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Trying to Keep Divinity ...

By [MAREK FUCHS](#)

Depending on the day at her Methodist seminary, Jennifer Wilsford wants to be either a parish minister or a professor. Her seminary, for its part, has tweaked its curriculum, brings in speakers and tries to hold her hand through the logistics of ordination — all designed to nudge Ms. Wilsford and other seminarians toward the pulpit.

Jason Miller entered the rabbinic seminary with the notion that he wanted to graduate to a pulpit job, but leading a congregation out of school was daunting. He said that to help him prepare for the calling — and not be tempted to leave it before he graduated — he became “the guinea pig” in a new program, attending classes in one state, living and working as an assistant rabbi in another and serving as the primary rabbi in a third.

“We need to lead the horses to water, as it were,” Dr. James Hudnut-Beumler, the dean of the divinity school at [Vanderbilt University](#), said of what has become a common effort across faiths and denominations for seminaries to lean on their students — ever so slightly — to consider a pulpit job.

While a seminarian taking a pulpit job was a near given in the past, there are far more options available now, like chaplaincy or work in nonprofit organizations and even in businesses that are finding use for those with divinity degrees. From 2000 to 2006, the number of students about to earn a master’s degree in divinity who intended to enter parish ministry fell about 15 percent, according to a survey by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada.

Equally troublesome, the number of seminary students nearing graduation and unsure what they want to do — about 9 percent of the group in 2000 — nearly doubled for men and tripled for women. As a result, seminaries are trying hard to ensure that a good number of their students decide on church ministry.

Vanderbilt offers a number of programs, including a new full-time, two-year internship that is required after the second year of three years of study. Students leave classes altogether to serve in a church, in the hope that they develop a comfort level at a time when they have some training — but before they make their ultimate decision.

“You have to learn how to share deep things about life with one person, while another is asking you if they can move the picture of Jesus from this wall to that,” Dr. Hudnut-Beumler said in explaining that the immersion of students in a church leadership position could teach the coping skills that relieve anxieties, forming a greater willingness to take such a job after graduation.

Vanderbilt’s divinity school also received \$10 million from the Lilly Endowment — its biggest grant ever — to help train future seminary teachers to teach specifically for ministry positions.

While Vanderbilt is training teachers, Virginia Theological Seminary tells its graduates they can come back for extra support. The seminary offers a three-year program for graduates that includes mentors and weeklong campus visits for lectures and peer reflection groups. The offer of continuing support, said Dr. J. Barney Hawkins, professor of parish ministry and director of the ministry program at the seminary, is to mitigate the sense among some graduates that working in a parish could become isolating and overwhelming.

“Knowing that they won’t be solitary practitioners, that there is support and that they will be able to reflect with others” can help tilt them toward a parish, Dr. Hawkins said.

At the Candler School of Theology at [Emory University](#), the Rev. Dr. Alice Rogers, the director of teaching parish programs, describes a goal to “cultivate that culture of the call of the ministry.”

“Instead of selling explicitly,” Dr. Rogers said, “we try to put in place programs where they can hear if pulpit ministry is what is calling them.”

As a board member for the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and traveling to smaller Jewish communities around the world, Ned Gladstein saw the result of the waning popularity of pulpit work — smaller or emerging congregations can be left struggling for rabbis.

Mr. Gladstein, president of Sunrise ShopRite Inc., which runs grocery stores, donated the money to establish a scholarship for an internship program structured to guide a seminarian through the process of learning how to serve a synagogue. This is done by serving in two simultaneously. While going to school, the student serves as the assistant rabbi at a large established synagogue and lives in that community; using what he learns there as a knowledge base and the head rabbi as a mentor, he travels for holidays and regular Shabbats to a synagogue that is smaller and newer.

Rabbi Miller did not go into the rabbinate immediately after completing the program at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He took a position at Hillel at the [University of Michigan](#) instead. (The program has since been changed to give incentive to the graduate to take a post with a smaller synagogue.)

But now he is a rabbi at Congregation Agudas Achim in Columbus, Ohio, and Rabbi Miller said that his experience was a lasting influence on his eventual arrival at the pulpit. It taught him, he said, to try his varied activities “in baby steps, I know I can’t do everything at once” in a way that a less-rounded program might not have.

Ms. Wilsford is only in her first year at Drew Theological School, still torn between academia and the ministry.

“I love Greek text,” she said, “but understand that there is not much calling to do that in a parish setting.”

She said that a course taught by several practicing ministers was having an influence and that she had been attending campus talks by deacons and bishops.

Ms. Wilsford said the first-year course had given her a full sense of what pulpit life would be like. With a future internship, she might be there. “It will be either, ‘Whoa, I don’t want to work in a church’ or ‘Oh, this is something I can see myself doing.’” she said.

Maxine Clarke Beach, the vice president and dean at Drew, said that since the seminary's students had tended to be younger in recent years, the school matched their searching nature and flexibility in bringing speakers from different denominations to speak about pulpit jobs.

At the dean's retreat, which is held at the end of each school year, Dr. Beach said she did not use a heavy hand but tried to let graduates know that "if they take a dead little congregation and turn it into a place of joy, that's not something dreadful."

In the end, Dr. Beach said her school only wanted students to have the confidence and wherewithal to make a sound decision on their future.

"We just ask that they not shut any doors in considering pulpit work," she said.

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