

Transgender divinity graduates Adam Plant and Brett Ray share their stories

by [Jesse James DeConto](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue

Three years ago, when Adam Plant began master of divinity studies at Wake Forest University's School of Divinity, Plant was a North Carolina woman with a desire to plumb the intersection of faith and sexuality.

By the time he received his master's hood this spring, Plant had found acceptance and peace as a man.

"Coming out to myself was, I think, one of the hardest things I ever did," he said. "I think I was most afraid of being wrong. What if I am crazy? What if this is wrong?"

As he explains in a video shown during graduation, "those voices no longer rule my head. Now I hear one clear voice ring out: You are whole. You are beautiful. You are loved."

Since seminary is often the place where students come to terms with their identities, it's no surprise that a small but growing number of transgender students seek it out precisely because it is where they can wrestle with questions about their place and purpose in the universe.

Several mainline-affiliated theological schools have admitted transgender students. The Pacific School of Religion has a large transgender population and has helped convene a nationwide leadership development program called the Trans\* Seminars Cohort.

Plant, who grew up in rural North Carolina, said passage of a controversial bathroom bill in the state in March has inadvertently helped create opportunities for dialogue.

"I've had conversations with people about this that I never thought I would have," he said. "It has been a real exercise in extending compassion and grace and patience while also maintaining my own boundaries and taking care of myself and my community as much as I can."

Although he started thinking of himself as a boy as early as age three, Plant did not embrace his male identity until his first year of divinity school when a campus

counselor referred him to a gender-identity specialist. The specialist helped him “to say out loud those things that I’d been thinking for so long.”

At Duke Divinity School, Brett Ray, a transgender man who graduated this year with a master of theological studies degree, helped lead the school to designate some restrooms as gender neutral and to dedicate a room for Sacred Worth, an LGBT student group.

Ray, 23, first identified as transgender while a sophomore in college.

“I didn’t know if I would still have friends, a family, or a church after making that proclamation,” Ray said. “I was in a gender studies class at the time, and there was just something that clicked, and I realized I had to live into the fullness of who I was, or I wasn’t going to live at all.”

Ray published a memoir, *My Name Is Brett: Truths from a Trans Christian*, last year.

There are ministry doors open to transgender seminary graduates in some mainline denominations. Many transgender clergy work in the Metropolitan Community Church, a denomination that formed almost 50 years ago to focus on ministry to gay and lesbian communities, and the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, which began with ministry to black LGBT people in Los Angeles during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

Erin Swenson, a Presbyterian psychotherapist in Atlanta who in the mid-1990s became one of the first mainline clergy to change genders while remaining ordained, said transgender ministers are often especially gifted to serve congregations because they know the experience of not measuring up to others’ expectations.

“We live in a world where we have unfortunately learned that love is an earned quality—that love comes from being more beautiful, smelling better, driving the right car, having the right job, having the right income,” she said. “If there’s one thing people struggle with in churches, it is accepting themselves for whom they are.” —Religion News Service

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