extended family...and lots of cousins and stuff. But every time one of the cousins got a new dog or somebody got a new bush, plant, or something, she would tell my dad to take her to visit that cousin or person because she wanted to meet the dog or admire the roses. Like she was always aware of other people's needs, and what was important to them was important, period, full stop. She didn't judge, she didn't say, "It's just a rose bush," she said, "Look, what a beautiful garden you've planted." She didn't say, "Oh, it's just a doggie." It's like, "Good for you, you've taken on the responsibility for—." So she was probably my primary mentor, at least in the idea that your life should be about pouring yourself out. She was that and her mentor would have been my grandma, Irish grandma, whose mentor was probably my great-grandma.... So you get the trend happening here, right?

FEMALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 41

These examples illustrated a pattern in the interviews. Family example seems to have been most important for Roman Catholics and Orthodox students and for evangelicals attending non-denominational schools. Fewer evangelicals in denominational institutions and almost no mainline Protestants gave

significant credit to the example and guidance of family members in determining their choice of profession.

A noticeable minority of students in all types of schools reported an interesting reversal of the pattern of family as role model. They said that their decision to enter ministry had strengthened the commitment of one or more family members to religious faith and practice. An Eastern Orthodox student noted his divorced mother's "recommitment" to Orthodoxy and described how he chanted (a priestly function in that tradition) at her remarriage to a man who joined the congregation. A mainline Protestant woman said that her decision to enter a pre-seminary period of mission work "triggered a renewal of faith" in her parents; another reported her family's "resurgence of interest and passion" in religion; a third that her mother, emboldened by her daughter's decision to prepare for ordained ministry, ran for office on a church board that had never had a woman member. Evangelical students made similar reports. For instance, one said that church became more "real" for her parents because of her involvement as a future leader.

In sharp contrast to the general pattern—families that were either strongly supportive of aspirations to ministry, or at least not opposed—was a handful of students whose sense of vocation was strengthened as they struggled with family opposition. Here is a portion of an interview with a Roman Catholic woman student from an immigrant family.

My family, they are great people. They love me; there is no question about that. But a lot of things are cultural in that they are a typical family [in our culture] and I was

always an intelligent kid and always did well in school so they pictured a neuroscientist or astrophysicist or something and I decided to be a high school teacher. And they never quite understood that decision. They never quite understood why I wanted to study theology and Christianity instead of doing science and math and medicine and all of these other kinds of things. So it's been a challenge....

**INTERVIEWER:** Are you putting yourself through school?

**STUDENT:** I am, yeah. So I have paid for everything. That's one of the reasons why they have no control over it because I was told that if they were going to pay for it, that I wasn't going to be studying theology.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did that include undergrad, too?

**STUDENT:** Undergrad, too, yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** Wow.

**STUDENT:** I defied them completely and went to the school they didn't want me to go to and did a program they didn't want. But I paid for everything and I have paid for room, board, books, tuition and everything right up until the end of this degree as well. So I put myself through seven years of school.

**INTERVIEWER:** Are you leaving with debt?

**STUDENT:** No.

FEMALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 24

## Teachers

More than half of survey respondents said that their interest in ministry and theological study was encouraged by a "teacher or mentor"; two-thirds of students aged 30 and younger said that their vocational direction was influenced by teachers. Interviewees—in almost all cases Protestants—spoke compellingly about the difference that their teachers, usually college professors, made in their vocational formation. Mainline Protestants in independent seminaries

were especially likely to identify teachers as key influences. (This category of schools includes university-based divinity schools that enroll many students who were considering academic careers.)

In some cases, professors created formal mechanisms for steering promising students toward their field.

And from the end of my freshman year on I was part of a small mentoring group with a professor of theology at [name of college]. So every year at that time he would choose twelve young men, twelve freshmen men, after spending a year of teaching, and then be with them for the next three years, walk with them and mentor.... For me in my formation after leaving home, he was the one who I consider to have shaped me to think theologically, and he bred in me a love for theology, he pointed me in a certain direction. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25.

In other cases, informal contacts were more important than organized programs.

Yeah, it was about five or six professors, and you knew them on a first name basis right away, and that was huge for me. And so they kind of—they were the ones that really planted the seed that maybe you can do this, and this is what you need to do if you're going to do this, these are the steps you might want to think about taking.... They had a [vocations program], but I didn't take full advantage of those opportunities. Like I didn't go that route. For me it was more knocking on my professor's door and saying, "Hey, can you—do you mind talking for a bit or having coffee?" MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24.

As was the case with parents, the influence of faculty was even stronger when explicit career direction went hand in hand with an example of meaningful living. One evangelical student described his professor's

personal faith and testimony and the passion for the Lord and for ministry that most intrigued me. He's really smart too and all those things, [but] he and some other professors after him, seeing just their personal involvement in what they were studying and how passionate they were about it really left an impact on me.

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 29

A female student in a mainline Protestant school said something similar about her professor:

I fell in love with, I guess, the God who my theology professor was in love with, and that was different from any other God that I had been told about up to this point in my life. It wasn't this legalistic form of Christianity, but it was sort of about the bigger idea of being a part of some story and getting to participate in that, and that loving people is the main key, and sort of how that works. And that was something that was very evident—not only in how he taught, but in how he lived. And he always made you feel like the most important person in the world.

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

Women, in fact, seemed especially to welcome the encouragement of faculty, notably in settings where their interest in ministry was not entirely welcome. This is the comment of a woman graduate of a conservative Christian college who went on to study in a mainline Protestant seminary:

One professor in particular made it his mission to encourage specifically women. He was adamant about saying, you know, "Women, you have a voice. You need to use it. Have you ever thought about this," because he really noticed the gap. Especially, you know, in a college like [name of conservative Christian college], you know, women who might like it don't even consider that it would be something they could do.

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

### Ministerial Models

Two categories top the list of persons whose influence and encouragement steered the students in this study toward seminary and ministry. One is persons in ministerial roles—often ordained clergy—but sometimes youth pastors and other lay ministers. Two-thirds of all survey respondents said that a pastor, youth minister, chaplain, or other clergy person encouraged their choice of profession. Virtually all interviewees reported that seeing ministry done well played a central role in their vocational decision making even if they were not explicitly guided or encouraged by a religious professional. Reviewing the interview transcripts, one member of the research team concluded that "First you have to see it." Almost no one enters ministry who has not personally witnessed it and benefited personally from its practice.

In this respect, ministry is different from many other professions. In interviews, students described what prompted them to consider other professional tracks. One reported that she had earlier wanted to become a criminal psychologist after seeing *Silence of the Lambs*. Another had "never seen a lawyer" in person but wrote well and was told she could be one. A third said, "Well, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. That was kind of a—I wasn't sure. First I wanted to teach English maybe or just do

something in that realm. But I saw a movie about Japanese concentration camps in the U.S. and that kind of pushed me to say I'm going to go into law and sort of be a voice against injustice." As these reports suggest, young people consider some professions because images of them are widely available in media and elsewhere in the culture. Often they actually choose a life direction based on those images. Thousands of students beginning law school, for instance, have probably never seen a lawyer in action. They have formed images of the profession from television shows or films.

Cultural images of ministry are in short supply. Few widely admired public figures today are ministers, and the representations of religious practitioners in popular culture are sparse. The only report in the interviews of a student's interest in ministry starting at the movies was this, from an African American who grew up in a Presbyterian church in the south: "I'd pretend I was a rabbi. I saw *Fiddler on the Roof* when I was eight and I was obsessed with it, and me and my sister dressed up and were *Fiddler on the Roof*, and we had services." Because of the absence of images and models in the wider culture, living examples of ministry well practiced were indispensable elements of the decision of students we interviewed to attend seminary and consider ministry.

Accounts of the impact of ministerial exemplars pervade the interviews conducted for this study. Parish clergy are mentioned most often by Christian students. Some actively encouraged the student to consider ministry; many more provided a picture of ministry in which the student came to see himself or herself.

Once I went to church on this particular Sunday and heard the pastor preach, it kind of clicked. And I kind of straightened up my act. After a few more months I approached

the pastor of this church and told him I'd like to learn a little bit more about just Christian doctrine, the Bible, and theology. He started handing me book after book. And he really took me under his wing where the next two and a half years of my college career I met with him almost every day for an hour or so. So he really just poured into me.

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 26

I think there is a certain sense of, I guess, the relationship I developed with that pastor as a young child was very good, very healthy. I think there is a certain sense of, I guess, of reverence for that particular position. To ask if I ever thought about, I'm sure I probably was, "I wonder what that would be like if..."

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 29

Congregational rabbis and cantors have been especially active in tapping young congregants and suggesting they consider the rabbinate, as well as in providing role models:

I think the clergy would...say to my parents, "This one's gonna be a rabbi." And as a kid, you hear that, and I think maybe you internalize it. It's a wonderful strategy. I have since used it myself around like other kids. But no one really pushed it, but what they did do is when I got back from Israel, and I kind of shared with them that I'd been thinking about becoming a rabbi, the assistant rabbi of the congregation took me and like two of my friends, who kind of had expressed the same sort of idea.... We like skipped school one day, and she drove us into the city, and we attended classes at [the seminary] for the day. It was very smart, I think, because it helped kind of keep crystalizing the idea for me.

FEMALE, JEWISH, 26

I felt that sense of like affirmation from [my rabbi] when I went through confirmation that I could play some role in Jewish life and I didn't know really what that meant at the time. But he always really modeled a rabbi who cared and took an interest in me, and I think that kind of one-to-one feeling, a relationship, really, made a difference. Actually, when I was sixteen, my uncle passed away suddenly and he was there at the burial and he was, you know, I remember his presence and I kind of got what a rabbi was at that time. FEMALE, JEWISH, 31

The example of ministry well done can be powerful enough to overcome outright discouragement, even if that discouragement comes from the exemplar himself. One rabbinical student identified the rabbi and cantor she grew up with as mentors. Her cantor, she said, "took it very seriously and was very helpful," but her rabbi "dissuaded me passionately from going to rabbinical school. He said it's like a horrible profession and you're destroying your life, do something else." His example was more influential than his precepts: "So despite the fact that he said all that to me, I so admired his work at my synagogue that it didn't really offset the passion that I had to be a rabbi." This passion was further nurtured by a woman rabbi before and during seminary who has "ushered me through this process from the minute I came [here]."

For children of clergy, the positive example of the minister parent (or other relative) is sometimes enough, but often it is enhanced by contacts with other ministers. The daughter of a full-time lay minister said this:

My pastor was a big influence in that too, allowing me to be more involved in worship when I was home, more responsibilities to see what really goes into the worship service

and stuff. She was my first female pastor, so that was huge for me. It's not like I ever thought that women couldn't be pastors, I had just never had one before, so it was awesome. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

My grandfather, an Episcopal priest, was a positive mental image of the priesthood in my mind.... After I started going to church, yeah, and getting to know personally some of the priests at this church.... I saw they were normal guys also. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

Sometimes simply seeing a priest or minister at work, without personal contact, has impact. This student was moving toward a career in broadcasting, based on what he and others perceived to be his talents.

Right before I started college, I was still struggling with what I wanted to do, and I was in church and I thought to myself, "I can do that." I was watching a priest, and I said, "I should do that—not only can I, I should do that." I felt very comfortable with that feeling. I felt very confident in that, and I thought, "This is what I wanna do."

MALE, ORTHODOX, 26

For a large minority of those interviewed, the principal model and encourager was a youth minister in the home congregation or (much less often) a college chaplain. Not surprisingly, younger students were more likely to cite youth ministers as major influences and older students were somewhat more likely to describe the impact of parish clergy, though many in all age groups mention them as influential. Here are accounts of a series of brilliant youth leaders whose influence was decisive in students' vocational development:

I had an influential pastor that helped to guide our youth group and led our confirmation class. And so, she kind of instilled in us at a young age, eighth or ninth grade, of, you know, what can you do that will work for God that you have? What are your gifts and your talents? What do you want your ultimate purpose to be? And so, that question haunted me, and I found myself leading worship in our church and doing these things. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

It was a good church—small, kind of liberal Protestant.... So he was a really formative pastor for me growing up. And his heart was youth ministry. Even though he was a solo pastor, he poured everything into us as teenagers. And that was really formative for me, having a really strong youth group experience. And I think, I've often said, perhaps even more so than my parents, I felt like he shaped who I became. At least spiritually, for sure. But, he was a huge influence in my life. FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 28

The youth group provided a place for me where maybe I could be a leader. Shortly after he [the youth leader] came, he started telling me to start thinking about whether or not I should think about going into ministry, which at the time I just thought, you are crazy. I don't want to do that. I wanted to be an engineer, maybe a lawyer. I wanted to go to a prestigious university. But it is amazing the power of a person who believes in you and tells you that they think you should think about God's call in your life. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 27

He [youth leader] started talking to me about it, about being a leader in the youth group and—and taking that forward and what that would look like and what that would mean by—when I was in eighth grade probably, when he was first there. And then as my leadership roles developed, he started talking to me about why he likes ministry, to get me interested and asking questions. He told me all this later, his strategy for doing this.... He would talk about why he loves youth ministry...and then I'd start asking questions and then he'd start saying, "Well, you know, you could look into this, and you can do this." MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

Seeing estimable priests do their jobs was especially important for men who decided to study for the priesthood. One described his encounter with a priest who gave him a tour of a pre-seminary high school he was considering attending:

The priest comes five minutes late because he couldn't find the school. It was a little school. He comes running up the stairs, he's sweating, he's all just exhausted. But one thing I picked up from that priest was he didn't sell me the gym...he didn't sell me the computers. He did a little bit of that, but [this school] didn't have a lot of that. But he was joy-filled, happy, at peace, excited and he really sold—he sold the person I always like to be. He cared about us and what was best for men thinking about the priesthood. That's what he sold. And at that time I couldn't put a name on it, but I said whatever that priest has, I want it. Or if I don't want that, I want to be in an atmosphere where people really care. And if this priest is an example of the seminary, do it. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 25

A 23-year-old preparing for the priesthood, described the priests he encountered in college, and one in particular who impressed him with his candor about the priesthood. The priest told him honestly that there were days that “People are not fun to deal with,” but the priest assured him that, “You can be happy...if you trust God and stay in prayer.” The student concluded:

You see a good person, you say, “I want to be like that...” If I didn’t have that, I think it would’ve been a lot different. Maybe God would’ve still gotten me here, but I think it would’ve taken more time.

MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 23

A 34-year-old candidate for the Roman Catholic priesthood thought he was headed for lay ministry until he joined a young adult group:

I think that’s the biggest influence on me, meeting wonderful people there, priests who truly led the life of faith and then truly men of—you know, of God. Very powerful, tough guys that were able to carry many, you know, on their shoulders. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 34

And yet another candidate, who had thought of priests as “weird” and “odd ducks,” met priests at the Newman Center of his college who transformed his image. “That was the first time I really thought I could be like these people. You know, they’re not completely different than I am.”

The other group for whom examples are critical is women.<sup>14</sup> Many of those interviewed reported that they never considered ministry until they met a woman minister. A defining moment for one 21-year-old mainline Protestant was “definitely having a female minister come into my life for the first time when I was about 13 or 14, because it had honestly never even

crossed my mind before that a woman could do this job. So that was a big moment.” Numerous other female interviewees spoke in the same vein. One, who grew up in a African American church, is now, after a career in law, studying at a mainline Protestant seminary. She said this:

I was feeling very drawn. I had seen—finally seen—an example of a woman in ministry that had some resonance to my style and personality type. I was like, “I think I could probably do that.”

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 42

I...hadn’t seen a lot of women doing pastoral work. I didn’t have a lot of context for that and what that looks like. I think I had trouble picturing myself in that life. So...I really didn’t really have that as a goal, but I think I kept it all in the back of my mind. I also had a mentor at the time who, actually, I still work with now. She is the pastor of the church I’ve been attending here. Just seeing her preach and do her ministry and the way that she did that was something, a factor in opening my eyes to the possibilities around that too. FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 26

But, I also—at my home church there was a woman who oversaw the entire worship ministry.... Back when I was in junior high, and though we didn’t meet on a one-on-one basis, like a specific mentorship, I looked up to her for everything.... She continues to pursue excellence [in musicianship], but she’s a woman of faith and that radiates from who she is. And that radiates into her ministry. And so that really stood out to me.... And so she’s probably one of my biggest role models, especially because she’s a woman. And so many people are like, we want a guy worship leader. I’m like, I play piano and I’m a girl, for goodness’ sake, if you like it or not, God’s

called me. And so she's a really big example for me that women can be in full-time ministry. Especially in worship. FEMALE EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 25

A Methodist woman wanted as a child to be a nun, because that was the only religious role she could imagine for a woman. She wandered religiously, taught writing at the college level, and later decided to go to seminary after meeting a woman in ministry:

Well, our pastor at [our church] was a woman, and within the first few months I got to know her, our family got to know her, and I had conversations with her, like, you know, I think that's what I had wanted to do. I thought I wanted to be a nun because that was the only female figure I saw in religion.... [Now] I wanna be a pastor. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 42

In a similar vein, a female Roman Catholic poverty lawyer was headed for ministry after seeing women do it:

So no, I would not have thought [a leadership role in the church] was a possibility for me, but when I started in ministry and when I found the community I joined, I mean it's the cathedral parish of the...archdiocese. It's run almost entirely by women. Like there's this priest, but the business manager is a woman, the local parish assistant is a woman, the priests have to do what the business manager says. Like it's changing! FEMALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 41

Other women students, especially evangelicals, reported that because they had not seen women in ministry, they continued to question their own capacity for it. One, a pastor's daughter who had extensive experience in theater and

public speaking, still questioned whether she could become co-pastor with her husband when she finished seminary:

I looked at the pulpit and I always saw men standing up there. It had a very different presence, and it was very difficult for me to visualize myself. I think I visualized myself in other capacities, maybe evangelist or something. It wasn't the week in, week out person who came to bring the Word of the Lord to a congregation. I really struggled to see myself there. FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 26

Yet another woman grew up in an evangelical church where female leadership was not encouraged. She went to seminary to prepare for a career in counseling but, after encouragement during seminary, hoped to become co-pastor with her husband:

It was hard, though, for me to get mentored [in our home church] because all of our pastoral staff are male. They had strict guidelines on meeting with females.... My husband grew up in the same church. He got mentored all he wanted. I was a girl and couldn't get that access so it was a little frustrating.... He probably wants to be a pastor, and I am in the process of preaching and pastoral care—that has kind of opened because I never saw female pastors. It never crossed my mind, and so it's like, "I really enjoy this." FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

In a remarkable number of instances, the specific form of ministry that interviewees aspire to is the specialization of the minister who most impressed them. A woman student,

for instance (mainline Protestant, 20) went to seminary planning to be an academic, but when her uncle became terminally ill and she saw the work of hospital chaplains, she re-enrolled in an M.Div. program to prepare for chaplaincy. Several students who were profoundly affected by campus ministries wanted to do that. Even more who first thought about ministry under the influence of youth ministers were headed in that direction when we interviewed them.

My youth pastor did play a big role in my life. I was very involved in the youth ministry. I was in leadership and kind of helping every now and then in the youth ministry as a teenager, but helping lead some various things.... I would like to stay in youth ministry.... I really feel that's what God's called me to do.... [There is a] real need for good quality educated experienced people working with teenagers and their families.

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 29

I thought I might want to be a youth pastor, because I really thought my youth pastor was cool and enjoyed talking with him.... I want to be a pastor in a church where the contract with them is that my focus is faith formation. ... I feel pretty passionately that children and youth are a great way to energize the spiritual life of the congregation. MALE , MAINLINE

PROTESTANT, 32

The most positive proof of the relationship between seeing ministry practiced and aspiring to do it was the number of times that interviewees reported changing their specific ministry goals after being exposed to a different kind of ministry. One student, for instance, said that he was daunted by pastoral ministry until he saw his field supervisor combine parish ministry and counseling. Then he too wanted

to do both. Another student in the same school, an older woman (57), from a conservative background, after observing her pastor husband through many years in ministry was studying in a mainline seminary to become a pastor. A younger student, who had many relatives in ministry and who took a year off after college to work in the student ministry of a church, recognized this pattern (wanting to be the kind of minister he had seen most recently) in his own changing aspirations:

When I was a junior in high school is when it really started, you know, for really thinking about these things. And so I was trying to piece all that together, what that would look like, but at that point, really my only experience with working in ministry was just with the youth group stuff. And so I thought...I'll be a youth minister kind of thing, and then I went to college and I thought, well, I'll do college ministry. And I've done both and I've done recreation ministry and stuff, and I think that age group, youth and college students, is kind of where my passion lies. At this point, I don't feel called to be a pastor, but that could change. If I say it won't happen, then it probably will happen. MALE, MAINLINE

PROTESTANT, 24

Just as positive examples can inspire, negative ones can deflect people from considering ministry. A handful of interviewees said that this had happened to them. Some saw parents in ministry defeated by vicious church politics. One (female, evangelical Protestant, 23) said that her grandfather has been in pastoral ministry and "I don't want to be my grandfather." Another (female, evangelical

Protestant, 26), felt called early to youth ministry, but then was discouraged by an experience with a youth minister that she declined to describe in detail. After that, she planned to use her earlier training in English and her theological degree to write:

And probably more towards upper high school I've kind of turned away from doing youth ministry. Some things happened in our church that I got burned—feelings got hurt from other youth and from my youth minister too. So my thought was, “Well, if this is what ministry is I don't want this.” So I kind of decided to go into teaching. And in college ended up in majoring in English and pursuing a graduate degree in that.

FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 26

### Friends and Peer Groups

Survey respondents identified friends as important influences as often as they did clergy (almost two-thirds say that they were encouraged by them). Interviewees most often identified a *group* of peers with similar goals and values as important, or even essential, to sustaining the sense of call to ministry. Most often, they found and were shaped by this group during their college years.

For students who grew up or were attracted into the evangelical youth culture, a parachurch organization on or near their college campus often provided a peer group that was “cool” and also Christian. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes and The Navigators were mentioned most often as providing this support and ratification; InterVarsity and Campus Crusade were cited less frequently. Older students like this woman, a corporate attorney who resisted a call to ministry for many years, mentioned church groups and programs that provided a new social context in which a call to ministry could be acknowledged and developed.

[I remember] a crusade...in 1988, and being very impacted by it and felt very drawn to it; but for quite a few reasons and at that stage, Christianity didn't seem compatible with the job that I was doing, the lifestyle that I was living and the people that I was friends with.... I was quite under the influence of my peers, and Christianity for me seemed like a weakness or a cop out. So I never—I sort of pushed it away.... It wasn't cool.... Then after I moved ..., suddenly this huge relief that the peer pressure that I'd been under fell away. I was just a complete stranger; I knew absolutely no one, and so it just sort of seemed right. My mother recommended a church...and I started going there. Then they held an Alpha course, February 2002, and I went on the Alpha course and gave my life to the Lord within about two weeks. It was just very quick.

FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 46

For Catholics, campus ministry provided a community of peers in college:

I remember one of first times going to [Mass at college], and you're surrounded by all your friends. And so it's this great collegiate atmosphere, and it really impacted them. These were cool people who were—believed in justice in the world and believed in God and were trying to bring this stuff together. And there were these older mentors who were like, “Yeah, you really can believe this, and work it together in a functional life.” And I remember them all. They were all standing up.... It was very peer driven. It was definitely my friends...that union of sacrifice, intellectual rigor, self-abnegation, those kinds of things coming together. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 24

When I was in college, I took classes. The university is one of the sites in the United States where [men from the order the student eventually joined] do philosophy studies. And so I got to know some of those guys in the philosophy program. Great, great guys. And there's no doubt getting to know those guys played a significant role in terms of seeing them as folks engaged in the world seemingly fulfilled in what they were doing, enjoying life. That just became a very attractive model for what I was looking for.

MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 37

Jewish movements also provide campus ministry programs and, for pre-college kids, camping programs that are settings in which religious observance and a possible call to the rabbinate are “cool”:

Then I went to camp and there were these young counselors with long hair playing guitar, and we were allowed to call that praying. And it was on a mountain, like, sitting on a hill where camp is and the sun is setting and all of a sudden I had this like, very different relationship to prayer. And that it didn't have to be with like, books and the hard seats with like, the rabbi a million miles away up on the bema. So, camp was ... where I first realized that maybe leading prayer would be cool because I thought my counselors were cool. And I thought if they can make me feel this way then like, why wouldn't I want to be like them and make someone else feel this way. FEMALE, JEWISH, 28

Mainline Protestantism provides many fewer organized opportunities to find peers with similar views, values and vocational aspirations. A few mainline Protestant interviewees reported that while in college they participated in evangelical campus ministry groups (InterVarsity,

Reformed Fellowship) because they were the only religious activities that attracted substantial numbers of students. Most, however, made or found their own communities of support:

In college, I had a close-knit group of friends who were intentional about Bible study and discipling one another, and in prayer for one another. And that, you know, gave me strength coming into seminary that were helpful—spiritual practices and things like that. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

These older guys were...they'd be like, “We're gonna have accountability groups, and we can talk about our struggles with girls and with, you know, our family, and with our dads, and with school, and with...,” whatever it was. And it was just like this close community, almost like Bonhoeffer. I just felt like I was part of the beloved community; really did. And the guys that I kind of grew up doing that with in college are still my best friends today. We still get together a few times a year, so [it was a] very special life-giving, life-sustaining thing for me, for them to still be a part of my life. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 27

One of the few students we interviewed who had had minimal church involvement early in life discovered the faith in his late teenage years and almost immediately decided to become an Episcopal priest, to the dismay of his parents. He was guided toward ministry by his fellow students in college:

And there were some great mentors for me in that [student] group. We joked that it's kinda become a priest factory.... There was a period like in five years there were four guys who went to seminary from that community. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

Some mainline Protestants and Jews eschewed explicitly religious groups, because they were “clique-y” or close-minded. Most, however, found functional substitutes. One, for instance, did not participate in religious activities until his bishop told him to go to church regularly. He was, however, president of his fraternity and in that, he said, he played a “pastoral” role to the members, and he remained faithful in religious practice: “I didn’t go to church, [but] I had my prayer book and I would always have morning and evening prayer.” A rabbinical student whose youth group of twenty produced four rabbis had a similar story. She felt confirmed in her sense of call by her sorority:

It was in college when I definitely decided to be a rabbi. And actually it was my experience in my sorority—it wasn’t a Jewish sorority, and in fact, there were only a few Jewish students and I was the president of it. And I always felt like I was the rabbi of it even though they didn’t see me that way, I saw just an enormous amount of parallels between that position and being a rabbi.... It was just a wonderful group of women. You know, there was no hazing, there was not excessive drinking. It was like exactly what a sorority can be in the best of scenarios and ought to be. And just feeling that I was the head of this group that was assembled around common values really felt like being a rabbi and so that was what propelled me to apply [to rabbinical school]. FEMALE, JEWISH, 24

Peer support was important during seminary as well. It was central for Roman Catholic men preparing for priesthood. In a group of students at a diocesan seminary, one student (21) talked about “true brotherhood” and another, the same age, about the importance of being “brothers in this together” for sustaining a commitment to priesthood and celibacy.

In a number of cases, the two most common influences—the example of a religious professional and camaraderie with like-minded peers (in that order)—were both present in interviewees’ narratives. This evangelical woman was first influenced by a pastor whom she met in her early teens, when she was mourning the death of her mother. Then she accepted her call when she went to Guatemala with her husband to do mission service and found herself in the company of others who had ministry in view:

[I met a pastor.] Such an educated man. And he knew his Bible like inside out and backwards, and knew—he just knew so much. And I was just really challenged to learn. And started reading through the whole Bible and coming to Bible study every week with like ten questions that, you know, I was just hungry for knowledge. And I think that’s what started me on the path toward thinking about seminary. And, it started as sort of this nagging idea that maybe this is what I was supposed to do next. And I thought, that’s ridiculous. So, why would I go to seminary...? And I wasn’t ready to say, okay, I’m just following Jesus and it’s going to look like what it looks like. And I think in Guatemala, I was surrounded by so many people who had made that decision that all of a sudden it wasn’t so scary. And it—I liked how it looked and I could see the fruit in their lives. And I was around peers that had such a vibrant faith that I was like, oh, that’s what this looks like, because I just hadn’t ever had that. My church growing up had really a private faith sort of an ethos.... And so, I don’t think I was really given a good model of how you should live in a way that looks different from other people.

FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 28

## Spouses

For students who are married, support and encouragement from spouses is critically important. More than 80 percent of married students surveyed said that they had received active encouragement from their spouse or life partner. Interestingly, women were as likely to report spousal support as men, even if they were members of conservative religious groups that placed limitations on women's leadership. It may be that the encouragement of a spouse or partner is virtually essential for women who face more challenging circumstances in ministry. Those who do not have that support may not even start the process of preparing for ministry.

In interviews, spousal support was mentioned by most married students, but in passing, as if it

were taken for granted as important. In the few cases of spousal opposition, students reported that it was very painful. One evangelical woman spoke about the "tension" with her husband over whether she could or should be ordained. Two male Protestants in two denominations (one mainline, one evangelical) with appointment systems that require ministers to relocate frequently—sometimes without their having much say in the matter—told us with some sadness that they were not seeking ordination because their wives did not want that pattern of life. And one evangelical Protestant man, married to a physician, said that he would not enter ordained ministry because two full-time professionals in a family is too many.

## Pathways: How Students Get to Seminary

### C. Influences | Organizations and Programs

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Programs as well as persons exert strong influence on the vocational formation of many seminary students. Many of the programs that interviewees named are ongoing: youth and camp programs, the campus ministries described in the foregoing section, and congregations whose members singled them out as possible future ministers or rabbis. Some, however, have been specially devised in recent years to identify and attract young people with promise for ministry. Both kinds of "organized" influences are described below.

#### Congregations, Denominations, and Their Programs

As noted in earlier sections of this report, interviewees were caught and held in a variety of programmatic nets in their childhood, teenage, and late adolescent years. The following levels of involvement were gleaned from the interview data:<sup>15</sup>

- More than half the interviewees were members of youth groups.
- At least one quarter, most of them evangelical Protestant or Jewish, went to church or religious camps.
- At least one quarter had been involved in mission trips and activities.
- At least one in six was part of a music group that led to leadership of worship for a youth group or congregation.

These levels of involvement are notably higher than those that the National Study of Youth and Religion discovered in the general U.S. population.<sup>16</sup> In addition, a number of interviewees named "the congregation" in which they grew up or later became involved as a significant influence in their growing sense of

call to ministry. The phenomenon of the “tap on the shoulder” by one or more congregants seemed to be more common for Protestants than it was for Roman Catholics.<sup>17</sup>

[My call] came from my church really. My church had a strong emphasis on missions. They sent a team to Haiti every year, and then we would hear from them. And then our pastor was really into missions, and one of my mentors at church really was.... She was one of my teachers in youth group, and she worked at the International Mission Board, and so just talking to her I guess I got into it. We grew up in a really great church, and my pastor was certainly a big influence.... He's great because he's such a good scholar, and so he really encouraged the development of the life of the mind and thinking about our faith. And he's the one that was urging me to go to seminary or something when I was saying “No, no, no.” And he's like, “You need to go to seminary.” So that was really good. And then just the youth group community that I grew up in. We had great youth leaders. Particularly they were always willing to talk about theology things with me, and I appreciated that. So I think maybe my church was especially helpful, 'cause it was intellectually engaging for me. And then there were people that I admired there, too.

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

Another student was the son of an admired and heroic pastor who was jailed by a dictatorial regime in the country in which the student grew up. The father died when the student was a small child. The student eventually came to the United States and worked in finance, while functioning as a volunteer lay preacher in non-denominational churches. He married and had a child who died as a baby, an experience that for him was as “transforming” as persecution in

his home country had been for his father. It made him think about formal theological education (which his father had not had). A nudge from a fellow church member was decisive:

The image of a pastor or clergy [that] I always had was my dad and my siblings. And it was always like, I didn't want to do that necessarily. I always wanted something more like a Martin Luther King ministry or John Wesley. I don't want to be stuck in a church setting. But while I served on the committee, there were people that knew me very well. I preached in the church. I volunteered to speak and they would ask me. And they would always tell me, “Gee, you should go...to seminary.” And I was like, “Ah, I know I'm a preacher, why should I go to seminary? I'm already doing things some of these people have never even done.” That was my own personal pride and ego. And all of a sudden, there's an older gentleman, a retired judge who became very close to me. And he kept on saying, “You should think about it.”

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 34

As these accounts suggest, the verbal prompting to consider ministry and encouragement along the way was often accompanied by the opportunity to try performing some ministerial functions. Similar opportunities often accompanied long-time participation in youth groups, camp programs, and mission activities. The combination—being named as promising for ministry and being given the chance to try leading worship and programs—was powerful and seemed to create the sense of capacity, called in career literature “self-efficacy,” that was decisive in the interviewees' choice to attend seminary and consider ministry as their life work.<sup>18</sup>

## Special Programs for Teenagers

In 1998, Lilly Endowment Inc., a foundation that makes major grants in religion, launched Theological Programs for High School Youth.<sup>19</sup> Forty-nine theological schools and organizations have received grants to offer summer seminars and programs in other formats for teenagers to experience the study of theology and practice of ministry. More than 20,000 students have participated in these programs to date.<sup>20</sup> This study contacted twenty-four of these programs, twelve of which agreed to send a brief questionnaire to former participants. At the time of the survey, the programs contacted had enrolled 4,154 participants in total over their lifetime. How many were actually reached at current addresses could not be determined; 653 responses were received.

It is very likely that the participants who responded to the survey were those on whom the program had had considerable impact, and it is also likely that the participants who were attracted to such programs were already fairly firmly rooted in church life. (Levels of church attendance during college, majoring in theology and religion, and participation in vocational programs in college are much higher than they were for interviewees and respondents to ESQ and GSQ surveys.) Still, the extent to which the respondents to the survey remained rooted in church life and gravitated to theology and ministry after the program was impressive, especially because almost all the respondents came from programs in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox institutions—religious sectors that have a hard time retaining their youth these days.

- Half the respondents attended church-related or Christian colleges.
- One quarter of them majored in religion or theology in college.
- Half said that they participated in a vocational discernment program in college.
- Four out of five engaged in some kind of volunteer work in college.
- One quarter said that they have graduated from seminary, are currently enrolled, or plan to attend.
- A slightly larger group (28 percent) said that they are considering going to seminary.
- More than half said that they are likely or very likely to work in ministry, or are already doing so.
- Almost half (40 percent) said that in ten years they expect to be in ministry or some form of work that serves others in need.

Several interviewees described their experiences in these high school programs as the defining moment in their decision-making about ministry. These students had a vague interest in ministry before they were steered into youth theology programs.

*This was my junior year of high school, and then that summer I attended...a ten-day vocational study for Orthodox high school students in their junior or senior year of high school, and I did that, and it was a life-changing experience. ... I found myself very ignorant of much of what my faith entailed, and actually going to the program and living a life of daily prayer twice a day and taking classes with seminary professors and doing social outreach and all that stuff within an Orthodox context, really getting to know who Christ is, who I am in relationship to Him, and what that means for my relationship with my neighbors. It was a great experience, and it was actually at that program that I actually could say that it was my first real conversion/*

belief experience.... It was at that moment that I kind of knew this is where I need to be. So I went through my senior year of high school knowing that I was going to go to seminary. MALE, ORTHODOX, 23

Also, that summer I had the opportunity to attend a camp that...was funded through Lilly and was affiliated [with my denomination]. It was...for students that maybe felt the call to vocational ministry. And so I had the opportunity to kind of feel that out and see if the life of a minister was something—was interesting. It was great. Yeah, it was really good....And it had practical ministry experiences versus a kind of classroom setting of “this is how you preach a sermon.” Or “this is how you baptize people” and so we practiced baptizing people.... And so by the end of the week, I said “Yeah, sure, vocational ministry, seminary, that sounds good, I like it.”

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 22

### Special Programs for College and Post-College Students

The college and immediate post-college years were a critical decision-making period for most of the interviewees in this study. Almost all had been set on the path to ministry earlier, but the actual decision was often made during college or just after. Peer groups (both those sponsored by parachurch or campus ministry organizations and religious orders and those formed by students on their own) were often the setting in which the choice was made. One in ten of the students interviewed also said that they had participated in a special college or post-college program that had vocational discernment as its main purpose. Most of the programs in which mainline Protestants in this study participated

were funded by Lilly Endowment as part of its Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) initiative or under the Lilly-funded sponsorship of the Fund for Theological Education (FTE), an ecumenical agency. Most of the programs in which Roman Catholic interviewees took part were sponsored by dioceses, orders or seminaries, though PTEV programs were sponsored in Roman Catholic institutions as well.

PTEV programs varied widely in format and scope. Some consisted of series of one-time events; others were intense immersion experiences in ministry. For some who participated in the programs that demanded deep involvement, they were vocation-shaping and even life-changing. This student participated in both high school and college programs:

[I went to a youth academy] one summer, and that kind of sparked my interest in theology. Actually, that's really when I became a Christian. And I started going to church. And then the second thing would be three summers ago, [my college] had this program where you either spend a full year after you graduate in vocational discernment, or you spend the summer. And I spent the summer between my sophomore and junior years of undergrad doing that. And you live in an intentional Christian community... and you intern at a nonprofit...based on your vocational aspirations. And that's where I met [my fiancée]. And kind of the coupling effect of her really saying like, “You are called to be a minister,” and working at [name of] church, interning there, those things together really just kind of like hit the nail in

the coffin for me, like, you know, don't think about law anymore.... It really hammered home what I kind of sensed internally for a long time. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

Most often, the programs were the capstone of a long process of development and illustrated a central finding of this study: very few students, especially those the schools identified as “best,” began the pilgrimage to seminary and ministry in adulthood. Almost all were at least strongly pulled in that direction by the time they entered college. College and post-college programs most often functioned as reinforcement:

My best friend died of cancer when I was 14, and that was a time where we had really great youth people at our church—youth ministers at our church—that connected me to other youth who were going through the same sort of thing, so the church became my family more when I was going through that grieving process and struggling with questions like why would God do this and things like that. So that coupled with this love of service that was fostered within me...reemerged in college. I went to [a denominational college] and did the [PTEV] program. That was funded by the Lilly Foundation. And [the program director] was somebody who really formed a lot of my opinions about things and just kept leading me on questions I already had.

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 22

When I was in college, I was part of Lilly Scholars my senior year. And so that's geared towards—I think it's mostly religion majors. And at that point, coming into that, I've had an idea I'd probably end up as a seminarian, so I think that's especially why once I was recommended by a professor.... I think it was an affirmation.... How I work, I'm kind of a

very slow and incremental person when I have a sense. I don't have these huge epiphany moments like some people do, and so I think there were small ways that continue to affirm. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

A college [Fund for Theological Education] conference let me know that I wasn't alone in that direction. It was helpful. Like I think I would probably still be here now if it wasn't for it.... I think my direction was set in [missionary programs overseas] then just working in college chaplaincy all four years. But the summer [parish-based, FTE-sponsored] program was very [confirming].

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

Roman Catholic institutions seem to offer a multitude of opportunities for discernment at various life and vocational stages. One order, for instance, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, invites some high school graduates into an “associates” program that keeps contact with them through college and helps them with discernment. One interviewee came to seminary and the decision to prepare for priesthood by that route. Another described his Jesuit college's “culture of discernment” (the school in which he was enrolled was one that had a PTEV program as well as other activities focused on vocation):

I would say that that was very much a part of my college experience. I was around people who—in a lot of ways, I just—I think I fell into a culture that promoted that kind of thinking and reflection.... I had a spiritual director through my four years of college, and I would say that that wasn't typical, but it wasn't something that I thought of as odd. I was just around people partially, I think,

at the university, partially at the Catholic student center in which there was a sense of more of a comprehensive way of looking at life and intentional way of going about using—I think the language I couldn't have used then, but would use now—of discernment. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 37

A 25-year-old student seminarian found many of the same discernment resources at the Newman Center of a public university. Most influential, he said, was “entering into a culture of vocations,” with other students who were considering priesthood and religious life. Without that, “I don't think I would have ever—well, who knows? You know, I don't know how God works...but that was a big part of it.” For a third, the pivotal moment of discernment came during an internship program that was part of his pre-seminary college experience:

I did pastoral internship in between my sophomore and junior year of college seminary that just really made me realize that, yeah, I'm supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be with the people. I'm supposed to be with a parish. And I always point back to that experience of being in a parish that really told me, yeah, you're supposed to be a priest because you can do this. You can be with people day in and day out. You can be with them in the hard times. You can be with them in the joyful times. That was the biggest turning point, when I embraced that title as seminarian. You're kind of just wading in the water and that floatation device kind of came, which was the parish, which helped me get through all the rest of the bumps of college seminary. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 22

Evangelical students have access to strong parachurch student organizations present on or near most college campuses. Jewish students can usually find a college Hillel or other Jewish campus group. Students from these groups who want a specific focus on vocational discernment, however, may or may not find them in these settings. Some described devising their own programs:

I remember vividly going to my rabbi—this is my male rabbi—and saying “this is what I really want to do but I'm concerned that I maybe don't have a strong enough sense of spirituality,” ... I felt I didn't feel enough of a calling. And I remember that he was very reassuring and supportive and said, “You know, the fact that you want to do this does show some sense of calling, and even if you don't feel you have like, a vision from God or you know, some one moment of calling, your path is a calling and you know, your spirituality and your theology is something that will develop, and you don't have to have it all figured out and I don't have it all figured out.” And so that really propelled me. FEMALE, JEWISH, 24

## Patterns of Influence

In the life story of any one student we interviewed, the influence of persons the student had met and groups and programs the student had participated in were woven into a complex narrative tapestry. Nevertheless, patterns emerged from the stories, roughly corresponding to the religious traditions and types of schools.<sup>21</sup>

### *Mainline Protestant denominational.*

Clergy were the most important influencers of students in these institutions, followed by professors and members of congregations. In the students' teenage years, youth groups were important; for those who participated in

special youth theology programs, the experience was often decisive. Most of these students attended public schools and spent much of their time outside church institutions, so peer support—other young people for whom religious commitment and interest in ministry was “cool”—was very important for them at the high school level. It was even more important in college, because campus ministry resources for mainline Protestants are sparse.

#### *Mainline Protestant independent.*

The chief influencers of interviewees in these schools, many of whom were still undecided about whether to pursue academic careers or congregational ministry, were college professors; congregational clergy and members were secondary. These interviewees too were caught and held by youth activities in their teenage years. In college, for some, the academic study of religion and their fellow students in the field were the most important influences.

#### *Evangelical Protestant denominational.*

Congregational clergy were the most important influence, but professors, youth pastors and leaders, and congregational members vied for second place. Evangelical denominations seemed to offer a balanced ecology of influences: persons in a variety of roles, plus youth groups, camps, and to a lesser extent, mission activities in the early years and campus groups in college, as well as a wide selection of Christian colleges. Perhaps because of the comprehensiveness and cohesion of influential persons and programs available to young people who come into contact with evangelical denominations, schools associated with them were most likely to have attracted interviewees

whose families were unchurched and who were recruited into church life as individuals when they were young.

#### *Evangelical Protestant independent.*

For students in these institutions, many of whom were rooted in the broad evangelical culture rather than a particular denomination, clergy, family, and youth group leaders were equally important, along with Christian camps and parachurch groups. These institutions also had substantial numbers of students whose parents were not church-connected, which suggests that the resources for young people in the broader evangelical culture, though not as tightly organized as it might be by denominations, are very powerful.

#### *Roman Catholic.*

Overwhelmingly, the principal influencers were parish clergy, especially for students who became candidates for priesthood. Parents and peers were strong secondary influences, and involvement in liturgy, mission activities, and other church-sponsored programs, including those focused on vocational discernment, had impact as well.

#### *Jewish.*

For the rabbinical students interviewed, one influence stood out among all others: clergy (rabbis and cantors). Much more than Christian clergy, they spoke to young congregants (and their families) early and often about their promise for the rabbinate. A strong camp program and the tradition of travel to Israel were strong reinforcers, along with campus Hillel programs for some college students.

# Pathways: How Students Get to Seminary

## D. Testing

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Many of the students interviewed for this project who seemed more mature and self-reflective reported that they had had disruptive experiences that had shaken their worldview and sometimes their faith, causing them to reexamine their views and values. Usually these experiences—and especially their integration into a new understanding of self, God, and other people—were identified as important markers on the path to ministry and sometimes as the incidents in which the call was defined and the goals became clear.

Experiences of testing came in several forms. In a number of cases, they occurred in a social setting different from the relatively comfortable and stable one in which the student grew up. A new understanding of the enormity of need and suffering in the world became the occasion for examining life goals in the light of faith. Here is one such story of a young man, mainline Protestant, now in seminary in his early twenties:

At the end of my freshman year, I took a mission trip with my home church to [a Central American country]. It was a medical mission. They put me in charge of eye exams. I had gone on the trip because girls were going and for the exotic experience. They put a big box of donated ugly 1970s glasses in front of me. That was all the training I got. I looked out the window, and there was this huge line of people waiting to see me. So I did what I remembered from getting eye exams. I put a line on the floor with tape and hung up the eye chart. I arranged the glasses by how much they hurt my eyes.

I have 20/20 vision, so the ones that didn't hurt I put on one side, and the ones that hurt a lot on the other, and I lined them up in between. If people made a lot of mistakes on the chart, I gave them the strong ones—if just a few, the others. It was an imperfect system at best. But for these people, it was the first time that many of them could see. They were so excited and joyful. One little boy couldn't see anything on the chart. Then I gave him glasses and he could read all the letters. His mother was crying. It was like a Bible story happening, even if through ordinary means. At that moment, I committed my life to the church. I knew I wanted to make a difference.

When I got back, I was restless about journalism. I started praying. I thought that maybe I could go into teaching and make a difference. But you have to be passionate about it to do that well. In my junior year, I started asking myself about the church. I went to study in Africa. I didn't know anyone there, and I thought it would be an opportunity to figure things out. While I was there, I got this sinking feeling that I should do ministry. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

An evangelical student had the same kind of experience in Africa as a young man. He told of being “the only western white face in the African village on the outskirts of a major city” when he volunteered at an indigenous hospital sponsored by a Pentecostal community. There, he said:

[I] just encountered a way of life and a faith in God and a power to love people that I'd never encountered before.... I met believers who had the same kind of experience like I had. And I had a kinship with it I couldn't explain. So I came back very hungry to learn the scripture, which I didn't really learn while growing up, and to answer a host of questions that came up along with that.

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 41

After that experience, he first became a physician, though the pull toward ministry never went away. At the time he was interviewed, he was 41 and studying in a seminary in order to return to his non-profit clinic and teach medical students whose commitment is faith-based about the theological dimensions of their profession.

A rabbinical student told a story in the same vein, about a trip to the poor section of Haifa, where she lived and worked with immigrants who spoke no English:

And I ended up returning to that area time and time again, working with Russian teenage girls in an after-school program. Ethiopian students, doing tutoring. So, that became very defining,...it was a really defining part of my Jewish journey...Jewish life and my Jewish identity became all much more messy and complex. It was like stepping really out into the unknown and having to wrestle with some pretty hard realities. FEMALE, JEWISH, 31

For a 25-year-old Orthodox Christian student, the period of testing occurred during a semester at a mainline Protestant seminary. He was engaged to a woman from a city in the South, and he "wanted her community and her family to know who I was and that I wasn't just some

Yankee trying to steal her away." So he got permission for an exchange semester at a school in his wife's hometown:

So I went down there and it was the best experience of my life. I slept on now one of my best friend's living room floors for nine months. And I went to school with a radically different and diverse group of students. I did my volunteer chaplaincy down there for my field education program in a hospital that's in the middle of one of the more violent urban areas in the country. So much so that where we parked in a parking garage, less than a quarter mile from the front door, we had to get shuttled back and forth to the hospital and then back to the cars. So, it was a very eye-opening experience.... The professors there were very, very big on addressing poverty issues, and that really blew out my worldview. Enriched it with empathy that I had not known before, and a desire to really invest in that as well as a part of a ministry. MALE, ORTHODOX, 25

The student's commitment to priesthood remained in place, but his vision of what that might involve expanded: "I would like to in some capacity be devoted to a community, both ecclesial and local, without a boundary of race, creed, or economic status." In service of that new perspective, which complemented the views and values instilled by his seminary studies and spiritual direction, he planned to graduate from seminary and then attend law school before accepting a church assignment.

Some of the most strenuous testing of both character and call was reported by students who had become middle or high school teachers immediately after college.

I think 75 percent of the kids at the time were on reduced lunch and like a free breakfast program. A lot of poverty, a lot of broken families. I had many students that didn't even know their fathers. I had several girls who were pregnant. I had many gang members. I had one guy [in my class who] was the ring leader of the most prominent local burglary ring. And I learned how to teach. I developed a passion for teaching. Really discovering my gifts in that. But the Lord [also gave] me opportunities to really father the kids in a lot of ways, especially my second year. And I would stop class sometimes and—I can't believe I did this but I would stop class. I would just look around the room and I would remember even having tears in my eyes. I would look at my kids and I would say, "I'm so honored to be your teacher. You are a gift to me." And I would say, "I love each one of you." And I just found that speaking love into their lives in that way was one of the most impactful things for these kids because they had never had anything like that before. And it also taught them to love history too. So we developed a great relationship. I discovered what it meant to really give my heart to people. Discovering their deep brokenness and need for the gospel, and all of that really attracted me back to ministry. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 34

For some students, the period of testing was not one that they chose, like mission work or teaching, but rather some tragedy in their lives. One woman student, a 29-year-old evangelical, was the child of divorce. She was taken to her father's home country outside the United States and grew up without her mother. She traced her decision to give up a promising career in computer science for ministry to that

experience: "So that's why I identify with a lot of people's hurts, because I got to experience them, too. And I have a lot of sympathy for other people that go through struggles and hardships. That was the motivation."

For several students, the event that shook them and was later incorporated into their sense of call was the death of another child, a sibling, or friend:

So, I was your typical grammar school kid. I thought I was going to be into sports.... When I was in the fourth grade, however,... I had a brother who passed away.... So, that kind of began—at least for me now looking back on it—my whole reason why I decided to get more involved in the church. So, I became an altar server, joined the choir, things like that. And I guess, those were the qualities that my pastor saw within me and how much I loved doing that, and being at church, and being able to help people that when I was in eighth grade, deciding to go to high school, much to my dismay, I was approached one day—actually in January of 2002. He said, "Hey, you'd make a great priest." I have all the qualities. "I see them in you and we're going to pay for you to go to the high school seminary." MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 22

Almost all the interviewees who came from immigrant families said that the difficulties of moving to a different country were a central part of their spiritual and vocational development. One Roman Catholic seminarian (male, 34) said that "cultural differences remained no matter how much I tried to assimilate" and described the pain of that process in theological terms, as his "first

experience of a kind of Paschal mystery, of suffering in my life as a kid.”

Not all students had profoundly disruptive or decentering experiences that become a linchpin for vocational development and self-understanding. For some, maturation and clarity were achieved slowly, as the sum of small steps, without a dramatic turning point or moment of revelation. In a few cases, the test was too hard: there were some interviewees who had become deeply depressed and, it seemed, defeated by family tragedies and struggles with physical and mental illness. Most of them questioned whether ministry would be possible for them. A handful said that they planned to minister to persons whose problems resembled their own, though it was not clear whether they had the stamina to complete their preparation and take on such work.

Yet another small group of students seemed to interviewees not to have attained much personal and vocational maturity by either the conversion or slow growth route. Their lives had been mostly untroubled, their successes regular, and any challenges easily overcome. They wanted, usually, to minister in settings like those they had always known. These students were unknown quantities. When finally confronting real difficulty, as almost everyone does eventually, some will no doubt find ways to integrate that experience or reorient their self-understanding to incorporate it. Others may be defeated by it. In the light of this uncertainty, it seems highly desirable that students be seasoned in some way—by life events or by exposure to the wider world—before seminary studies begin.

## Pathways: How Students Get to Seminary

### E. In Seminary | Choices and Challenges

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This section recounts how students who have traveled this path, with its many variations, decide where to attend seminary. It also reports what happens to their vocational goals during their time in a theological school.

#### Choosing a Seminary

By their own account, the students surveyed and interviewed for this study were drawn to the schools they decided to attend by their perception of the school’s quality and fit with their values and views. As Table 4 shows, the ranking of reasons in survey responses for choosing a school did not change substantially over the last decade: two of three reasons ranked “important” or higher have to do with the quality of the school, and the third has to do with “fit” with the school’s doctrinal position. For reasons not readily apparent—because

students are borrowing much more today than they were ten years ago—financial aid dropped in the rankings. Even controlling for age, the rankings of the importance of financial aid were lower. Notably, the role of admissions staff became more important.

The interviewees’ responses to questions about how and why they chose their seminary add nuances to the survey responses. *Academic quality* was one of factors mentioned most often. In some cases, quality was assessed by acquaintance with the curriculum or the work of faculty. For most, “academic quality” entailed not only scholarly prestige but also a faculty and curriculum that offered a theological context and openness to personal “faith in God.”

**Table 4: Reasons That Entering Students Chose Their Theological School**

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Rank in Order in 1998</i>	<i>Rank in Order in 2009</i>
Academic reputation of school	1	1/2
Comfort with school's doctrinal position	2	3
Financial aid	3	4
Quality of faculty	4	1/2
School close to home or work	5	6
Encouragement of denomination	6	7
Quality of admissions staff	7	5

*Sources: 1998 Survey, Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education; 2009 Entering Student Questionnaire, The Association of Theological Schools.*

Mainly because the staff here, they were the authors of the books I had been reading. So I figured these are the guys I agree with theologically. Why not go learn directly from them instead of going to a seminary who's using the same books? I might as well get it straight from the horse's mouth.

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 26

I knew that going to [this school] would definitely open more doors for that [further academic study] rather than [the alternative I was considering]. So, that was also a factor.... When I visited, I attended three classes, but one of them—there was a professor here, [name], and she had been teaching class on prayer. And I had gone, and she had actually invited me to attend this class.... In the class, I just really was inspired. Like there was all these things that came up and that just struck a chord with me. I was, "I was thinking about this just now; I was thinking about this." Then afterwards, she offered to pray with me. And I just thought—you know, one of the worries of coming to [this school] was I had

heard [that you] "don't go to [this seminary] it's too liberal," or something like that. Yeah, you know, "You'll become agnostic." So, they were just exaggerating, but I think that was the confirmation that really quieted those fears. And for me, that was also a sign that God was leading me in that direction.

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

I decided on a master's program of some sort and I was still interested in early Israelite stuff. More than historical orientation. But I was also interested in pursuing it in a theological environment and so I applied to [other] places.... And ultimately I decided on [this school] because I didn't want to divorce my academic studies from faith in God.

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 26

*Theological fit and doctrinal position of the school*—which were highly ranked by survey respondents—were equally important for many interviewees:

I mean, I'm a woman. So, like, I need a school that will take seriously my call. That I am a woman, and that I have been called—that's something God does. You know,

they see that. And not only that, but they advocate—I mean, it's more than just, "You can come in. We'll open the door." It's more, "How can we open the door in a way that allows the church to function as men and women?"

FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 23

But then once I got really like looking into [this seminary] and its mission, I was like, that's what I want to do. Like I want a progressive Christianity, a social justice, kinda it goes right along with what I would want to do with a non-profit group, organization. So I was like, even if I don't end up working in the church, the education that I would get at the seminary would really prepare me for non-profit work as well. So that was really the turning point for that.

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 28

[This school]...bills itself on being—I don't want to use the word centrist because I don't like the word centrist—but [as] a middle ground in between...some of the different positions in [our denomination]. [Seminary A] has a reputation of being more liberal in theology, [Seminary B] more conservative evangelical. [This seminary]...actively advocated like a middle-of-the-way, historic tradition in line with historic Christianity ..., which was very attractive to me as well.

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

Most often, both academic quality and fit were assessed on the basis of a trusted person certifying the school. Here again, both exemplars and trusted peers played important roles in illuminating the paths that interviewees took to ministry:

Well, one weekend we had a Bible conference at our church and the guy, the guest teacher that was there, I spent a ton of time with him. He has taught on the seminary level before. And so the last night that we were together, I was dropping him off and he turned around and looked at me and said, "Before you make any final decision, you need to go check out [this seminary]." And he's the kind of guy, he could have said "You've got to go to Iraq," and you would just go. And he was just a smart, wise, just kind of sage. And so you want to listen to him and respect his advice. And so my wife and I, we started getting online and started making phone calls and talking to the folks in the seminary and we came and visited one weekend and we were done. We never turned back. We just knew. We were here one night and we were like okay, we were coming [here].

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 29

It was very significant for me that people I knew and trust well have been to this institution. I was not one of these people who had grown up wanting to be a pastor. I had not spent much time at all researching the myriad of different theological seminary institutions across the world that I could go to....

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 33

My sisters in community who have studied here before have really had a great experience of studying here. And, of course, we do have our own theological institute as well.... And I must say that it is a privilege...to study in a setting where you—how do say? It's a very intellectual setting here, and it's outside of the community in that sense.

FEMALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 32

A closely related reason for the choice of school that emerged in the interviews (but for which an option was not offered on the

questionnaires) was *family or school tradition*: the school was selected because a parent or relative attended, or because recent graduates from the student's college had gone there in significant numbers:

I looked here and I actually finished my undergrad a semester early, so I actually did a semester of graduate work [elsewhere]. Basically, my dad, having come here and doing his graduate work here, just really suggested coming here. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 22

A large group of graduates [from my college, which was geographically close to the seminary] were coming here too and there was some continuity in that. That was definitely a part of it.... MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

In the questionnaire rankings, "school close to home or work" was a second tier consideration, ranked and rated lower than it was ten years before. Interviewees introduced a wider range of *location* considerations—not just convenience, but proximity to family (especially a spouse's family) and the attractiveness of the area or region in which the school is located. One or more of these aspects of place was often mentioned by interviewees as an almost equally important factor as academic quality, faculty reputation, and theological fit.

Then I had friends living in the [this] area. I'm not really the type of person who wants to move somewhere where he doesn't know anybody. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT 27

Two names popped out (for schools to attend)... Very superficially, I thought, "Well, if I'm going to spend a year anywhere,

would I prefer to be in a place with skiing, mountains and beautiful scenery or in [a northeastern city]?" FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 46

There were several reasons other than it was just where I needed to be I realize now. One was that I wanted to move closer to [my home state]. My dad has had lymphoma for five years now and it's really hard being that far away. And I've always had a really good relationship with my family, with my dad particularly. So that was part of it. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 39

For a significant number of interviewees, it was *contact with the school*, often a visit, that sealed the decision.

We went in—we were at the seminary for, like, an hour and a half, met—we met the rector, we met a couple seminarians, met a lay member of staff as well. He was kind of the main guy that we met and showed us around a little bit. We were there for, like, an hour and a half or so. But there was just something about it that was, like, I want to go here, and something about it said this is where—this is where I'm supposed to be and this is what I'm supposed to be doing. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 24

On the weekend I was thinking about visiting, they were holding their first live symposium here. It was a seminar for minorities called to ministry. And I was like, "Wow, this perfect. Okay, let's go and look at the campus." And at that time, I decided to just put all my eggs in one basket because I just felt like maybe God is calling me to [this school]. I came here and fell in love with the campus. It felt like home. And [this school] was the only school I applied to, and I got in. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 28

The people here welcomed our whole family, which as very important for us. We see ourselves as a unit. Some of the other schools that we went to, we went as a family and they were like, “Well, why is your wife and son here?” You know? “Can they go wait outside while we talk business?”

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 47

For younger interviewees in particular, the *recruitment and admissions process* made a critical difference. (Younger survey respondents were also more likely to indicate the importance of the admissions staff.) Indeed, for some like the interviewees quoted below, careful attention from the school before admission was taken as a sign of God’s leading. Younger students have formed a growth sector for some schools. The fact that deliberate efforts in recruitment of these students had an effect is an encouraging sign. One evangelical woman student who was praying about her choice between seminary and law school made the seminary decision when a handwritten letter from the seminary dean arrived in her mailbox. For another student, an admission director’s dinner invitation was key:

The director of admissions...was visiting my college. And I had heard about [this school] from professors.... So she was at the booth. And I was with my roommate and we were talking. And there were probably 15 people around there that she was giving the spiel to. —And we kind of pushed to the front to grab forms just to fill out. She looked at the forms after we filled them out, and she said, “Do you wanna go to dinner tonight?” I’m like, sure. So we went to [name of restaurant]. And she prayed over us, and she cried when she prayed. And of course, I cried. And it was just

beautiful, like praying over our ministries. And I thought, what? (Laughter) So that really began that relationship, and then by my senior year, when she [visited] again, I was already admitted. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

For interviewees as for survey respondents, *finances* were an important secondary factor. Very few interviewees said that they chose a seminary on financial grounds alone. In combination with other reasons for school choice, however, it could be decisive. In both the survey responses and the interviews, students in mainline Protestant schools are much more likely than students in other institutions to have said that financial considerations determined their choice of school. The mainline Protestant school category includes a number of institutions that are related to research universities that set high tuitions. That could be one reason for the difference. It also may be that mainline Protestant schools are more likely to require residence and full-time attendance, arrangements that make it difficult to work for pay while the student is enrolled.

Well, I applied to, I think, six different schools, and of all of those [this school] really stood out to me as a place where I would fit in very well.... The faculty here are just outstanding... they are people that I just wanted to come and work with. And so, they made that possible for me. They called and offered me a scholarship to come here, and it all worked out. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 22

I interviewed at [another seminary that was a better fit “liturgically”] and here. But, you know, when things started working out and we sat down and we started looking at numbers, you know, my bishop was like... you could potentially tack on, you know, \$60,000 to \$100,000, you know. He’s like this

is gonna take you the rest of your life to pay this off. So, you know, I had a hard time with it, because my family was, I mean a blue-collar family, but we weren't poor, but you know, we had to work to have everything. So money had always been something—or it has always been something in my life that I've always said, I don't want money to ever determine my direction.... So, you know, it was a hard decision. I had to sit down and to weight a lot of factors out because while money does—money is very important, sometimes experience, I feel, is just as important....

FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 26

Finally, as the foregoing illustrations suggest, the choice of a seminary usually depended on multiple factors. Very few interviewees or survey respondents, however, indicated that their choice of school was dictated only by convenience or affordability or a convincing pitch by recruiters. Most claimed that academic and faculty quality and theological fit were their primary criteria and that admissions processes, location, and finances were secondary. It may be the case that most students define whatever school they decide to attend as a “good” school, provided that they are happy there—it would be difficult to invest in an institution perceived to be of poor quality. It may also be the case that location, finances, and skillful recruitment play a more decisive role than students acknowledged. The fact that quality and fit continued to be named as the principal factors in choice over a long time interval, however, provides clues to schools as they shape their recruitment programs. Effective admissions processes, easier access to program offerings, and adequate financial support are likely to be effective only if a school has clearly projected its values, theological profile, and academic and religious strengths.

## In Seminary: What Happens?

In some quarters, seminary has a bad reputation. In certain traditions, “higher” critical theological education is believed to undermine faith or seed heretical beliefs. Across the range of religious groups, church executives and many lay people fear that seminary training distances students from the life of the church, drawing them away from local congregations and toward the academic study of religion, muddying the clear sense of call that brought them to seminary. The findings of this study offer little support for these widely believed conventions. Both the “best” students chosen for interview and the whole population that completed surveys were much more likely to report an increase than a decrease in the strength and dependability of their faith during seminary. They usually report that their sense of call was confirmed or clarified during their years of study, and the direction of vocational change in both groups was toward rather than away from congregational ministry. The remainder of this section documents these trends and other features of students' seminary experiences most often cited in interviews and surveys.

## In Seminary: Challenges

About half of students interviewed had had substantial seminary experience—they were either in their last year or near the end of a first or middle year. Of these, one-third emphasized that seminary had been for them a period of major challenge in which prior assumptions, opinions, and even whole worldviews were scrutinized and sometimes shaken.

The challenge for many started as soon as they stepped into the school. One woman, a mainline Protestant in her middler year

(25 years old), described the challenging experience of “facing a lot of questions head on and in a new environment ... my thoughts and my beliefs and how I read scripture and how I talk about it with friends and having to build a new community.” A first-year woman student in a different mainline Protestant school described entry as “emotionally and spiritually awfully challenging to figure out how to maneuver in a space where all your worlds are coming together at the same time.”

The consensus of more advanced students was that the challenges were “hard but beneficial.” This evangelical seminarian felt at first upended by the experience of seminary in a troubled city, then increasingly secure in his relationship with God:

When God just kind of pulled the rug out from under my feet and just—I realized I didn’t have any foundation to stand on. And so after that...the first year in seminary was just a very difficult year.... And it was really hard, but really good. In the first year, I’d just kind of been taking random classes.... And then the second year, that summer after my first year, I stayed. I stayed—I moved here and stayed that first summer. And it was just a time where God was just revealing Himself to me, and I was just learning so many new things about Him. And that second year in seminary was when I started taking the harder classes like the systematics and the languages and was just—everything in life is fuelling my understanding of God. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 28

### **In Seminary: Spiritual and Personal Formation**

Spiritual growth and overall maturity are regular themes. The platforms for growth are various. Student initiated prayer groups are mentioned fairly often:

I’ve learned a lot about prayer since coming here. And I really think that’s been instrumental. Just the valuable time that I’m on my knees and seeking the Lord in ways that I haven’t before. And my first semester here, someone did invite me to a weekly prayer group that prays for the campus and the world.

FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 27

And early on, about six guys, we started a weekly Bible study, which has been huge for me for spiritual formation. Just kind of accountability, fellowship are the main two factors of that. Which has been huge to get in close with a group of guys, ‘cause it’s real easy here—the class is huge, I mean it’s 200 students—it’s real easy to kinda get lost in the mix, with everybody living off campus, everybody is studying all the time. And so that’s been crucial for me. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 23

For some students, the crucible for spiritual formation was the classroom:

I [have changed] drastically. This has been a great place for just spiritual formation.... Spiritual formation really does happen in the classroom.... The curriculum in general is really geared towards shaping you to be a pastor, to be a shepherd, a servant.... The professors are very much, a lot of them are very much pastors. They want to spend time with students. They want to get to know you. They like your wives. They want to get to know your wives. Some of them want to really spend time with single students. They will have you over for dinner. They really do it well. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 29

Some of the descriptions of the maturation process in seminary suggest that was broader than what is usually meant by “spiritual formation”:

Seminary's been awesome. I mean I have absolutely loved it. It has been—I mean I have grown in so many ways besides just spiritually. I mean I feel like I have just gained such a maturity here. I feel like I just see everything coming together. I've enjoyed my classes, I've enjoyed the people, I've enjoyed the mentorship of the professors. I mean it's really been a wonderful experience of growth. MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 25

Here at [name of school] I have moved from a reactionary stance to a secure self-identity. I don't need to shout our [brand of] theology from the rooftops anymore. I am able to engage others from a perspective of love. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

### In Seminary: Confirmation of Call

A number of students reported that their experiences during seminary strengthened their ministerial identity. Field education was often the setting for this experience, as this young Roman Catholic student reports:

But going into a parish...and then the pastor taking it to the level of having everyone call me Seminarian Sam in the parish is what helped me identify with my vocation.... So being in the parish it was, "Oh, Seminarian Sam here. Oh, Seminarian Sam,<sup>22</sup> can you do this? Seminarian Sam, can you preach for me? Seminarian Sam, can you do this?" Having that helped tremendously because I finally felt like, okay, I'm here for the right reasons because I like that. I like the fact that people identify me with what I'm doing and that's what I'm supposed to be doing. That was the biggest turning point, when I embraced that title as seminarian. MALE, ROMAN CATHOLIC, 22

The experience also occurred in other settings. For women in traditions in which the ministerial job opportunities were limited, faculty members and other elements of the seminary curriculum, such as vocational discernment groups, often played a decisive role in affirming the students' aspirations to ministry:

I think seminary confirmed it [vocation]. Didn't really change or anything. It just really confirmed, especially when I remember in my first World Missions 101 class, when I really had the question, "What motivates missionaries to do what they do?" I always had that question because I was like, okay, I can go there, but what is the pushing factor that will take me to do this? When Dr. [name of professor] was here..., he was my mentor when I was here, and we did my internship—we met about once every month. And I talked—he really was a great influence in my life. So I found that out, and I was like, "Yes! This is exactly right! This is what I was looking for!" So it just confirmed my journey and gave me more support and more tools. FEMALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 29

### In Seminary: Changing Direction

The single most frequent change reported during the years of seminary study was an increasing interest in congregational ministry. On this measure, the students interviewed and those surveyed were very similar. One in ten interviewees said that they had entered theological school either undecided or with some goal other than congregational ministry in mind, and then, in the course of seminary, became convinced of a call to ministry in the congregation. The difference was the same for students surveyed, as Table 5 shows. Ten percent more graduating than entering students were headed for parish ministry in 2009-2010.<sup>23</sup> All other goals except "other" were less likely to be

**Table 5: Change in Vocational Direction During Seminary**

Vocational Choice	Percentage Gain or Loss During Seminary
Parish ministry	+8
Campus/youth ministry	-2
Social justice ministry	-1
Chaplaincy/counseling	-2
Teaching	-5
Missions	-3
Graduate study	-2
Other	+1

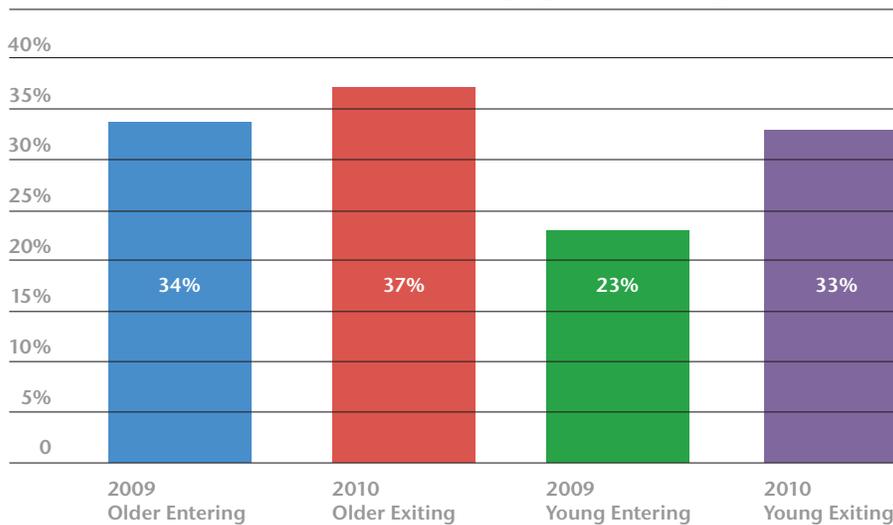
Sources: 2009 Entering Student Questionnaire; 2010 Graduating Student Questionnaire, The Association of Theological Schools.

selected by graduating than entering students. As Figure 2 shows, the youngest group of students surveyed (those 30 and younger) were much less likely than older students to have entered seminary focused on congregational ministry—the difference was 11 percent at entrance. The

difference virtually disappeared at graduation, however, because a high percentage of the youngest cohort appears to have changed goals in the direction of parish ministry, while the older group’s level of interest stayed virtually the same.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that substantial numbers of students reported themselves as “undecided” at both entrance and shortly before graduation. On the 1998 Auburn Survey that did not offer the undecided option, the percentage who said that they would most likely work initially in congregational ministry was somewhat higher.<sup>25</sup>

Pages of this report could be covered with students’ accounts of how their interest in congregational ministry developed. One common story line involved an internship or field education placement in a local church. This young man, who grew up in an evangelical missionary family, rebelled and then found his way into mainline Protestant denominations. He entered seminary with academic aspirations but changed direction during an internship in which he realized that his pastoral skills were stronger than his academic gifts:

**Figure 2: Percentages of Master’s Level Students 30 and Younger (“Young”) and 31 and Older (“Older”) Headed for Congregational Ministry**



Sources: 2009 Entering and 2010 Graduating Student Questionnaires, The Association of Theological Schools.

I just came to love the church in a way that I hadn't before.... It was just it was working in a church this summer for an internship and participating [as an intern in the chaplaincy] at the university for this would be my second year now, and yeah just really loving the church and wanting to give my life to service in the church. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 25

Another male student about the same age, also studying in a mainline Protestant school, admired his physician grandfather and went to college sure that he was headed into medicine. He found he did not love science, however, and he did love his religion classes. For a while, he thought he would combine his interests and become a hospital chaplain, but a field education placement changed his mind:

I thought that'd be a great compromise, you know, my plan and God's plan together. But then when I did my first field education placement at a rural church I figured out that the parish is where I was supposed to go.... I had a wonderful supervisor who let me just experience everything.... She had me preach and teach and do a lot of visitation and work with the youth group and chaperone a mission trip and help teach vacation Bible school, and we led worship every Sunday. And I really just got a taste of all the different aspects of parish ministry and I loved it. MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 24

A woman student gave a very similar report:

I came in thinking I'd be in a non-profit, maybe eventually get my Ph.D., probably be a teacher at some point in time, work for the U.N. I had all these grand plans and ended up working at a church...with the youth program which is kind of what my niche is in ministry.... I loved it. This is feeling right. FEMALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 28

A second common pattern was the recognition that some other occupational path did not offer the rewards that the student had experienced early in life in the local church. This student was a life-long member of a mainline Protestant denomination. A youth pastor recruited him into various leadership positions, and the idea of seminary was planted. In college, though, he went to Washington in connection with a course in political science, saw the huge discrepancies there between government power and poor neighborhoods, and changed his vocational focus to public policy. After college, he worked for a faith-based advocacy organization in Washington. It was in this context that he decided he was called to parish ministry:

During those years [working as an intern for a religious organization with public policy goals] I came to be more and more convinced that there's a real limit to the ability of a place like [that] to change the hearts and minds of Christians. Part of what they do is oriented towards influencing Congress, and part of what they're doing is about educating the church and helping the church to live more fully into its own scriptures and its own calling for justice. Some people can be really reached by [that way]. [But] that's nothing like the trust that you put in a pastor who, you know, came to the hospital when your child was sick. I was kind of harboring this idea that my duty was to do something bigger than tend a congregation, and so it's kind of ironic that my time in DC led me to feel more like there's nothing more important that you can do, nothing bigger than tending the life of a congregation. So that was when I knew that this idea of

going to seminary had hung around for a couple of years without going away. And so probably the next faithful step would be to apply and go and see what comes of it.

MALE, MAINLINE PROTESTANT, 27

A female rabbinical student came to the same conclusion after deep immersion in campus ministry (Hillel) followed by an internship in a congregation:

Well, I recently had an epiphany that I need to be a congregational rabbi. I was entertaining the Hillel world for a while, because it gave me so much; I'm very passionate about it. But being in my internship, I realized that I love the intergenerational aspect of congregational life. I love being with people at major moments in their life, and leading ritual gives me like a high—like I love it. And I pray best when I'm leading services, so I realized—this was very recently—I realized like I want congregational life. FEMALE, JEWISH, 26

As might be expected, men are more likely than women to say that the position they most want after seminary is congregational ministry. The size of the gap, as measured by survey response, varied by school tradition and type. For students in mainline Protestant schools and evangelical Protestant denominational schools it was smallest (about 10 percent for students in master of divinity programs); for students in evangelical independent seminaries it was wider (about 20 percent for M.Div. students) and for Roman Catholics, wider still (40 percent for M.Div. students, though only 20 percent for all master's students, because many women preparing for parish assignments were enrolled in non-M.Div. programs).

Some students interviewed reported change in other directions—a few who were not

considering careers in research and teaching when they entered were attracted to that possibility in seminary. Others, in relatively small numbers, decided on a ministry specialty other than congregational ministry—counseling, chaplaincy, social service agency leadership, or work for a parachurch organization. Both interview data and survey results show, however, that more students shifted away from these specialties during seminary than adopted them as vocational goals.

Significant percentages of students surveyed (22 percent of those entering seminary; 18 percent of those about to graduate) reported that they are “undecided” about vocational direction. Among the students interviewed, there were fewer undecided students, but some reported that they were torn between two directions:

I am going to be coming out of [name of seminary] much more open to the possibility of like a pastoral ministry.... I don't know exactly where I'll end up. I guess I'm in a period of kind of discerning the call, and seeing where God will lead me. So I'm not giving up on a Ph.D. program. But... after graduating from here, [I will] do more soul-searching and maybe looking at ordination in my denomination.

MALE, EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT, 23

Earlier research found that some students who were not certain of their vocational destination when they left seminary ended up in pastoral ministry.<sup>26</sup> Professional degrees from seminary, with the exception of degrees from certain programs that lead to licensure in fields such as counseling, do not have wide

**Table 6: Percentages of Entering Students Who Do Not Plan to Be Ordained or Are Undecided, 2009**

	<i>Mainline Independent</i>	<i>Mainline Denominational</i>	<i>Evangelical Independent</i>	<i>Evangelical Denominational</i>	<i>Roman Catholic/Orthodox</i>
M.Div. students	32	16	38	32	24
Other Master's students	97	73	80	75	87

*Source: 2009 Entering Student Questionnaire, The Association of Theological Schools.*

recognition or currency beyond the world of religious organizations. Students interviewed for the present study acknowledged that. If their goals were to use the theological degree as general background for a non-religious pursuit, they usually recognized that further preparation would probably be required. Based on the previous research, it seems likely that as many as half of the almost 20 percent who leave seminary “undecided” will take a first position in some form of ministry, most often congregational ministry. Students who were surveyed seemed to anticipate this. More of them anticipated that they would be serving in congregational ministry five years after graduation than said that it was their first choice for post-seminary employment. This was as true for women as for men.

Because of differences in religious traditions, students’ ordination plans were not certain indicators of their vocational goals. Table 6 shows percentages of 2009 entering students who said that they were not planning to be ordained or who were undecided. In schools of all religious traditions, a majority of master of divinity students said that they were headed for ordination. Virtually all other master’s students in mainline independent schools and most other master’s students in Roman Catholic/

Orthodox schools said that they were not intent on ordination or had not decided, but about a quarter of evangelical students who were enrolled in master’s programs other than the M.Div. were planning on ordination. The same was true of students in non-M.Div. master’s programs in mainline denominational schools. These students were, very likely, planning on ordination in Protestant traditions that do not require the M.Div.

Slightly lower percentages of students surveyed indicated that they planned to be ordained (or have already been ordained) in 2009 than did in 1998. The most notable change is in the school locations of students who have ordination in view. Percentages of students who intended to be ordained rose in mainline independent Protestant schools and fell in mainline denominational schools. The reason, in part, could be the dispersion of students, who have been increasingly more likely to attend a local or regional school than a distant school of their own denomination. It could also be due to the high representation of African Americans in mainline independent Protestant schools—these students are more ordination-oriented than others. In all evangelical and Roman Catholic schools, the percentages of students who were ordained at the time of enrollment or who planned to be ordained fell slightly.

According to students nearing graduation who were surveyed, the strongest influences on vocational direction, were “mentors” (72 percent said that they were “influential” or “very influential”) and faculty members (70 percent; this category may overlap with “mentors”). Spouses (67%), fellow students (66%), and clergy of the student’s home congregation (61%) were also rated “influential” or “very influential.” Perhaps because significant numbers of M.A. students are not required to work in field settings or internships, those experiences are rated lower (61 percent), though for one-third of all students, they were “very influential.” In response to a separate question, half of all students said that field education was “very important” in their seminary education, and another quarter said that it was “important.” By far the most important “influence on your seminary experience,” however, was faculty members. Two-thirds of students rated them as the single most important influence; rated next highest were “Biblical studies” (29 percent) and “fellow students” (28 percent).

### In Seminary: Religious Practices, Views and Opinions

Some critics of theological education charge that it makes students more liberal, implanting views and attitudes that are out of step with those of the religious communities they plan to

serve and drawing them away from the life of local religious communities.

The data form a more complex picture. Students’ ties to church and synagogue do not loosen during their seminary years. Virtually all students surveyed were active or very active in the life of a worshipping community during seminary. Despite the fact that younger students showed somewhat less interest in religiously-related ministries, they still reported that they were active participants during seminary in worship and other religious activities.

As Table 7 shows, survey data confirm that more students became more liberal during seminary than became conservative. For men, who comprise the largest part of the student population, the differences between those who said they became more liberal and those who said they became more conservative was not great. For women, the differences are more substantial. Many more reported that they became more liberal.

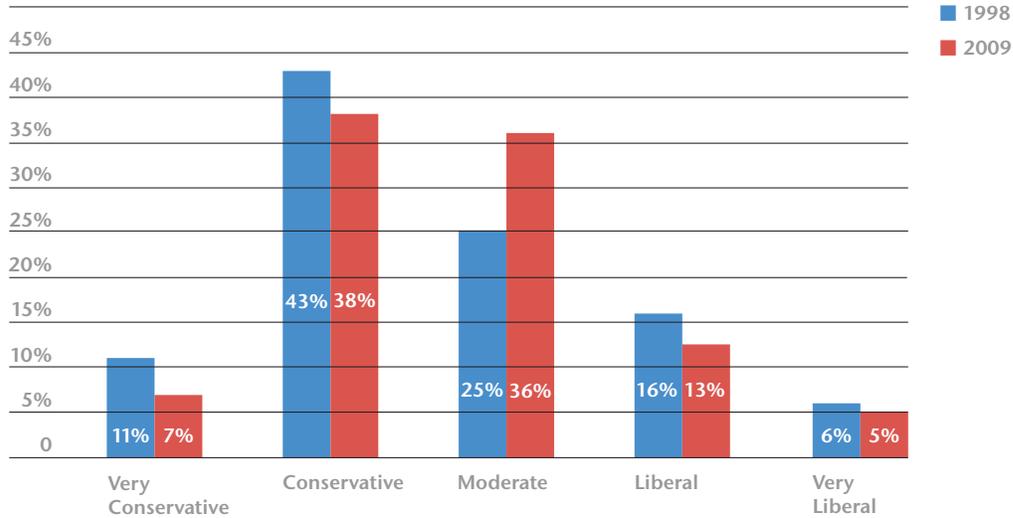
The largest percentages of students reporting in 2010, however, said that their theological views did not change during seminary, and a comparison over time (see Figure 3) indicated that students in 2010 were more moderate in their views than students a decade before. Entering students in 2009 were more likely than entering students in 1998 to say that their views were moderate (25 percent in 1998; 36 percent in 2009) and less likely to categorize their views in any other way, as either liberal or conservative.

**Table 7: Self-Reported Change During Seminary in Graduating Students’ Theological Views, 2010**

	<i>Became More Liberal</i>	<i>Became More Conservation</i>
Men	22%	18%
Women	34%	10%

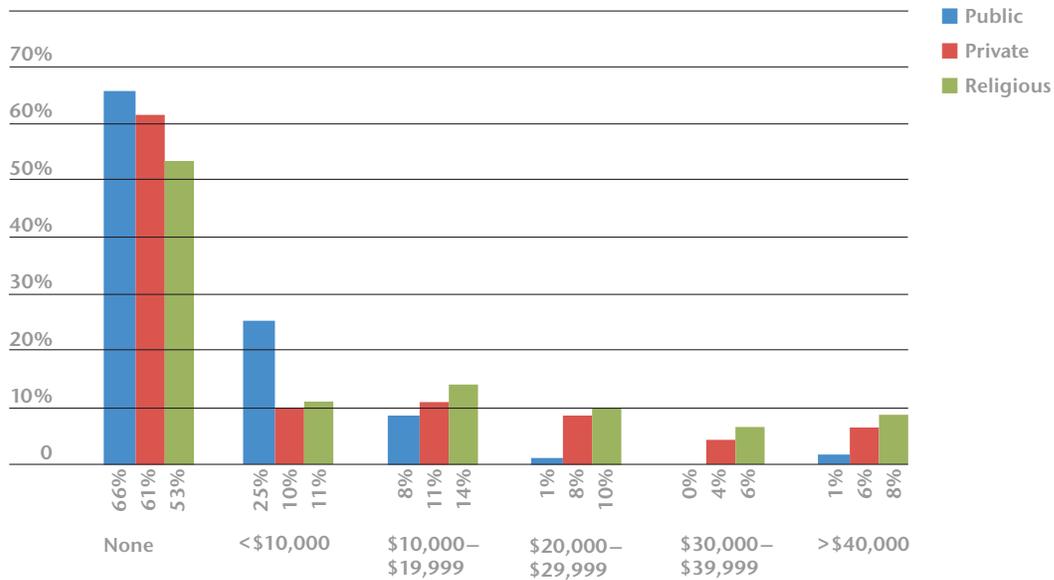
*Source: 2010 Graduating Student Questionnaire, The Association of Theological Schools.*

**Figure 3: Changes in Theological Position of Entering Students, 1998 and 2009**



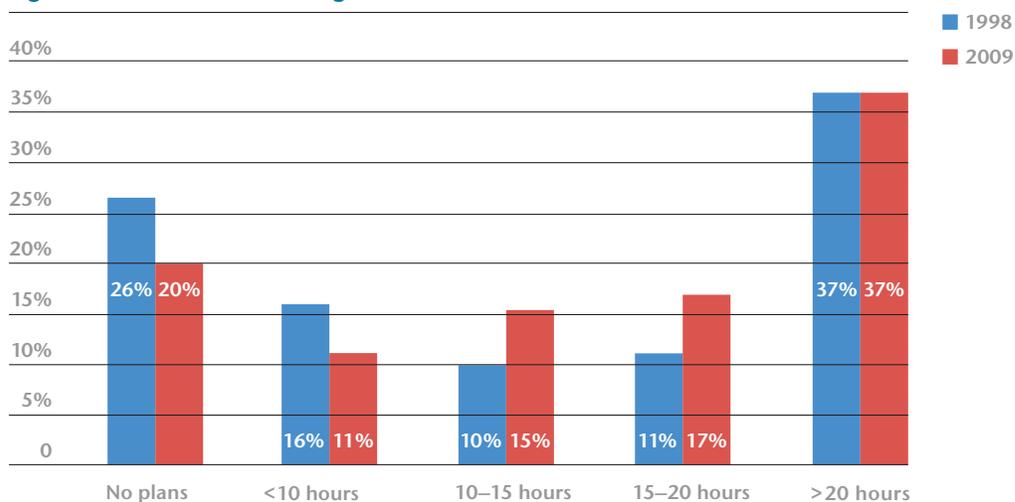
Sources: 1998 Auburn Survey and 2009 Entering Student Questionnaire, The Association of Theological Schools

**Figure 4: Student Debt at Time of Seminary Entrance: 1998 Entrants, 2009 Entrants and 2010 Graduates**



Sources: 1998 Auburn Survey and 2009 Entering and 2010 Graduating Student Questionnaires, The Association of Theological Schools

**Figure 5: Work Plans: Entering Students**



Sources: 1998 Auburn Survey and 2009 Entering Student Questionnaire, The Association of Theological Schools

Some sociologists, while acknowledging that North American religion is deeply polarized, see signs of increasing moderation, especially among young people.<sup>27</sup> These data for seminary students lend weight to that hypothesis.

### In Seminary: Finances

Like other studies conducted by the Auburn Center, this one portrayed students under increasing financial strain.<sup>28</sup> As Figure 4 shows, in 1998, two-thirds of students entering seminary at the master’s level had no prior educational debt; in 2009, only 53 percent of students reported no prior debt at entrance. The change in percentages of students with low prior debt was even greater: then one-quarter of students had debt of less than \$10,000; in 2009, only 11 percent were in that category. In all the larger categories of debt, from \$10,000 to more than \$40,000, the percentages of students with that amount of prior debt have increased, reflecting not only inflation but also undergraduate debt that has been rising at rates faster than inflation.

The pool of indebted students became larger during seminary. By graduation in 2010, almost

two-thirds (63 percent) of master’s students were carrying debt—either residual undergraduate debt or educational debt acquired in seminary, or both. (Because both graduate and undergraduate debt are steadily increasing, the percentage is likely to be higher for the 2009 entering students by the time they graduate.) Students in mainline Protestant schools were most likely to have borrowed (71 percent), and those in Roman Catholic institutions least likely (41 percent). M.Div. students, whose programs are usually a year longer than the programs of other master’s students, were more likely to have borrowed and to have more debt. Most women do not have higher debt levels than men (the exception is women in evangelical schools), but they are less likely to say that they can manage financially and much less likely to say that they are supported by a denomination or congregation.

The groups apparently facing the most strenuous financial challenges were African American and Hispanic students. African American students were more likely to bring undergraduate debt with them to seminary, and that debt was higher than other students' debt (almost one in five had \$40,000 or more in undergraduate debt when they entered seminary). Hispanics also had higher than average indebtedness. Both groups were more likely to express doubts about being able to manage financially during seminary, as were Asians, who on most financial

measures registered the least financial distress of any group.

As Figure 5 shows, more 2009 entering students anticipated working while in school than did entering students ten years previously. Over a third of students planned to work more than twenty hours a week, and this number did not change during this time period. African Americans were more likely than others to anticipate working and to plan to work more hours (more than half of African American students—52 percent—planned to work more than 20 hours a week, compared with 37 percent of all students).

## The Path Ahead: Implications for Religious Communities and Theological Schools

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In an interview for this study, a young candidate for the Roman Catholic priesthood noted that just a few parishes in his diocese produced most of “the people becoming priests and religious sisters.” Those parishes, he speculated, had “a culture of vocations.” He concluded, “It seems like it’s rare that you get people to spring up by themselves.”

His observation is an excellent summary of the theme that runs through the scores of personal histories recounted and quoted from in this report. Theological students do not spring up by themselves. Most are set on the path by family religious practices and parents' examples. Through childhood and early adolescence, religiously-related programs and organizations—schools, youth groups, camps, music, sports, and service programs with a religious tie—are critical, so that their social and religious worlds overlap. In late adolescence and young adulthood, a group of peers that takes faith and religious identity seriously and affirms

a developing sense of call makes a decisive difference. For many, a disruptive experience that puts the world in a different light is the catalyst for a decision to pursue a religious leadership role. Ministerial role models are indispensable: they exercise their influence at all stages leading up to seminary; and the religious leaders whom students meet during seminary and the ministry contexts to which they are exposed heavily influence the type of ministry to which students aspire.

This master narrative was derived from interviews with students designated by their schools as “best.” How typical is it of other students? Do most theological students come from strong families with strong religious ties and values, deep involvement in church and religious activities? Are exposure to excellent

ministry, reinforcement from peers, some kind of shaking up that leads to vocational clarity important to them? In short, are most students as rooted, embedded, supported, and seasoned as these interviewees who are proxies for our “best” students?

As indicated earlier, it is difficult to say for sure. In the past, both theological schools and researchers have overlooked the importance of students’ early lives as they have sought to understand how those students arrived at seminary. Surveys conducted by the organizations sponsoring the current research, the Auburn Center and the Association of Theological Schools, have not asked about background or experiences before college. Those surveys do yield some information, as indicated at various points in the foregoing report, about parents’ occupation, college choice, and religious switching. Those data support the tentative conclusion that average students are not quite as deeply enmeshed in religious cultures and institutions as those most promising students interviewed for this study. Still, the wider population of seminary students looks different from the general North American population at available points of comparison. Their parents are more likely to be involved in altruistic occupations; they are more likely to attend private and religious colleges; and they report high levels of involvement in religious organizations and activities.

To a considerable extent then, theological schools rely on a long process of nurture and encouragement to produce their future students. They are especially dependent on their supporting religious communities for producing over time the most promising students and future religious leaders. This basic fact has several major implications for the practices of both theological schools and the religious communities they serve.

*Schools and religious communities should not bank on enrollment increases.* Total enrollments in theological schools are currently declining and are unlikely to grow in the foreseeable future. The demographic factors affecting enrollment are documented in *Theological Student Enrollment*, and both interviews and surveys confirm the analysis of enrollment trends in that report. The pool of prospective students has stopped growing, as the enrollment report shows, because of the age structure of the population. This report adds evidence that it will be difficult or impossible to increase quickly the total numbers of seminary students. Because interest in seminary and ministry incubates over decades, it is highly unlikely that clever marketing will attract many persons who have the educational preparation for seminary but who have never before considered religious leadership. The students who make their way to seminary have been on the path for a long time. Those who have not been alerted to the possibility of religious leadership as a vocation early in their lives will probably not be drawn to it as young or older adults.

Recruiting techniques cannot, then, markedly increase the size of the prospective student pool. Neither can enrollments be bolstered by diving deeper into the pool and accepting a higher percentage of applicants, because a large majority of theological institutions already accept a high percentage of applicants. As the report on enrollment documented, new program formats and locations, including distance education, do not dependably increase enrollment either. They have had that effect for some schools—usually those that are large already—but there is also

evidence that new programs may cannibalize older ones (extension programs, for instance, have shrunk in size as online programs have grown) and that enrollments in distance education programs are hard to sustain. Taken together, these factors add up to a caution. Few schools will achieve large gains in enrollment in the next period. Most institutions should plan for student bodies the same size as or smaller than the ones that they currently enroll.

***Well-planned and executed recruitment programs can help schools to sustain enrollment or stave off sharp decline.*** Recruiting may not increase the size or depth of the pool of prospective students, but it can increase an institution's competitive advantage over other theological schools. The interviews contain numerous accounts of students who were drawn to a particular school because a recruiter or admissions officer paid careful, individualized attention to them, contacted them frequently, and offered specific answers to their questions and reassurance about their anxieties and concerns. Warm welcomes extended to spouses and families of prospective students were especially effective. Given the importance of relationships in steering students down the long path to seminary, it is not surprising that intensive contact with a sympathetic representative of a school makes it much more likely that students will attend that institution rather than one that handles them in more routinized ways.

***Recruiting the best students for the future will require long-term strategies and major investments on the part of seminaries.*** The interviews conducted for this study show that schools can draw some of the students they want by creating a niche that attracts a particular subset of students. Many younger students, for instance, reported that they chose their seminary when they saw that the school had a sizeable cohort of students in their age

group. Schools that have a critical mass of such students have learned, however, that attracting them is neither easy nor inexpensive. Younger students are drawn to full-time residential programs with attractive facilities and extensive co-curricular resources. Both are costly to create and maintain. Many younger students arrive with substantial undergraduate debt and limited time to work for pay, so they require a major investment of financial aid. Other special niches have their own costs. Schools that aim to attract part-time commuting students spend less on residence halls and scholarships, but creating educational programs that fit the schedules of working students usually involves extra instructional resources and academic support.

The subset of students most likely to bolster enrollments will also require the biggest investment. As noted in the enrollment report, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians are becoming a larger proportion of the general population in North America and are the only enrollment groups in theological schools that continue to grow. Schools that figure out how to serve these groups will probably fare better than those that continue to serve predominantly white students. Creating an inviting environment for racial/ethnic students and international students, however, is a major undertaking. Students in these groups that have been minorities in most theological schools are drawn to institutions in which there are faculty members conversant with their culture and language. Recruiting such faculty members requires a long-term plan for faculty appointments and competitive salaries. Further, many of the students in these groups have high prior debt and limited financial resources, so grant aid and work-study programs must be in place.

*Nurturing religious leadership for the future is the joint responsibility of theological schools and religious communities.* The most challenging finding of this study, for both theological schools and religious communities that hope to identify and attract stellar religious leadership for the future, is that the best students are formed for religious leadership over an extended period of time, in stable family and religious circumstances that are becoming increasingly rare in North American life. Schools and religious groups that want better leaders will have to create more opportunities for young people to form supportive relationships in which religious commitment is an ingredient. Like many other studies, this one found that students were steered toward lives of commitment by persons—both older mentors and peers—who themselves were committing their lives to service.<sup>29</sup> The theological schools and religious communities that make connections with the settings in which these relationships are formed may well find there the best students for the future. Some seminaries, colleges, and denominations already sponsor theological programs for youth. More such programs, along with networks that sustain their effects as their participants mature, are likely to generate more seminary students of high promise.

Earlier studies like the one cited above also confirm the importance of experiences this study has labeled “disruptive,” in shaping lives committed to serving others. As organized religious groups support and rebuild their programs for young people—an essential step in securing the future of religious faith and practice—they should place emphasis on mission, service, and educational opportunities that offer experiences of “the other”: unfamiliar persons, conditions, and cultures. Seminaries

and agencies focused on religious vocations should look for ways to form alliances with such programs, which will almost certainly continue to be fruitful recruiting grounds for excellent students whose sense of call has already been tested.

These measures, which will require unusual alliances between theological schools and other religious organizations, may seem to be out of the reach of seminaries that have few excess resources. Most schools, however, can make a commitment to at least one program that brings them into closer contact with the kind of young people who will one day be their students. That partnership will be a field for recruitment and, just as important, will educate the school about the kind of students it will eventually enroll. The cumulative effect of many seminaries making such commitments would be salutary, not only adding able young people to the pool of prospects, but also helping to rebuild religious institutions and drawing gifted young people—not all of whom will become seminary students—into lay as well as professional leadership roles.

*Theological faculties have a critical role to play.*

One last implication of the findings of this study demands the attention of theological faculties. Many of their students and most of the best ones have backgrounds very different from the life experiences of most members of the society in which they will serve. The large majority of students have rich religious backgrounds, mentors with strong values and high ideals, supportive friends in the faith, and, in many cases, some formative experience of religious and social difference. They will leave seminary

to serve in places where organized religion has diminished influence and where social polarization is intense. Seminary curriculum, much of which is now oriented to preparing people to serve in existing religious systems, must be redesigned to equip students to serve in settings very different from the religious enclaves in which they grew up. That is a tall

order, requiring the review and revision of both classroom instruction and opportunities for learning from practice. But if religious traditions and institutions are to have a future in North America, they will need leaders who are motivated and prepared to renew and rebuild. The theological schools of North America have an essential role to play in the education of those leaders.

## Notes

1. About one-quarter of the entering students surveyed had decided to go to seminary before college. The survey did not ask at what age students first thought about religious leadership as a possible vocational path.
2. Barbara G. Wheeler, "Is There a Problem? Theological Students and Religious Leadership for the Future." *Auburn Studies* No. 8 (2001). [www.auburnseminary.org/students-and-graduates](http://www.auburnseminary.org/students-and-graduates).
3. Barbara G. Wheeler, Anthony T. Ruger, Sharon L. Miller, "Theological Student Enrollment." *Auburn Studies* No. 15 (2013). [www.auburnseminary.org/student-enrollment](http://www.auburnseminary.org/student-enrollment).
4. The weighting variable used was DENCLASS, which divides ATS member schools by religious tradition (Roman Catholic/Orthodox, Anabaptist, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant) and then further subdivides the Protestant schools into those that have denominational affiliations and those ("independent") that do not. The determination of whether a Protestant school is "mainline" or "evangelical" is based on its self-description. This variable has proved more useful than any other in explaining variances in data from and about theological schools. In a number of analyses in this report, the Anabaptist category is omitted because subdividing the data for purposes of comparison yields numbers too small to convert to meaningful percentages.  
Despite the weighting, the ESQ 2009 data contained a disproportionate number of younger students, possibly because such students are likely to be residential, enrolled full-time and thus more easily reached with reminders to complete the online instrument. The Auburn Center's 1999 survey responses, in which mainline Protestant schools were overrepresented, were also weighted for purposes of comparison with the 2009 ESQ data.
5. The research team for the interview segment of the research included Helen Blier, Sharon Miller, Anthony Ruger, Melissa Wiginton, and Barbara Wheeler.
6. Other researchers have noted the problem of limited disclosure of personal information in interviews. Christian Smith, with Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (Oxford Press, 2009), 314.
7. The comparison is also complicated by the factor of age. The interviewees were much younger than the survey respondents, and the 2009 ESQ respondents, though older than the interviewees, were also atypically young, even after the data set was weighted: 72 percent of interviewees (which included entering and graduating students and a few in between) were under 30; 55 percent of 2009 ESQ respondents were 30 or less. The total group of survey respondents—entering students plus graduating students—does resemble the total population of master's-level students in age: after weighting, 45 percent of all respondents to the 2009 ESQ and 2010 GSQ were 30 or less; and just over 40 percent of all master's-level students in 2009 were under 30, as reported by ATS member institutions to the Commission on Accrediting. Questions about pre-college background are asked only on the ESQ, however, so information about early formation is available only from two groups (interviewees and, much more briefly, ESQ respondents), both of which are atypically young.
8. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 37, 55.
9. For the purposes of this tabulation, parents were treated as a unit. Level of involvement was determined by the more involved parent.

10. Some of the interviewees raised the question of whether their “memories” are real: “I can remember—and my parents don’t remember this, so who knows if I just made it up or not, but I do remember being, like, five or six years old, and my grandma asking me what I wanted to do, and I had no idea what my response was, but her telling me I was going to be a pastor.” (Male, mainline Protestant, 24)
11. Shoshana Dobrow and Jennifer Tosti-Kharas, “Listen to Your Heart? Calling and Receptivity to Career Advice.” *Journal of Career Assessment* 20 (2012), 264-280.
12. Half of the rabbinical students interviewed had graduated from independent schools and the other half from public schools. None had graduated from Jewish day schools. The number interviewed (17) is small, so they are not included in the table.
13. “College Completion.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010). <http://collegecompletion.chronicle.com>.
14. The importance of role models for women has been noted in research in other fields: Julie Quimby and Angela deSantis, “The Influence of Role Models on Women’s Career Choices.” *Career Development Quarterly* 54 (2006), 296-307.
15. These are counts of activities and groups that interviewees mentioned in response to questions about what series of experiences led them to seminaries. They may not include all interviewees who were involved in activities of various types.
16. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*. See especially Table 20, p. 60, which shows levels of involvement in congregation-based activities, and the summary on page 60, which underlines the importance of congregations in the lives of teens. The respondents to ATS questionnaires, which are roughly representative of all seminary students, consistently show more early involvement in congregational life and activity than does the National Study of Youth and Religion.
17. As illustrated earlier, rabbis and cantors take a very prominent role in suggesting to Jewish youth that they consider the rabbinate.
18. Jose Domene, “Calling and Career Outcome Expectations: The Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy.” *Journal of Career Assessment* 20 (2012), 281-292.
19. One earlier program, at Emory University, had been founded in 1992.
20. Amy Frykholm, “Seminary for Teens: Lilly’s Theological Programs for High School Youth.” *The Christian Century* (Nov 16, 2010). <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-11/seminary-teens>.
21. The categories in the following list were formed using the variable, DENCLASS. See note 4.
22. A pseudonym.
23. This calculation—comparing entering and graduating students in the same academic year—only approximates actual changes in vocational goals. The ESQ and GSQ instruments do not collect identifying information that would make it possible to show change, if any, of particular students’ goals at the beginning and end of seminary.
24. It is also possible that some students who are not interested in parish ministry have dropped out of seminary.
25. Wheeler, *Is There a Problem?*, 24.
26. The percentage of graduates whose first call was to a congregation was higher than the percentage of graduating students who said they were headed in that direction. Barbara G. Wheeler, Sharon L. Miller, Daniel O. Aleshire, “How Are We Doing? The Effectiveness of Theological Schools as Measured by the Vocations and Views of Graduates.” *Auburn Studies* No. 13 (December 2007).
27. Robert D. Putnam, and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).
28. Anthony Ruger, Barbara Wheeler, “Manna from Heaven? Theological and Rabbinical Student Debt.” *Auburn Studies* No. 3 (April 1995). Anthony Ruger, Sharon L. Miller, Kim Maphis Early, “The Gathering Storm: The Educational Debt of Theological Students.” *Auburn Studies* No. 12 (September 2005). [www.auburnseminary.org/finance-and-student-debt](http://www.auburnseminary.org/finance-and-student-debt). An updated report on student debt will be published in 2014.
29. Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

## Auburn Seminary

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Auburn Theological Seminary is an institute for religious leadership that faces the challenges of our fragmented, complex, and violent time. We envision religion as a catalyst and resource for a new world—one in which difference is celebrated, abundance is shared, and people are hopeful, working for a future that is better than today.

Auburn equips bold and resilient leaders—religious and secular, women and men, adults and teens—with the tools and resources they need for our multifaith world. We provide them with education, research, support, and media savvy, so that they can bridge religious divides, build community, pursue justice, and heal the world.

Auburn Theological Seminary was founded in 1818. Today it exists in covenant with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

## Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education

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The Center for the Study of Theological Education offers research and consulting to strengthen the institutions that educate religious leaders. The Center studies a wide range of topics, including students, faculty, finances, administrative leadership, educational programs, and the public role of theological schools. Using the Center's extensive database, consultants from the Center help schools evaluate programs, balance budgets, plan strategy, forge partnerships with other institutions, organize searches, and support seminary leadership, especially new presidents. The Center serves all religious groups and is the only research institute devoted solely to theological education.

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