What does a seminary education prepare you to do?

# Six of my Duke Divinity students, ten years later

by Jason Byassee in the February 24, 2021 issue

AFTER DIV SCHOOL: (clockwise from top) Ben McNutt gives a presentation to executives at Daimler Mercedes-Benz; Brandy Daniels counterprotests in Charlottesville in 2017; Elyse Gustafson at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico; Jordan Hylden preaches in Dallas; Matthew Nickoloff at a service in Rochester, NY.  (Courtesy photos)

In the fall of 2008, with the impending election of Barack Obama and the first entrance of members of the millennial generation into graduate school, one such millennial came into my office at Duke Divinity School and asked if I could help him start an online theological journal. With his hair sculpted to stick up as if unintentionally, Ben McNutt looked full of both nerves and bravado. Soon, over tacos, half a dozen students and I sketched out the start of *Confessio*, much as Ben had envisioned. Unwittingly, we also laid the groundwork for a rival satirical journal called *Depressio*, which was much more widely read and commented on.

This year marks the ten-year anniversary of this cohort's graduation. I found myself wondering where they are and what theological education had brought them in their lives. As I tracked several of them down and asked them, I was startled to see just how diverse their occupations and preoccupations had become. Seminaries may claim that we prepare people for a broad range of careers, but I don't know that I had ever imagined them as quite this broad. After listening to their stories, I have concluded that theological education perhaps best equips people to make a go of the Christian life, with far more possible outcomes than just preacher or professor.

Ben came to Duke from conservative evangelicals in Florida, where his dad is a Southern Baptist minister. He planned to use divinity school to go into the family business, though he was always more interested in publishing than pastoring. After graduation, he took over my role at Duke's web magazine *Faith and Leadership*, with the idea of helping the church reinvent itself for a new day. But he soon left the church all together. He moved to New York and worked for a prestigious publisher reading slush-pile manuscripts before taking up a marketing gig to pay the bills.

When I caught up with him recently, he was the creative head of a marketing company in San Francisco called Butchershop. He hadn't planned to stay in marketing, but now he is rising through the ranks. It surprised me that he sees continuity between his work at Duke and his work as a marketing executive. "You have to know a little something about culture and human nature and what makes people tick," he said.

When he talks about his clients, it sounds to me like he is speaking in tongues. One produces autonomous drones that can deliver medical supplies deep into Africa. Another is developing electromagnetic pulse tubes for frictionless trains four times as fast as Japanese bullet trains with zero carbon emissions. Another is run by an ex–intelligence officer with a new way to offer cyber insurance. He described his clients as "fascinating people who look at the world, notice an opportunity, and build something. I help them articulate their point of view, mission, and vision and do storytelling around that."

Ben admits that he could not recommend divinity school as a place for a marketing executive to start, but the pairing of faith and entrepreneurship that marked his days in seminary seems to have remained. He sees, for example, the struggle that one of his clients, Daimler Mercedes-Benz, has as it tries to make adjustments while worried that Tesla is going to eat it alive. It's easier to start a new company that has

only ever made parts for electric cars than to retrofit one that is more than a century old. When he said this, I thought he had just explained the whole history of church planting.

While Ben is using storytelling to coach those who want to run the world, his classmate Brandy Daniels is still trying to save it. “We are on our 151st day of nightly protests in Portland,” she said when I called her. “The Portland Interfaith Clergy Resistance includes legal observers, medics . . . we are a microcosm of society.” She’s been on the front lines of protests in Charlottesville, where she did a postdoc at the University of Virginia, and now in Portland, where she teaches at the University of Portland.

Brandy arrived at Duke after an aborted attempt at a graduate program at Wheaton College. She left when she started a same-sex relationship. She’s ordained as a teacher and an activist in the Disciples of Christ and has a PhD in theology from Vanderbilt. Now on her sixth institution of higher learning before turning 40, she seems like the happiest academic creature of her cohort.

But she is even happier on the streets. She was the first person in her family to go to college, and when she finished her doctorate, her family asked what hospital she was going to work in. But she sees herself as a person of privilege who works on behalf of those more vulnerable. “We step up to protect vulnerable and BIPOC communities,” she told me. “We’re not leading, we’re supporting.” From PICR’s earliest days, clergy wore purple vests, and fellow activists would ask, “What’s a clergy?” Now they’re known as the purple people or the purple perimeter. “Given all the talk around antifa and law and order, people will see these protests and say, ‘That’s terrorism.’ But I’m a professor, and when I show people video I’ve taken of police being violent, they will agree: that’s crazy. That’s a moral witness around what’s going on in our culture.”

Brandy was one of only a couple of openly LGBTQ students at the divinity school when she was there. But she connected with the postliberal theological orientation at Duke, and she sees herself as “pretty orthodox” theologically. That is what makes her a “raging liberal” socially, she said. Her academic work has also been focused on postliberal eschatology; she uses gender theory and queer theology to critique postliberalism. At the Catholic school where she now teaches, she focuses her first-year introduction to religion class on White supremacy, aiming for a world where a purple perimeter may no longer be needed.

At Duke one of Brandy's closest friends was Elyse Gustafson, a Wheaton graduate who was in divinity school training to be a military chaplain. This set her at odds to some degree with the establishment at Duke, which had a strong pacifist orientation, embodied by Stanley Hauerwas. For a time after graduation she wondered if she were the only pacifist military chaplain in world history. Being a chaplain allowed her to minister to poorer and more diverse populations than she ever could have as a typical Episcopal priest. She loved the work for almost a decade. But today, she no longer considers herself a pacifist—nor is she a chaplain, having left the military in 2017.

Elyse's work in the military gave her a strong interest in the financial well-being of soldiers. When she wondered what to do after the military, she thought about all of the financial stress she heard about from soldiers, day in and day out. She is now a financial adviser for Morgan Stanley. "It was a hard pivot," she said. "But working with clients feels a lot like being a chaplain at times, and talking about money is about so much more than money. It requires a lot of what we would call pastoral care."

As we talked, I noted that she has a thing for impossible missions in hard-to-change institutions: she was a pacifist in the military. "I do find that the blending or intersection of spaces is more interesting than being fully in one and not the other," she said. And there are compensations. "I would never have been able to pay off my student loans if I was still in a parish."

She has found her sweet spot in ESG: environmental, social, and governance-based investing. "Mission-aligned investing or impact investing helps mission-driven organizations align their endowments with their mission," she explained, "so that's been exciting." For example, a group of Dominican sisters was protesting Wall Street in response to Pope Francis's *Laudato si'*. They wanted help reinvesting their pension fund in a way that makes for the healing of creation. "Lots of firms weren't able to do that. We were." The Dominicans were pleased. During the pandemic, ESG funds have outperformed others.

When Elyse looks back on her divinity school education, she wishes that care for the world had been emphasized a bit more. She sees the way that the church needs not only to distinguish itself from the world but also to interact with it. "That's not to say I'm a Niebuhr fan now," she said, winking as she named Hauerwas's bête noire.

Cohort member Leigh Miller has taken a very different path from her colleagues. “We’re not interested in changing the world,” she said. “We’re just trying to change ourselves.” Leigh, her husband, and their four children share space with another family in suburban Minneapolis. They are not exactly an intentional Christian community: they have no name, no rule, no common purse. But they do share meals regularly, pray the morning and evening office, and try to make life together. All four adults are converts to Roman Catholicism.

When they were in North Carolina, Leigh and her husband connected with the Catholic Worker tradition. They were Episcopalians then but had started to make a move toward Catholicism. Intentional Christian community is an experiment in how to love one’s neighbor, though this is often confused with flight from the world. The Millers are trying hard to love face to face. No wonder they, like monks and nuns for ages before them, pray so often.

Leigh’s is the last byline in *Confessio*, which stopped publishing in 2010. When I first contacted these former students, she was the hardest to find. From her point of view, this difficulty is intentional. Her staunch form of commitment to loving her neighbor means “I’m going to narrow my choices, so I don’t have constant FOMO.” She observed that too many millennials “spend our days texting and on social media, posting in an effort not to feel alone, yet we have record anxiety and depression and loneliness.”

She credits her choices about her life to Sam Wells’s “personalist” idea that “the most important political commitment is what you do with your body every day.” When I asked her about her day, she said, “Well, I wiped some butts, made some meals, read some storybooks . . . it’s hard.” She imagines those who live in communities like L’Arche may understand.

She feels that her former Baptist and Episcopalian churches did not tell her the truth about sex, love, or her body. When she read John Paul II’s *The Theology of the Body*, she thought, “That’s true.” The pope’s argument made sense of her experience: male and female bodies are intended by God for each other in lifelong monogamous fidelity. This helped her understand why previous relationships had hurt so badly when they’d ended.

Increasing commitment to family means decreasing commitment to work outside the family. Leigh had nine jobs in the ten years after finishing divinity school. “A

typical millennial," she rues. But now she believes that she is seeking happiness through relationship and faith.

Jordan Hylden's path is not as counterintuitive as many in his cohort. Originally from North Dakota, he is now a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas. Before coming to Duke, he studied at Harvard and interned at the journal *First Things*. He finished a PhD in theology at Duke as well and now works for the diocese, training deacons and lay ministers in a "sort of mini-seminary, covering a lot of the same ground in a more truncated fashion." His wife, Emily, who is also an Episcopal priest, has pastored a small parish in south Dallas, St. Augustine's, and he has sometimes copastored with her.

Jordan tries to bring depth to his work for the diocese, giving ordinands a rich entrance place into the questions of the church. He thinks that too many of his fellow Episcopalians are trained "more in deconstruction and are not as interested in digging into the riches of scripture and tradition." So at a recent "curate camp" he asked ordinands to reflect on standard stewardship material—but then gave them an exchange from *Commonweal* in which Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart discusses the nature and meaning of money with Catholic theologian David Cloutier. "We asked who had the better argument from scripture and theology and how that should move us past a simple fundraising paradigm," he said.

Although five of the six students I interviewed are ordained, only one is a parish pastor. Matthew Nickoloff serves a Lutheran church in Rochester, New York, called the South Wedge Mission. It is modeled somewhat on the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, where he once interned. While most church planters I know are peppy, Matthew is broody. When I asked him what he's reading lately, he said, "I don't read books anymore." Over the next hour of conversation he cited a dozen he is presently reading.

South Wedge Mission's church space is filled with icons, instruments, candles, and images—no traditional pews, but lots of prayer stuff. Matthew is making a "catechism" of videos explaining why racism has no place in the Christian tradition, based on the idea that any effort one makes to justify oneself apart from Christ is heresy.

He was involved in the protests that rocked Rochester last year and has served on a police accountability board. That work requires him, he says, "to think about how

Romans 13 sounds in a police locker room" and to think about how the suburbs where police often live "teach them to view the cities where they work."

Matthew believes that the Black church has been successful in proclaiming the coming of God, whether hearers like it or not: "God is coming; our current way of thinking is idolatrous. Christ is bringing a new creation; here is how to be a part of it." He believes that "people actually want to be spoken to this way," not just to hear another appeal to a moral abstraction like social justice.

Matthew ties his work in Rochester to the famed Burned-over District of New York State in the 19th century. He believes that the Great Awakening, which raged across his region, in fact stripped the soil of its spiritual nutrients. People's views of faith are "polluted because of church abuse." He borrowed an ecological term to say we live in a "brown field. But we need people willing to stay there."

Church planting done this way is not fast or glossy. It takes generations. When I asked what he'd have liked to learn more about in seminary, he noted a lecture from the great Wendell Berry: "Seminaries don't do very well at teaching us to expect to be disappointed." He's pondering writing a book on "Christian nihilism," arguing we need not care overmuch what folks believe—just introduce them to the practices. Disappointment, nihilism—most church planters don't talk that way.

These six stories were full of surprises for me. Not one of these students is a Methodist, despite having attended a Methodist divinity school. Two-thirds make a living far beyond traditional seminaries' purview. Not a single one of them has written a book, despite working for a theological journal throughout divinity school. Not one of them fits a millennial stereotype as flighty or lacking in commitment. Each is serving an institution or more than one in different ways. Each one of them—pastor, advertising exec, mom and quasi monastic, activist, investor, church administrator—is doing what they do because of their theological education, not despite it.

And at long last, I discovered who the editor of *Depressio* was. While he continues not to confirm or deny his identity, he still speaks in that journal's voice. He says that when the commencement speaker at their 2011 graduation encouraged them to be "aroma spreaders" of God's word, he could not help but think that "this goes against CDC guidelines, but maybe it is a useful analogy for living in the world."

Most of the *Confessio* 6 are happy to stick with earnestness. “Going to irony is the easiest thing to do,” Matthew told me of his generation. Elyse echoed this sentiment. She said she’d rather be “on team sincere and in the open any day.”

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