

For so many the idea of Bible college study is for Pastors or missionaries or those who wish to enter the Pulpit, yet Neela banerjee of the New York Times uncovered an interesting trend...

### **Students Flock to Seminaries, but Fewer See Pulpit in Future**

**By NEELA BANERJEE**

ATLANTA " Among the important things Kirkland Reynolds has figured out in his three years in the seminary is that he does not want to be a church pastor.

Like many young people here at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Mr. Reynolds, 24, hopes to put his religious education to some other use, saying he does not want to preach or take a position of authority in the community.

Across the country, enrollment is up at Protestant seminaries, but a shrinking portion of the graduates will ascend the pulpit. These seminarians, particularly the young ones, are less interested in making a career of religion than in taking their religion into other careers.

Those from mainline denominations are being drawn to a wide range of fields from academia to social service to hospital chaplaincy, said the Rev. Daniel O. Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada. Students who are evangelical Protestants, meanwhile, often end up at advocacy groups, sometimes called parachurches, which have defined the priorities and solidified the influence of conservative Christians.

Only about half of those graduating with a Master in Divinity now enter parish ministry, Mr. Aleshire said. The portion has fallen sharply in a generation, he said, and declined 10 to 15 percentage points in the last five years alone.

The idea of using the seminary as the jumping off point for other, seemingly unrelated pursuits, is not new; just the number of people doing it is.

George Rupp, for instance, graduated from Yale Divinity School and served as president of Rice and Columbia Universities before becoming president of the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian aid group. Thomas M. Chappell, co-founder of the Tom's of Maine's line of soap and toothpaste, completed Harvard Divinity School. And Al Gore attended Vanderbilt Divinity School for a time before switching to law.

"Theological education has a lot of uses, like a legal education does," said Barbara G. Wheeler, president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York and director of its Center for the Study of Theological Education. "It's good to have people with a theological education doing lots of things. It's a perspective that helps."

Maggie Kulyk, 43, graduated from Candler in 1996. In divinity school, she thought she might go into academia or be ordained in the Episcopal Church. She is now a financial planner in Atlanta, helping clients with socially responsible investing.

"There's a sense that it's the kind of education that invites you to go deep into your own interior life and explore your own sense of what matters and doesn't, and if such-and-such matters, how do you behave in the world?" Ms. Kulyk said. "Knowing how to ask questions is infinitely helpful: it helps you take clients through the process, where you ask: 'What is this money for? How do you want your life to be?' "

Though mainline denominations have shrunk considerably over the last 35 years, enrollment in mainline divinity schools rose 20 percent from 1990 to 2004, according to the Association of Theological Schools. Part-time study programs and interest from minority applicants and women contributed to the gains.

At the same time, seminary graduates drifted away from becoming pastors. Among United Methodists, about 70 percent of seminary graduates in a recent survey said they would enter pastoral ministry, compared with more than 90 percent of graduates in 1970.

Mainline seminarians, including the Methodists, now largely fall into two age groups: those over 40, who are

embarking on a second career in ministry, and those under 30, who are more likely to choose another profession.

At Candler, a United Methodist divinity school with about 500 students from various denominations, a majority of students is under 30, according to Cynthia Meyer, assistant dean of students. Only about half the graduates say they will become church pastors, she said.

Mr. Reynolds opted out of parish ministry after his first year at Candler despite a long commitment to the United Methodist Church, the inspiration of local pastors in his youth, his summers working with children in Belfast under the church's auspices and his wife's imminent ordination as a Methodist minister.

"Parish ministry offered job security; it was what everyone did and it seemed logical," said Mr. Reynolds, who expects to graduate in May and will apply for jobs after his wife is assigned a parish. "But I felt that preaching and having a role of authority in the community was not who I was. Still, being at seminary felt right."

The young candidates are exploring, said the Rev. Jonathan Strandjord, director for theological education at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "Young people are thinking about possibilities, about blue-sky possibilities. Older people have mortgages and responsibilities, and their goal isn't to invent a form of ministry or find something that is really out there."

Often, seminary education, with its focus on personal spiritual growth, theology and social justice, introduces students to the idea that one's calling need not be answered in church every Sunday.

Ronald Galvin enrolled in Candler because he "wanted to make a difference in the world in some way." Since graduating in 2000, he has worked as a community activist, most recently at the Center for Working Families Inc. in Atlanta. Many of the poor people he encounters think he must be a minister and call him Reverend, he said.

"Seminary really gave me the space and the moment of pause that I needed to develop the skills to analyze the world," said Mr. Galvin, 37, who was raised Catholic. "It expanded my faith, gave me a greater appreciation for folks who are struggling, and showed that there are many sacred ways and that God is with us no matter where we are."

So far, the shrinking interest in pastoral ministry has not created a shortage of ministers in the mainline denominations, partly because they have adapted. The United Methodist Church has added licensed ministers, who have completed training programs rather than the seminary and who can perform the functions of an ordained minister except for participating in the denomination's decision-making bodies. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has long required seminary graduates to do three years of pastoral ministry.

The clearest impact has been the aging of the clergy in the mainline denominations. For example, the average age of ordination for Episcopal ministers is 44; in 1970, it was 29.

The older people entering pastoral ministry often say they needed years of other work and maturity before they could imagine leading a church. Arlindall Burks, 52, spent 26 years in the Navy and worked as a counselor at a community college in Florida before entering seminary.

Ms. Burks, an African-American who grew up Baptist in Gary, Ind., recalls becoming alienated from religion after encountering racism and rejection in society. Seven years ago, though, she began attending United Methodist churches, moved by the denomination's commitment to social justice. Now in her last term at Candler and on her way to becoming a Methodist minister, Ms. Burks said she understood why younger people often rejected pastoral ministry.

"I don't think I could have done this at 25," she said. "I had too much baggage. I was too angry. I was mad at God. I don't think I could have heard God then."

From the pulpit, she says she can do what she loves: teach and inspire people to act for social change.

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"I think all that I did before this was preparation for this call," Ms. Burks added. "I don't think that I would have had the patience, the passion, the compassion before."

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