

Program aids newly ordained ministers: Two-year residencies offer training and support

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When Amanda Adams was growing up, she considered a number of professions: doctor, nurse, writer, teacher, psychologist and bareback rider.

She eventually became a Presbyterian minister because it includes all the things she wants. “Ministry,” said Adams, 26, “is an extraordinary balancing act between what we do every day—the mundane paperwork and meetings, sitting at people’s beds when they’re ill—and personal time, time for our own devotions.”

Adams and two other young ministers arrived at First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, last September, committed to two-year residencies. They’re part of the Transition-into-Ministry Program funded by the Lilly Endowment.

Indianapolis-based Lilly in 1999 began a number of pilot programs to help young ministers move from seminary to full-time pastorates. Transition-into-Ministry, part of Lilly’s larger effort to improve preparation of pastoral leaders, so far has invested \$38 million in programs.

First Presbyterian, which has about 2,200 members, was one of the first congregations to host Transition-into-Ministry residents and has since had nine. Situated near the University of Michigan campus, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affiliate is the largest Protestant congregation in Ann Arbor. Douglas Brouwer has been senior pastor there for two years.

Each fledgling pastor works about 50 hours a week, rotating through a series of areas, including evangelism, stewardship, adult and children’s education, special projects and administration. They learn not only the specific skills that go with such tasks as delivering a good sermon but also how to develop the relationships that make ministry work.

Adams, along with the two other residents, Meghan Gage and Andrew Parnell, came to ministry as the result of relationships with people already working in the field.

Parnell, 31, is a “PK”—a preacher’s kid. The son of a Presbyterian minister in Parsons, Kansas, Parnell thought ministry was his dad’s profession, not something for him. But a church youth program and a friendship with a young Baptist minister that grew out of it led him to seminary.

Gage, 28, planned to be a psychologist, but realized during her senior year at Ohio Wesleyan University that secular work didn’t fit her. A campus chaplain and a pastor of the church she attended encouraged her to go to seminary and get a master of divinity degree.

Adams was about 15 when her pastor in Alexandria, Virginia, noticed her interest in God and church. He suggested ministry.

“I thought he was nuts, and went home,” Adams recalled. But the idea took root, and by her senior year Adams had focused on a seven-year path to ordination.

Ministry, say the three residents, allows one to witness some of the most important, most intimate moments of people’s lives. “I’ve had people share things with me that they won’t tell their spouse or their children,” Gage said.

The flip side is that after seminary, a newly ordained minister often takes a job that requires great skill but doesn’t offer much support, particularly if he or she is serving a small church. The results can be serious mistakes, burnout and, in some cases, rejection of ministry altogether.

“Being a minister is more than sermons,” said Gretchen Wolfram, spokesperson for the Lilly Endowment. It requires leadership and administrative skill, not to mention nuts-and-bolts things like basic knowledge of accounting.

Eldon Beery, a pastor who supervises ministry residents at First Presbyterian, said about 20 percent of men and about 40 percent of women in ministry drop out within five years. “It’s one thing to be a student writing good answers at the seminary, and something else to work with people in a parish,” Beery said. “We immerse these young seminary graduates in parish ministry so that they experience and experiment in a protected atmosphere.”

“There are hands out to catch us,” said Gage, who has helped a group of First Presbyterian teens prepare for confirmation. –*Catherine O’Donnell, Religion News Service*