

The Multivocational Plans of Students in Graduate Theological Education

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Since 2013, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has tracked the bivocational plans of entering and graduating students who attend graduate theological schools in the United States and Canada. The data have taught us quite a bit about bivocational ministry, particularly how it factors into student plans for ministry when they enter seminary and at graduation. The data have also revealed demographic differences among those pursuing bivocational ministry, including a significantly higher percentage of Black students planning to serve or already serving in such positions. In 2019, ATS began a process of revising the student questionnaires. My own experience as a bivocational minister, the experiences of my peers, and research undertaken as part of an initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment on the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers suggested that our current questions related to bivocational ministry were too narrow in scope. New questions were added to help us better understand

the nature and scope of bivocational ministry. This chapter explores what we have learned from students at ATS-member institutions through the questionnaires. This knowledge is expanding our understanding of bivocational ministry, prompting us to embrace a complex multivocational reality that includes both paid and volunteer ministry.

History of Bivocational Ministry in the ATS Student Questionnaires (mid-1990s to 2013)

In the mid-1990s, the Association of Theological Schools created a set of questionnaires to gather information on students as they enter and graduate from member schools. The first questionnaires assumed that students would be planning on a single full-time job at graduation. However, by the first revision in 2001, a part-time response option was added. This change may have been due to the recession that hit the United States and Canada around that time. It may have been due to growing concerns about the ability of graduates to find full-time placement in congregations. It may also have been in recognition of those students planning to work part-time for a number of reasons, including the desire to balance work and family life, those serving in retirement, and the growing number of students entering graduate theological schools from traditions that historically hire bivocational pastors.

Data from 2001 suggested that this concern was unwarranted. Over 94% of graduates reported plans to work full-time. However, that percentage dropped to 87% the next year and over the next ten years steadily declined until it reached a low of 74% in 2012. During that decade, there was a growing awareness that many students planned to serve in bivocational ministry upon graduation. In 2013, ATS added a new question during a third revision of the questionnaires: Do you anticipate holding another paid position in addition to your ministerial work after graduation? Students were given the option to respond with yes, “unsure about being bivocational,” no, or “no plans to do ministerial work.”

While the question provided some information about the bivocational plans of students, it lacked clarity. First, it did not define ministerial work or clarify whether that ministerial work would be paid.

Second, it did not clarify whether the paid position would be full- or part-time and it assumed that a student would only have one other position. Finally, it assumed bivocational ministry meant one ministerial job and one “non-ministerial” job. It is likely that, when the question was crafted, there was an assumed model of bivocational ministry as one part-time paid ministry position and one part- or full-time paid non-ministry position.

A second question from the revised student questionnaire provided additional insight into the bivocational nature of students’ work plans. The questionnaire asked students to indicate a single position they would be working in after graduation—a clear assumption that students would work in one primary job. They were first asked to indicate whether or not that position would be in a congregation and then whether it would be full-time or part-time. In 2013, there was a slight change to the question. Rather than asking students where they would be working after graduation, they were asked where they “anticipated” working after graduation. This change brought an increase in those planning to work full-time from 74% in 2012 to 81% in 2013. That percentage remained fairly steady, fluctuating between 80% and 82% over the next seven years.

When we compared the question on bivocational ministry with the question on what position a student anticipated serving in after graduation, we noticed that while approximately 80% of master’s graduates planned to work in a single full-time position, 30% planned to serve in bivocational ministry. It became clear that students were not equating bivocational ministry with working part-time. Did this mean that students were working on one full-time paid position and then volunteering in ministry? Were they working one full-time paid position and a second or third part-time paid position? Our questionnaire was unable to capture the complexity of how students were navigating ministry, vocation, and paid work.

The Emerging Picture (2013–2019)

Over the next seven years, the Association of Theological Schools began looking closely at data on bivocational ministry among its students. Data clearly showed that bivocational ministry is impacted by various demographics, including race/ethnicity, age, and gender.¹

This data also gives insight into ways the image of pastoral ministry has changed among ATS-member schools.

From 2013–2019, the ATS Entering Student Questionnaire asked students whether or not they anticipated holding another paid position in addition to ministry upon graduation. One quarter of entering master’s students planned on bivocational ministry when entering seminary and another 40% were considering that possibility. These percentages remained quite steady over those seven years. That means that two-thirds of all students entering master’s programs in graduate theological schools considered bivocational ministry a possible outcome of their degree. This statistic indicates a dramatic shift in the role of graduate theological schools, which historically focus on preparing students for full-time ordained ministry. As noted above, it was not until 2001 that the ATS student questionnaires even offered an option for graduates to indicate whether they would be working full-time, and bivocational ministry did not make it into the questionnaires until 2013. Bivocational ministry is not something on the margins but rather a central orienting image for a large percentage of those considering or engaged in pastoral ministry.

Do theological schools impact bivocational identity?

While bivocational ministry is a central image, some of those considering bivocational ministry as entering students changed their minds at graduation. The 2013–2019 ATS Graduating Student Questionnaires asked students whether or not they anticipated holding another paid position in addition to ministry upon graduation. Responses were consistent over those seven years. Figure 1 compares the answers of entering and graduating students, showing the total percentage of all respondents from 2013–2019. Among graduates with master’s degrees, 30% anticipated holding another paid position; 20% were unsure; 41% did not plan on holding another position; and 8% reported no plans to serve in ministry.

Do you anticipate holding another paid position in addition to your ministerial work after graduation?				
	Yes	Unsure	No	No plans for ministry
2013–2019 Entering Students	25%	39%	30%	6%
2013–2019 Graduating Students	30%	20%	41%	8%

Figure 1: Comparison of bivocational plans among entering and graduating students (ATS 2020).

Graduate theological schools seem to help some students clarify whether or not they want to serve in bivocational ministry. Upon entering seminary, 39% of students were unsure about bivocational ministry. That percentage dropped to 20% at graduation, indicating that almost 20% of students gain clarity about bivocational ministry during seminary. That clarity is reflected in the increase among those not planning on bivocational ministry from 30% to 41% and among those planning on bivocational ministry from 25% to 30%. It is unclear from ATS data how and why students are making these decisions. Does graduate theological education acculturate students towards a particular form of ministry? Do students gain clarity about the realities of ministry jobs available while in their programs? Does a master's degree cause them to aspire to a full-time position or to serve in communities that cannot afford a full-time pastor? Do students graduate with educational debt that prevents them from considering part-time positions? Additional research is needed to clarify exactly how graduate theological schools influence student plans for bivocational ministry.

How do demographics impact bivocationality?

Data from the questionnaires showed significant differences in plans for bivocational ministry based on a number of different demographics, including the country where they attended school, their age, and their race or ethnicity. Perhaps surprisingly, there were only slight differences by degree program or gender. The various differences suggest that bivocational ministry is impacted by a variety of factors.

From 2013–2019, there was a slight decrease in the percentage of graduates from ATS schools in the United States who planned on bivocational ministry, and, while percentages fluctuated, the general trend of graduates from Canadian schools was slightly upwards (figure 2). Until 2019, graduates from schools in the United States were more likely to plan on bivocational ministry than graduates from Canadian schools. This may be due to differences in the ways ministry is structured and funded in Canada, different expectations of seminary graduates, the fact that Canadian seminary students are less likely to pursue ministry in a congregation, or a number of other factors. The data does beg the question whether or not there were external factors in Canada in 2015 and 2019 that impacted graduates'

plans for bivocational ministry or whether shifts in the composition of schools participating in the questionnaires impacted the data.

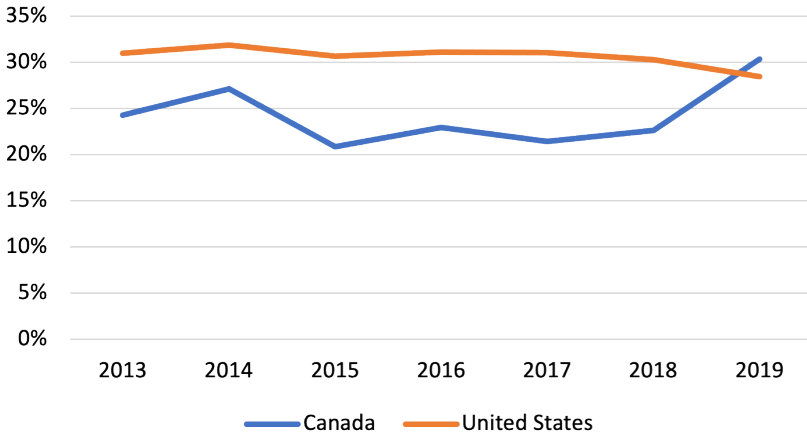


Figure 2: Graduates' plans for bivocational ministry in the United States vs. Canada (ATS 2020).

When looking at master's graduates by age, students aged fifty or older were more likely than younger students to plan on bivocational ministry, with a differential of 10%. Given the fact that many older students attend seminary to pursue a second career or to prepare for retirement, it makes sense that a higher percentage would plan to serve bivocationally. However, one quarter of students in their 20s and 30s also planned on bivocational ministry (figure 3).

	20-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	Age 50 or older
% planning on bivocational ministry	24%	26%	33%	35%

Figure 3: 2019–2020 bivocational ministry by age (ATS 2020).

When viewed by race and/or ethnicity, the differences in plans for bivocational ministry are even greater. Figure 4 shows the percentage of 2019–2020 master's graduates planning to serve in bivocational ministry by race/ethnicity. When ATS first started gathering data on plans for bivocational ministry in 2013, 58% of Black/non-Hispanic master's graduates planned on bivocational ministry versus only 25% of White/non-Hispanic. Graduates from 2019–2020 reported similar percentages with just over 50% of Black/non-Hispanic

graduates planning on bivocational ministry versus 25% of White/non-Hispanic graduates. For Black/non-Hispanic students, bivocational ministry reflects the lower economic status of many Black congregations and communities as a result of historical financial inequities in the United States and Canada. A Pulpit & Pew study from 2003 found that 41% of Black pastors earned less than \$13,000 per year and that Black pastors' salaries were about two-thirds of their White counterparts (McMillan and Price 2003, 14–15). The economic inequities faced by Black students are also evident in data related to educational debt. In 2019–2020, over 70% of Black graduates reported taking out student loans while in seminary versus 40% of White graduates, and the average debt of Black graduates was approximately \$42,700 compared to \$31,200 for White graduates (ATS 2020).

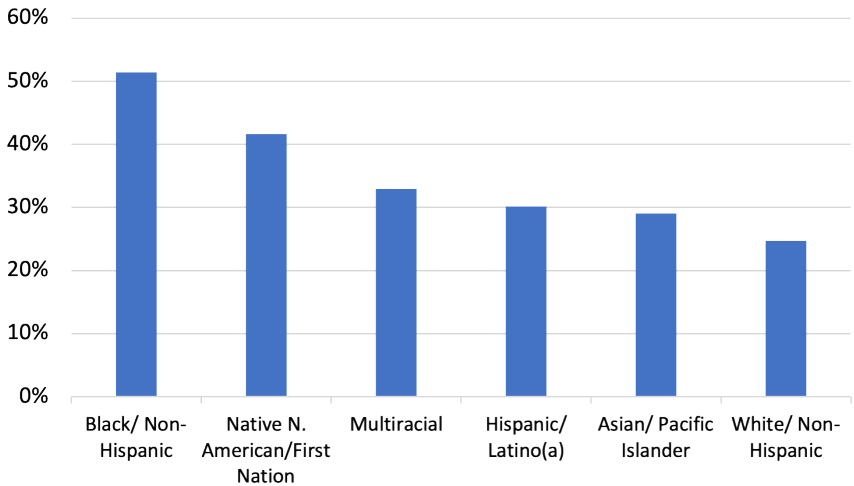


Figure 4: Bivocational ministry by race/ethnicity, 2019–2020 (ATS 2020).

The data raise questions about the financial impact of graduate theological education on students who plan to serve in bivocational ministry. Is the preparation received in seminary worth the cost of the degree? Should there be a different model of educating and forming those pastors who intend to serve in bivocational ministry? If different models are adopted, will they be comparable in terms of education and value within the denominational systems? Will such an approach further class divides or help overcome them?

In what positions do bivocational ministers serve?

The 2013–2019 ATS Graduating Student Questionnaires provided data on the positions students anticipated after graduation. By correlating data on bivocational ministry and anticipated position, the questionnaires revealed information on the types of bivocational ministries graduates planned to pursue. The questionnaires allowed students to provide data on only one anticipated ministry position.

Data gathered from 2013–2019 suggested that about 20% of bivocational graduates planned to serve as pastors, priests, or ministers of congregations. Another 40% planned to serve in staff ministry positions, including associate or assistant pastor, youth ministry, church planting, and minister of Christian or religious education. Just under 15% planned to serve in ministry outside the church, including hospital or military chaplaincy, campus ministry, social justice ministry, or missionary service. Men going into bivocational ministry were much more likely than women to plan to serve as senior or solo pastors (28% versus 13%). This is likely due to ecclesial differences among ATS schools, some of which are related to denominations that do not allow women to be ordained.

A Shift Towards Multivocationality

The Association of Theological Schools gathered seven years' worth of data on bivocational ministry between 2013–2019. During that time frame, the Association also undertook two different but related initiatives. In 2013, ATS began coordinating an initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment entitled, "The Theological School Initiative to Address the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers." This initiative included grants of up to six years awarded to 67 theological schools to address the economic challenges of their students through research, education, institutional changes, and collaborations. Several schools in the initiative began to look more closely at bivocational ministry and its impact on the financial wellness of both pastors and congregations.² Research focused on the shape of bivocational ministry, which we learned was incredibly diverse in terms of structure and motivations, and its financial impact on pastors. Meanwhile, a parallel initiative, also funded by the Lilly Endowment, focused on

denominations and other organizations that support pastoral leaders. The denominational initiative sponsored several research projects, documenting a growing number of pastors serving in bivocational ministry throughout the United States (Hadaway and Marler 2017 and 2019).

The data gathered, both through the questionnaires and through the Lilly initiatives, contributed to a new revision of the questionnaires, launched in fall 2020. This new revision shifted the language from bivocationality to multivocationality. The questionnaires also sought to clarify the relationship between ministry and salaries. Were students working one or more jobs so that they could do ministry for free? Were they working to earn additional money while serving in congregations that could not afford to pay them a living wage?

ATS first began thinking about multivocationality after engaging the research of Charisse Gillett and Kristine Bentley at Lexington Theological Seminary (Bentley 2019; Bentley, chapter 7 in this volume). Their research revealed a variety of ministry and vocational configurations among those who might be considered bivocational. Some held multiple ministry positions. Others balanced ministry with secular jobs. Still others held a single paying job and volunteered in ministry. The *bi-* portion of *bivocational* was not always accurate. While some clergy understood themselves as having multiple vocations, many felt they had a single vocation—a call to ministry—which was financially supported in several different ways.

Their research echoed my own experiences in ministry. Just prior to joining the staff at ATS, I served as a bivocational pastor. I was the part-time pastor of a small church just outside of Chicago. It had never been my intention to serve as a bivocational pastor, but finding work in the church or academy in 2010 was difficult. So, I took a part-time position at the church and worked in a variety of other jobs in order to pay the bills, including jobs such as bookkeeping, children's ministry, adjunct teaching, and consulting. I had a single vocation but worked multiple jobs to allow me financially to fulfill that call. Several colleagues also served in multiple configurations of work and ministry. One shifted his pastoral position to part-time and took a job as a football coach because he felt called to live out his vocation both in the church and the world. Another served three small rural congregations in northern Minnesota. Others were professors who also pastored local churches or parents who chose to work part-time in order to spend more time raising young children. Still others were full-time business leaders who stepped in when their church needed

a pastor. The language of *bivocational* was inadequate to describe the multiple ways we were living out our calls to ministry and financial stewardship.

The Current Landscape (2020–2021)

During the 2020–2021 academic year, ATS gathered its first data with the new revisions of the questionnaires. To capture the complexity of multivocational ministry, we asked graduates the following questions:

Upon graduating from this program, do you anticipate holding multiple paid positions?

- Yes
- Yes, and one or more positions will be ministerial work
- Unsure, but one or more positions will be ministerial work
- Unsure
- No

Upon graduating from our school, what types of positions do you anticipate having? (Check all that apply)

- Congregational/parish ministry
- Teaching or educational setting
- Health care chaplain or counselor
- Faith-based nonprofit
- Other

Do you anticipate holding a volunteer/unpaid ministerial position after graduation?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Graduates were also asked if they planned on multiple positions five years after graduation and the types of positions in which they anticipated serving. While the responses clarified some aspects of the work configurations of graduates, they also raised several questions

about how graduates interpret the relationship between work, vocation, and ministry.

What percentage of graduates plan to serve in multiple positions?

The 2020–2021 survey had two questions related to the positions students would be serving in after graduation. The first question was quite direct: “Upon graduating from this program, do you anticipate holding multiple paid positions?” Just over 30% of graduates were planning to work in multiple positions. Another 33% were unsure about serving in multiple positions. Just over one-third (35%) were not planning to work in multiple positions. This response was similar to data from previous years. Also similar to previous years, Black/African American/African Canadian graduates were most likely to plan on serving in multiple positions (46%) followed by Hispanic/Latino(a)/Latin@ students (38%). Asian descent/Pacific Islander, Native North American/First Nation/Indigenous, and White/Caucasian students were least likely to plan on serving in multiple positions (approximately 27% each).

The second question was less direct: “Upon graduating from our school, what types of positions do you anticipate having?” Students were given the following options and asked to check all that apply: congregational/parish ministry, teaching or educational setting, health care chaplain or counselor, faith-based nonprofit, and “other.” Overall, the second question revealed that 40% of graduates anticipated serving in multiple types of positions at graduation with a small percentage (4% overall) planning to serve in four or five positions at graduation. This was higher than the 32% who indicated in the first question their plans to serve in multiple paid positions. Why the difference in responses between these two questions? It may be due to differences in wording. The first question specifically asked about paid positions: “Do you anticipate holding multiple paid positions?” The second question simply asked, “What types of positions do you anticipate having?” It is possible that some students were not differentiating between paid and volunteer positions in the second question. It is also possible that students who indicated they were unsure about serving in multiple positions in the first question selected multiple “anticipated” positions in the second question.

This connection between being unsure and anticipating multiple positions arose again when we compared it to data related to place-

ment. The percentage of graduates who anticipated serving in multiple positions in the second question was higher (50%) for students who did not yet have a position at graduation or who planned on further studies after graduating with their master's degree. This connection between lack of placement and multivocationality seems to be confirmed by data from the first question, which allowed students to indicate that they were unsure about working in multiple paid positions. Among those who did not have placement at graduation, over 50% were unsure about working in multiple positions and an additional 26% planned on multiple positions. Regarding placement, two other groups had significant percentages of students (45% each) who said they were unsure about multiple positions: those who were not seeking placement because they attended seminary for personal enrichment and those who planned on further graduate studies. Interestingly, only 2% of those students who attended for personal enrichment indicated certainty about serving in multiple positions versus one-third (33%) of those planning on further graduate studies.

When students are struggling to find placement at graduation, many imagine the need to seek multiple positions. For some, this may be a result of a particular call to multivocationality or to serve congregations that cannot afford a full-time pastor. For others, working in multiple positions may be a way to meet financial obligations when a full-time position is not available. That was certainly the case for me after I completed my doctoral degree. Faced with a challenging job market, I pieced together any work I could find in order to pay off student loans, a mortgage, health insurance, and other living expenses. For some, the path of multivocationality simply reflects how they currently understand the job market in the United States and Canada. More and more people are operating in a gig economy where work consists of multiple, part-time, permanent or short-term “gigs” that are pieced together to make a living wage.

What percentage of students serving in multiple positions plan to serve in ministry?

The data show that just over half of those unsure about and planning on serving in multiple paid positions are planning on serving in a paid ministry position. Prior to 2020–2021, data from the ATS student questionnaires assumed that those students serving in multiple positions were planning to serve in ministry. In 2020–2021, those gradu-

ates who indicated that they were considering multiple paid positions (unsure) or were definitely planning on multiple paid positions (yes) were asked to clarify if one of those multiple positions would be in ministry. The data revealed that only about half of those planning to serve in multiple paid positions would be serving in ministry. Figure 5 shows the percentage of graduates planning to work in one paid position, which may or may not be in ministry, those who were unsure about working in multiple paid positions, and those who definitely planned to work in multiple paid positions. Data on graduates who were unsure or planning on serving in multiple paid positions is further broken down by those who planned on working in at least one paid ministry position and those who did not plan on any paid ministry positions.

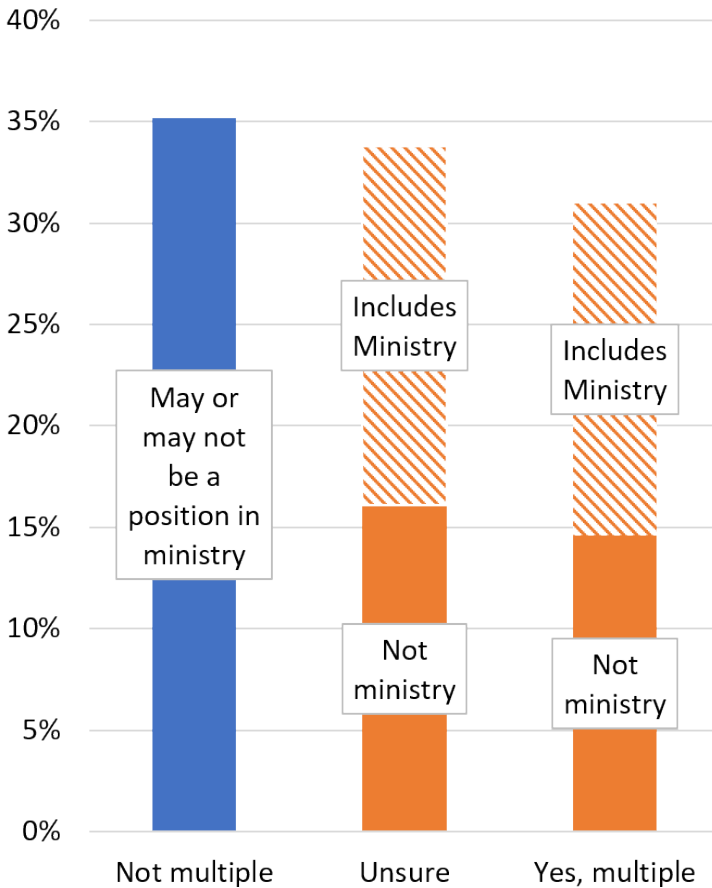


Figure 5: Do graduates plan to work in multiple positions? (ATS 2021)

In figure 4, we noted that a greater percentage of Black/non-Hispanic graduates (compared to other demographics) were planning to serve in multiple positions. Data from 2020–2021 showed a similar high percentage for Black/African American/African Canadian graduates, with 46% planning to serve in multiple paid positions (figure 6). In 2020–2021, a higher percentage of Hispanic/Latino(a)/Latin@ graduates planned to serve in multiple paid positions (38%, figure 6) than in previous years (30%, figure 4). Percentages for Asian descent/Pacific Islander and White/Caucasian students were similar to previous years, between 25% and 30%. Figure 6 shows that, in almost every racial/ethnic category, about half the graduates planning to serve in multiple paid positions were planning on one of those positions being in ministry. There was one exception: Native North American/First Nation/Indigenous graduates. The number of respondents in this racial/ethnic category was quite small. Further data will be needed to understand if this is an anomaly or a trend for these graduates.

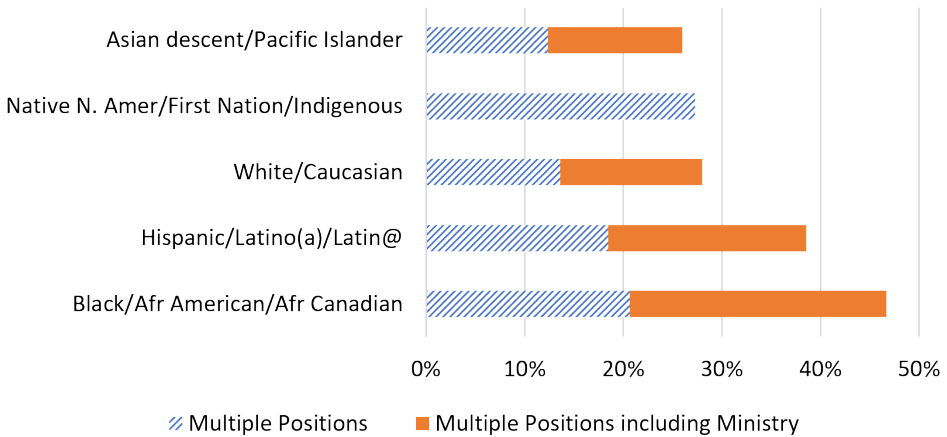


Figure 6: Plans for multivocational ministry by race/ethnicity, 2020–2021 (ATS 2021).

Data from this question focusing on multiple paid positions seems to indicate that, while a large percentage of students are planning on serving in multiple positions, far fewer are actually planning on serving in multivocational ministry. If these students are not planning to serve in ministry, where are they planning to serve?

Where will multivocational graduates be serving?

Multivocational graduates plan to serve in a wide-variety of settings, many of them within congregations. However, the data also raise questions about how respondents were interpreting the survey questions. In the first question, when asked specifically if they would be working in multiple paid positions that included ministry (figure 5), just over half chose, “Yes, and one of those positions will be in ministry.” In the second question, when these same respondents were asked what types of positions they anticipated holding after graduation, 61% indicated plans to work in a congregation or parish, work that would likely be considered ministry. In addition, 39% indicated plans to work in teaching or educational settings, 26% in healthcare chaplaincy or counseling, 31% in a faith-based non-profit, and 25% in some other setting. Of the 26% who planned to work in healthcare or counseling, about a third indicated in a later question that they planned to serve as chaplains. It is possible that graduates were not entirely sure where they would be serving after graduation, resulting in conflicting data. This would suggest that further research among alums would provide better data on multivocational ministry among graduates of theological schools. It is also possible that the slight difference in wording—the addition of “paid” position in the first question—skewed the data. Respondents may have interpreted the second question more broadly to include volunteer as well as paid positions.

Are Volunteer Ministers Bivocational?

In 2020–2021, the ATS questionnaires added specific questions about volunteer ministry. While volunteer ministry is rarely considered a form of bivocational or multivocational ministry, earlier data from the questionnaires suggested that volunteer ministry is much more prevalent among female students and certain racial/ethnic groups (see also Young Brown, chapter 4 in this volume). This trend was confirmed in the new questionnaire.

Approximately 25% of all master’s graduates plan to volunteer in a ministry position after graduation. Percentages are about the same for those planning to serve in one position or in multiple positions,

including those multivocational graduates planning on a paid position in ministry. Similar to multivocationality, percentages of students planning on volunteering in ministry varies by race/ethnicity. Comparing data from 2019–2020 (figure 4) to data from 2020–2021 (figure 7) on the impact of race/ethnicity on plans to serve in multiple positions, we see that Black/African American/African Canadian graduates are still the most likely demographic to plan on serving in multiple paid positions. They are also most likely to plan on volunteering in ministry after graduation. In 2020–2021, a greater percentage of Hispanic/Latino(a)/Latin@ graduates planned on serving in multiple positions than in 2019–2020. This may have been due to slight changes in the wording of the question about serving in multiple positions or changes in the question related to race/ethnicity that allowed graduates to select all that apply. It may also be related to fluctuations in the schools that participate in the questionnaire. More longitudinal data related to these new questions may help provide clarity.

Important to note in figure 7 is the relationship between multivocationality, volunteer ministry, and race/ethnicity. Black and Hispanic graduates had the highest percentage of respondents planning to serve in multiple positions and the highest percentage planning to volunteer in ministry. Multiracial graduates and White/Caucasian graduates were less likely to plan on multiple paid positions and also the least likely to plan on volunteering in ministry after graduation. Native North American/First Nation/Indigenous graduates and Asian-descent/Pacific Islander graduates were the least likely to plan on serving in multiple paid positions but more likely to plan on volunteering in ministry than their White and multi-racial colleagues. This data suggests that there are various ways graduates are negotiating the relationship between multiple paid positions and volunteer ministry. In some cases, such as among Black and Hispanic students, there seems to be a possible correlation between multiple paid positions and volunteering in ministry. Both racial/ethnic groups had high percentages of graduates planning to work in multiple positions and high percentages of graduates planning to volunteer in ministry. Among Asian students, the opposite seems to be true. While Asian students had the lowest percentage of graduates planning to work in multiple positions, they had the second-highest percentage of graduates planning to volunteer in ministry.

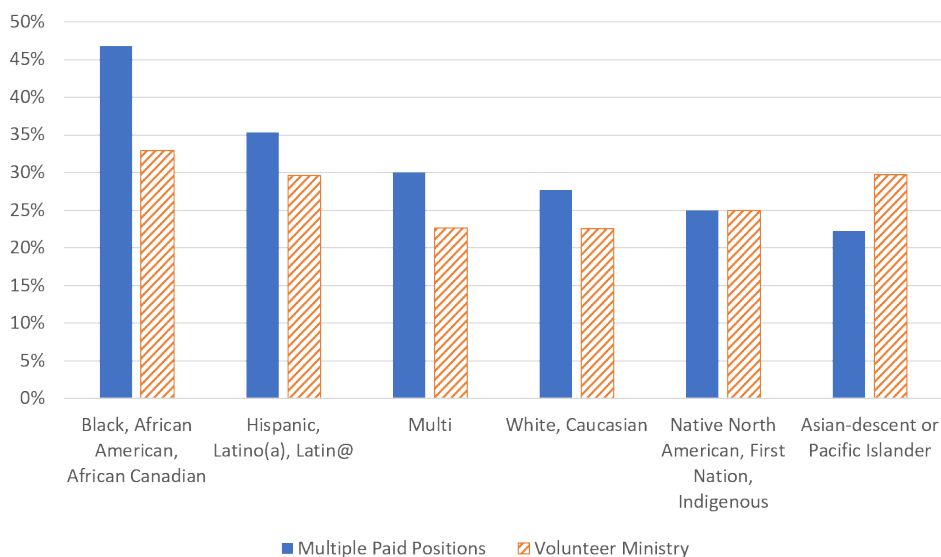


Figure 7: Percentage of 2021 graduates by race/ethnicity planning to serve in multiple paid positions and/or volunteer in ministry (ATS 2021).

Why the differences? Is it due to cultural expectations related to service, community, or ministry? Is it impacted by socio-economic status? How is it impacted by power and privilege in church and society? The data suggest that more research is needed in order to develop a definition of multivocational ministry that embraces various racial/ethnic expectations of work, service, and ministry.

Gender also has a significant impact on volunteer ministry. In every racial/ethnic category, female students were more likely to volunteer in ministry than male students. Differences were slight for White graduates, where 2% more females than males reported plans to serve in volunteer ministry. Differences were more pronounced for Asian (5% more), Hispanic (8% more), Black (9% more), and Native North American, where 40% of female graduates were planning on volunteer ministry in 2020–2021 compared to none of the male graduates. In fall 2020, “other” was added as a new gender category in the questionnaire, but there was not yet sufficient data to determine the percentage of those who identify as “other” who plan on volunteering in ministry after graduation. The higher percentages of women planning to volunteer in ministry may be related to ecclesial and theological barriers in some denominations to women serving in certain positions within the church. It may also be related to the way gender roles, work, and ministry intersect in the lives of female grad-

uates. Female graduates are more likely to take a part-time position or volunteer in ministry while raising children. Female graduates of color are more likely to struggle with the dual economic inequities associated with both gender and race that may shape how they navigate work and ministry.

Discussions about bivocational ministry often leave out volunteer ministry in an attempt to focus on professional definitions of ministry as defined by credentials or a paid position. While this might be appropriate in some cases, this omission does not recognize the number of volunteer ministers who invest time and money in a graduate degree in order to serve their congregations. Often, these ministry leaders volunteer because their congregations cannot afford to offer them a salary. This is particularly true among communities and person groups that have lower socio-economic status or have been historically impacted by financial inequities in society. Young Brown (chapter 4 in this volume) argued that to leave these unpaid ministers out of our conversations about professional and multivocational ministry is to neglect a group of ministry leaders who play a critical role in the everyday functioning of the church. Volunteer ministers are active and visible leaders and must be included in the definitions of ministry that shape our research, practices, and policies.

Conclusion

Data from the ATS student questionnaires over the last decade reveal a complex landscape of multivocationality. This landscape is impacted by historic inequities and cultural differences among various racial/ethnic groups as well as broad changes in cultural approaches to church and work. The data also reveal the prevalence of multivocational ministry among graduate theological students. The data suggests that two-thirds of master's graduates from ATS schools are either planning on or considering serving in multiple positions.

Why is this the case? ATS does not have data to answer that question, but there are several possibilities. The first is related to the decline in church attendance and church funding, contributing to a growing number of congregations that cannot afford to pay a full-time salary. Many graduates are aware of the needs of these churches and hope to serve in ways that will not be a financial burden. A second possibility, though, is that this generation of graduates thinks

about employment in terms of a gig economy, which relies on short-term contracts and freelance work. A third possibility is that a growing number of students enter graduate theological education from ministry cultures that assume multivocational ministry, whether in congregations or non-profit ministries. With almost two-thirds of graduates planning on or considering multivocational ministry, the Association of Theological Schools and other educational institutions must take into account the implications of multivocationality for graduate theological education and the preparation of ministers.

What is the best way to prepare and support multivocational ministers? Our educational models often assume a full-time student or a student who is able to take off work to attend intensive courses. We often ask students to prioritize education over all the other parts of their life. While there is certainly value in this type of education, the reality is that many of our students are not able to dedicate such time to graduate theological education. They are multivocational students juggling work, family, ministry, and their studies in an attempt to follow God's call to lives of meaning and service.

Theological schools must look more deeply at the reasons why so many students are multivocational. Many are related to the reasons cited above as to why graduates are deciding to work in multiple positions, but there may be other reasons more directly related to theological education. ATS data on educational debt suggests that cost might be one reason students are choosing to be multivocational students. There are increasingly more students who do not receive financial support from denominations or congregations to pay for the cost of seminary. In some cases, this is due to financial struggles in these organizations. Often these financial struggles are related to socio-economic inequities impacting the broad ecology that supports students. In other cases, lack of financial support is due to the growing number of students who come to seminary without any formal denominational affiliation.

ATS data also suggests that age and life-stage may impact the choice to be multivocational. More students are waiting until they are older to come to seminary. While they bring with them rich experiences that enhance their educational experience, they also often bring with them added responsibilities in terms of finances, family, and work. It is more difficult for older students to disentangle themselves from their numerous responsibilities and callings to attend seminary full-time. They may be selling homes, moving families, and quitting jobs that provided health insurance and retirement benefits.

In my experience as a dean of students at a seminary, I encountered students who chose to be multivocational for a number of other reasons as well. For some, it was not so much about finances as about mission and vocation. They did not feel released from the places they were serving to attend school full-time. They felt that the needs of the congregation or community they served were too great to step away. For some, it was an educational decision. They learned best when they had some place to immediately apply their learning. They were not able to focus as full-time students and needed the balance of work to help them succeed. For others, it was a cultural decision. They recognized that the seminary did not understand their particular ministry and cultural context. They wanted to receive a solid education but not lose themselves and their culture in the process. They needed mentors within the community to help them integrate what they were learning in seminary. Theological schools need to learn more about why students choose to be multivocational in order to create solutions that best help students and schools achieve their missional goals.

The multivocational reality of students provides a challenge but also an opportunity for theological schools. Theological schools are no longer just preparing students for ministry. They partner with students in a journey of life-long learning that includes preparation as well as on-going professional development. Too often, theological schools teach students how to think deeply about various topics but do not give them the tools needed to do ministry well in the bounded spaces that are part of a multivocational reality. Multivocational students give theological schools a great opportunity to explore educational models that can prepare their graduates, not just with a foundation but also with the tools to continue learning throughout their lives and ministries. How does one learn best with limited time and resources? How does one balance a life of reflection and action? How does a pastor prepare for a sermon in a week during which there is also a wedding, a death, and a spiritual crisis? How does a pastor develop a theological and pastoral response to a community crisis when juggling two jobs and a family? What does it mean to live a life of discipleship ministry with such limited time constraints? How can theological schools prepare their students for this reality? What research is needed to find practices that help with this integration—practices that do not force pastors to choose between the practical and spiritual? In order to best serve and prepare students, theological schools and others who train people for ministry will need to

find ways to meet these students where they are and give them tools to thrive in the multivocational ministries they have been called to.

ATS data reveals a complex landscape of multivocational students and alums who are navigating work, ministry, vocation, and education in a wide variety of ways. Theological schools have responded by offering part-time degrees, reduced credit hours, evening and weekend courses, and online courses. In many cases, they have lowered tuition and increased scholarships. All of these responses have made theological education more accessible and more affordable, but they have often required students to fit theological education into the margins of their multivocational lives. By looking more closely at the lives of multivocational ministers and students, theological schools have the opportunity to rethink their educational models in ways that focus more on integration and life-long learning. They have the opportunity to rethink the broad financial ecology of ministry. And they have the opportunity to create a more just system of theological education that is not just accessible but is also designed to equip and support those preparing to serve in multivocational and volunteer ministry roles.

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Endnotes

- 1 The language of “race/ethnicity” comes from the Association of Theological Schools’s Committee on Race and Ethnicity. These particular words were chosen to try and embrace the breadth of diversity within ATS schools, which include a wide range of Judeo-Christian denominations as well as schools in both the United States and Canada.
- 2 Schools looking at bivocational ministry included Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Calvin Theological Seminary, Earlham Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, Iliff Theological Seminary, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lexington Theological Seminary, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Payne Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, and University of the South School of Theology.