

Commencement strategy

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue



Thinkstock

Seminary commencement services are overwhelming. The ceremony usually takes place in a jam-packed auditorium or large cathedral church; at our seminary it is held in a Gothic university chapel. As the music begins, the faculty process in their 40 different colors of academic regalia, followed by the graduates in their robes and hoods. The organ, brass, and choir make it feel as if we are processing into heaven. It's sublime.

But that's not the overwhelming part of the experience. And I doubt it's the reason that the families of the graduates have flown in from around the country to cram into a pew.

The part that knocks me out is watching the graduates make their way to the chancel, where I wait to place a degree in their hands. As each name is called the graduates climb the stone steps, hold out an open hand, and smile.

What's behind that smile? Are they proud of their achievement, or just grateful that the all-nighters with Greek vocabulary cards are finally over? Could it be that they're just being polite? I don't think it's any of that. The key to interpreting the smile is the open hand. They're reaching for something more glorious than a diploma that will be framed and hung above a desk. They're reaching for a future. And the thought of it delights them.

There have been way too many commencement speeches that drone on about what it means to "commence" a future. In the past many of them presented clichés to the graduates about being the best and brightest we've seen, chasing dreams, following one's star, and building a wonderful life. What the speaker meant was that the graduates' degrees were tickets to a predictable career path. Those who are leaving school today know better.

When I made my way up those same steps to receive my degree 34 years ago, everyone I knew in my class had already lined up a future in a church, chaplaincy, or graduate school. But in the course of one generation the once steady flow of search committees coming to campus has become a trickle.

So it's striking that today's graduates still hold their hands open, reaching, eager to receive a future filled with hope. The paths to that future are not as institutional as they once were, but that has never been a problem for the God who is always making something new. The graduates are betting their lives on this.

The narrative of decline in ministry today has created a consensus that seminaries keep cranking out new pastor wannabes when there are no jobs available for them. But that's not true. There are certainly fewer positions available in mainline parishes, but there is still a wide-open landscape of opportunities for ministry.

Seventy-five percent of our May graduates have jobs in some form of ministry by the following September. Within a year the number rises to 93 percent. But it's the "some form of ministry" that has to be considered carefully. Many graduates are in traditional positions as a pastor. Others are in Ph.D. programs at divinity schools, or in nonprofit organizations that operate under a religious banner. Still others are engaged in public policy, and some teach in private schools.

So in spite of all the hand-wringing about the future of theological education, seminary graduates are still following the call of the Holy Spirit into some form of ministry.

Shortly before graduation last year two seniors came to see me to show me a business plan. They were going to buy two coffee shops and use the income to launch a new church. They had investors. After a few years, if the church was up and running, the students would apply for the church to become part of their denomination.

This year we will be graduating several students who have launched a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that's devoted to environmental sustainability. Two years ago a graduate returned to her hometown to work for civil rights with a very clear strategy to run for mayor. Another alumna is a correspondent for *Time* magazine; she interviewed the Dalai Lama and wrote articles about Pope Francis and Barbara Brown Taylor.

These are illustrations of "some form of ministry" for which a theological degree was crucial. Every one of these graduates belongs to a traditional denomination. But since the institutional structures cannot find a way to offer them a job, they are taking the church into mission fields where the church had no intention of going.

In our seminary's cafeteria recently, I asked the students at the lunch table if they were worried about the shortage of jobs. They told me that they've been hearing about a dismal vocational future since they were in high school. "By the way," they reminded me, "there are no jobs for new attorneys either." They've known for a long time that they will have to find their own way. This doesn't depress or excite them—it's the society and church they've always known. So they smile and reach out their hands for a future.