

Career Services @Candler

What to Do Before Coming to Seminary

Does God speak clearly when it comes to big life decisions? Sometimes . . . and sometimes not.

As Director of Career Services, I am the person at Candler tasked with helping students connect the dots between what they learn and experience at seminary and how that translates into the professional world. In terms of professional discernment, I have learned a lot. In fact, I took the long road and went into a professional path that was not right for me, only to leave that practice to live and serve in Haiti. Only then did I return to find my ministry of vocational development. At this point, I've worked with hundreds of students and professionals to assist and equip them to answer their calls. Here are some suggestions for prospective students as they continue to discern whether seminary is right for them, or as they prepare for their arrival at Candler.

1. Think about where seminary might lead you after you graduate and whether you want to go there.

The first thing to remember is that the educational process itself only lasts a few years. However, you live in your selected professional neighborhood (i.e. your job or field) for a long time after you graduate. Usually significantly longer than you spend in school! Thus, if you're thinking about coming to seminary, ask yourself why and what this means you might want to do when you graduate.

For example, if you are seriously considering becoming a pastoral minister, have you talked to any? Have you *really* sat down with some and asked what they do every day? One way not to get lost in the romanticized vision of what it is to "minister," is to ask a minister. This, in fact, is what kept me from going to seminary. I had an informational interview with a priest at a large Episcopal church after I returned from Haiti, and through this conversation, I realized that his job was only 10% what I thought it was. After that, I realized quickly in my discernment that traditional ministry was not the route for me.

That didn't necessarily mean that seminary wasn't for me, however. An MDiv, and the other degrees you can earn here, are truly multi-purpose. People finish seminary and become ministers, chaplains, spiritual directors, teachers, artists, activists, writers, higher education administrators, and more. The question really is: where might you like to go? If you were to choose two or three potential professional avenues to explore, what would they be? Once you've answered that, you can then start to answer the question, "Will seminary lift me up and prepare me to do that work?" Do people who graduate from seminary enter that field?

2. Get to know the potential professional neighborhoods you might want to enter after you leave.

If you have time in your schedule, I highly recommend interning, volunteering, or shadowing someone who does something you're interested in doing. That's a great way to learn more about what might work for you.

Apart from this kind of direct experience, (or a rare, unequivocal word from God), however, the rest of us have to discern in other ways. Another method that I alluded to before is simply to talk to people. If you have selected potential professional directions you might like to explore when you finish seminary, the secret is that you don't have to wait till you get here to talk to people who do that work. For example, if you're considering pastoral ministry and nonprofit administration, start by owning that, and ask people you know if they have anyone that you could contact. Perhaps even post on social media that you're currently discerning and would like to talk to anyone who works in your selected fields. If you ask, you may be surprised by who your friends know, have lived next to, or who their uncle is. It might feel strange to reach out to new people, but just consider it getting to know your potential professional neighborhood and neighbors, and trust that most people are happy to talk about their work, especially when that work is service.

To assist you, here is a link to some questions you can ask when you meet with folks in your potential professional neighborhoods. The trick during these conversations is to allow your intuition to guide you. I call them "yes bells" and "no bells"—the goal is to listen and reflect on what resonates. For example, let's say you meet with an executive director of a nonprofit, and they tell you about their daily work. If, as they are speaking, you are thinking, "I'd rather gouge my eye out with a spoon than spend half my day asking for money"—that is what I call a "no bell." It's a sign that this particular professional path *may* not be for you. Obviously, it takes more than one conversation, and different roles take different forms at different organizations. However, from a professional perspective, there are very few things as fruitful as building relationships with your potential professional neighbors. These relationships not only help inform you of your potential professional neighborhoods (and perhaps whether seminary is right for you), they can also open those professional or pastoral doors for you once you're ready.

3. Remember that you cannot mess this up.

Let me add a final note to this advice. We often put the pressure of God's nebulous approval on our decisions, asking, "Does God want me to do this?" But I don't believe that it necessarily works that way. In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about wrestling with her decision of whether to become ordained. She said she was extremely torn and asked God with sincerity what she should do and, for the first time in her life, she heard God clearly. The response from God was, "Do whatever pleases you . . . and belong to me."

I think we can all learn a lot from that.

If you have questions or want to speak about what people do when they leave Candler, you can reach out to Admissions or contact me at sarah.carlson@emory.edu.