

# George Mason

## On a Pastoral Residency Program to foster a successful Transition into Ministry

*By Louis Weeks*



### Introduction

In 1999, Lilly Endowment, Inc. launched an initiative to support programs that assist younger pastors in gaining competence and confidence as they move into ministry. More than thirty experimental projects have received grants. The greater portion of the support has been devoted to residency-based programs—currently in nineteen congregations.

Typically, seminary graduates are chosen by the pastor and other leaders in the congregation to serve two-year residencies at that church. During the two-year residencies, they experience the range of pastoral responsibilities as partners of and apprentices to the pastor. They serve alongside others in the staff and the lay leaders, who together teach them (and learn from them).

According to a report published in 2008 by James Wind and David Wood, [Becoming a Pastor: Reflections on the Transition into Ministry](#), the pastoral residents and mentors become co-participants “in a single community of shared practice.” In the course of their formation as pastors, the residents also receive the wisdom of lay leaders and the congregational context as part of the fabric of ministry. The pastors, other congregational leaders, and residents alike in such a “Teaching Church” grow in skills and practice as teachers and learners. The grants from Lilly Endowment provide funds to overcome initial inertia and establish programs well. The congregations assume the responsibility to garner

financial resources to maintain the programs once the grants have been exhausted.

Wilshire Baptist Church is named first in the report as an example of the “Teaching Churches” that sponsor residency programs. Located in urban Dallas Texas, the congregation is a stalwart in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Begun in 1951, the still-predominantly Caucasian congregation has been receptive to ordaining women as pastors and to providing hospitality for, inviting membership among, and soliciting leadership from people of current racial and ethnic minorities in Texas.

George Mason, Senior Pastor at Wilshire, has served the congregation for twenty years. A graduate of the University of Miami, and with M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he previously served Hillcrest Baptist Church in Mobile Alabama. He serves on the boards of numbers of schools and church organizations, including the two Baptist bodies with which the church is affiliated. His ties with Brite Divinity School, Duke Divinity School, and other seminaries help spread the word about the program and keep him current concerning both theological education and many of the students preparing for ministry.

We met in his study. The parlor-turned-library-turned-office houses hundreds of recent books and periodicals on every part of the theological encyclopedia and many of the social sciences. Bookmarks and marginalia evidence his having read and digested the eclectic books surrounding our chairs.

***Q. How did the Pastoral Resident program begin at Wilshire?***

**A.** In 2001, I was thinking seriously about my continuing ministry here at Wilshire Baptist Church. I had been serving this church for 12 years. I loved the people and the pastoral work here. I found the grass greenest right here. I wanted to keep serving.

But I had also heard ministerial wisdom that if you stay in one church for a long pastorate you can get stale. Most pastors solve this issue by changing zip codes. They do move to another call. If you stay you need to ‘re-invent’ yourself and not keep doing exactly the same thing.

I remember vividly visiting Bruce McIver, Pastor Emeritus here, who was in the hospital. His wife was there with us, along with a development officer from the Baylor Hospital Foundation staff, who is also a Wilshire layperson.

Bruce was my predecessor here, and he had served for 30 years as pastor and 12 years as Pastor Emeritus—42 years altogether. He had re-cast his ministry beautifully several times. We were best of friends, and the transition between pastors had been a seamless one, with Jimmy Allen the interim between us. Bruce and I had a wonderful relationship and we were being encouraged to write a book about how to have good transitions.

Bruce had just finished writing a book that told about the youth revival movement of the 1950s. Thousands of young people entered the ministry. It was a major revival. We were discussing whether such a movement of the Spirit could happen again. Bruce said that if another such work of the Spirit did come, it would doubtless be something different as well.

I remember saying that I wish we could have mentoring for young ministers as they entered into the vocation. Bruce sat up in bed, said that was a fine idea. He told his wife that when he died he would hope that gifts to honoring him might go to a mentoring program at Wilshire Baptist.

Bruce died two months later, and people did give generously in his memory. Wilshire received about \$150,000 to begin a program for mentoring young pastors. We secured our first resident that very year.

***Q. So you began the resident program before you had a grant from Lilly Endowment?***

**A.** I knew nothing about Lilly Endowment when we began. But after reading an article in Alban Institute’s *Congregations* magazine, I called Bill Enright, then pastor of Second Presbyterian, Indianapolis. The article had described their church’s experiment in offering residency for promising young pastors. I went to see him, and then at his encouragement I wrote Craig Dykstra at the Lilly Endowment and we began to talk. By the end of 2002 we had a grant from Lilly to expand the program, which we came to call “Pathways to Ministry.”

The first grant permitted us to call the first seven residents, and the second grant in 2007 has provided for our having six more thus far.

We have been trying to raise an endowment ourselves to support the program after the grants, and we have raised about \$1.8M. But the dip in the market scared people, and it has been slow growing the last year or so. I know some members of the church have the program named in their wills for bequests when they die, and we offer opportunities in person and on the website to support it. Our goal is five million to keep the present scope of the program—Pathways to Ministry—and to expand it as we have additional resources.

***Q. That’s a good name for it—“Pathways to Ministry.”***

**A.** Yes. Understand that we borrowed it—with permission. St. Michael and All Angels, an Episcopal Church in Dallas, used it for a time of inquiry among youth. I told the rector I thought it was a great phrase and asked him if we could borrow it. He said, “Sure,” so we’ve called our program “Pathways” ever since.

***Q. Who are the residents now?***

**A.** Matt Marston, a Senior Resident (in his second year) is the youngest. He came straight out of Duke Divinity School—went there straight from college. He’s 26, and his ordination council was on his 26<sup>th</sup> birthday a couple of weeks ago. He is the son of a pastor. He is one of those people you say is “wise beyond his years.” He has a wonderful demeanor for ministry. He has the make-up of someone who knows how to do this work. A theological understanding. A pastoral sensitivity. Just the bearing about him. He gets it.

D.J. Reed is our other Senior Resident. He is somewhat non-traditional in his pilgrimage to us. He is bi-racial: father Anglo and mother Puerto Rican. He works to keep alive his Puerto Rican heritage, believing it to be important for himself, his family and his ministry. He has an American Baptist background, and also some Pentecostal roots. His wife is from the Brethren in Christ tradition, so he has some exposure to the Anabaptist heritage, too. He served a Methodist church and a Four-Square church while he went to seminary at Fuller. He was serving a more contemporary-style church here in Dallas when we called him. He’s expects to be in the North, or perhaps in Virginia. Perhaps a smaller church setting. He enjoys the church as community. He’s a very gregarious person, with a tremendous ability to see stories that link well to preaching and teaching.

Gannon Sims grew up in another Texas Baptist church, and many pushed him toward a conservative college. But he was reacting against the fundamentalist youth ministry of his home church, so he went to Baylor. He was twice student body president there, and he thought politics might be his vocation. He worked for Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison first, and then he worked with a government agency trying to stop human trafficking. He gained a sense of Christian social responsibility—a new edge for him. During that time he met his wife and they attended an Anglican church, fell in love, and they both decided to go to

seminary. They both graduated from Duke. His wife is doing Clinical Pastoral Education while he serves here.

He is a really good singer, too. He’s quite comfortable in front of crowds, from his political experience and his work arranging and helping lead meetings. His preaching and teaching evidence these things already.

Tasha Gibson, highly gifted, brings enormous energy and good will. An only child of parents who both worked at Lilly, she graduated from Howard and received a Master’s from NYU. She worked awhile and went to Duke. I met her when I was teaching a class there, and she spoke up. She continued the conversation, and she decided to come here. She’s our first African American resident, and we have a contract that she can tell us when anything here at a mostly white church makes her uncomfortable. Tasha makes everyone around her feel very important. She hadn’t preached much before, but her first effort was really a good one. She has poise and presence, and she has a commitment to do well.

***Q. Describe the program as it exists right now with you and the four residents.***

**A.** Four full-time residents work with us as part of the pastoral team and of the whole ministerial staff. Each comes for a two-year time, and ideally we have two in their first year and two more in their second year—all working together—as we do now.

They preach regularly, they teach, they visit in the hospitals and nursing homes, they sit on committees: they do all the work of ministry.

They learn on the job, but also with some “impunity.” They are not by themselves, as frequently pastors are in their first calls to churches. In this environment they can gain both confidence and competence in pastoral ministry.

We provide a pretty thick system of support, one with a number of ingredients—

Each has a “Host Family.” Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis did this, and we followed their lead. The host family provides hospitality—Sunday lunch sometimes or tickets to games once in a while. They make sure the residents’ holidays are “covered” well.

Residents are assigned a “Lay Advisory Group” when they come, five or six people carefully chosen. I select them in consultation with Geri McKenzie, the program administrator, and the residents going into their second year. Members

of the Lay Advisory Group try to be present for the many public acts of ministry. They also meet with the resident several times during the year and go through a kind of curriculum—agenda—to make sure they have opportunities to react to the varied experiences in ministry. They also are responsible to teach things like what it means to be a lay leader, how they put faith and work together, and how they conceive of the “priesthood of believers.”

Each resident, after being here a few months, also chooses a “Spiritual Friend,” who is a person to pray with and to speak with confidentially.

And we expect that the residents will support one another. You notice they are together in one office space with dividers. They have some personal space in their cubicles—but mostly the office space is an open one shared among all four of the residents.

We really expect them to work as a team, and with me as a team. And I spend more time with them than with other members of the pastoral staff. We work on preaching together, and they work in partnership with other pastors, with me, and with lay leaders visiting in hospitals and elsewhere.

They are equally responsible to Mark Wingfield, who is called “Associate Pastor” but really functions as an executive pastor here at Wilshire. Mark works regularly with them as a part of their support system as well.

As part of the support system, we depend upon the previous residents who come back for “Reunions.” As you might imagine, the graduates of the residency program—the alumni—are a big help teaching the current residents. They talk about their first calls after the residency, and the learning is significant in that group. The reunions also help in raising the endowment to keep it going, helps all of us be conscious of the need to sustain it.

The residency program is just part of what we call “Pathways to Ministry.” The reunions are another part.

***Q. What else is part of the “Pathway to Ministry”?***

**A.** High school students who choose to join our YourCall program work on matters of vocation as they study things like biblical interpretation, church history, worship, and Christian ethics. We do not try to push them toward pastoral ministry, but we help them study about it alongside other Christian vocations. It’s usually not hard to spot those whose eyes seem to light up when talking about things spiritual. That’s a tip that we might open questions with them about call.

We also have seminary interns, mostly during the summer. This summer, we just had one, but sometimes we have more. Our college internship program in the summer also helps students in the discernment process to get a taste of ministry.

***Q. What benefits accrue to Wilshire from the “Pathways to Ministry” program?***

**A.** First and most important, perhaps, all of us at Wilshire now think of ourselves as being a “Teaching Church.” We’re proud of it. That identity extends to our teaching one another as well as our teaching the residents and interns.

The members of the church are supportive of the residents—cheer them on. It makes them better members; and as they experience leadership in one of the Advisory Groups or as a person providing hospitality, they become more interested in their own vocations. Working with the theologically trained residents, the laypeople gain a theological vocabulary, pay closer attention to their own spiritual journeys, and gain new ways of perceiving the world that come naturally out of conversations and assessments. It’s a wonderful, reciprocal education for all of us.

For me it has meant stepping back, a chance to examine my particular gifts and focus on the preaching and teaching and public ministry. And the whole church gets to step into ministry. Many get more serious about their ministry, discipleship.

The rest of the staff has become more generalist in ministry as a result of the program. They take more responsibility for visiting, for leading in various activities and events. We love the unusual sets of responsibilities, for example. Now a minister of music is teaching family systems for the residents and others who want to learn. Mark Wingfield moderates the staff meetings and I’m there maybe once a month mostly as we plan ahead.

When the resident program started, some members of the staff at that time considered they would just get “extra help” from the residents in areas where they had responsibility. They didn’t necessarily treat the residents as colleagues. And now the staff relies on residents as a part of a collaborative team. I think it helps all of us work as a team.

And it means we all have become more tolerant of one another—we are more forgiving. And that’s really healthy.

***Q. What is the most enjoyable part of this Pathway to Ministry program for you personally?***

**A.** I love seeing the progress the residents make in gaining pastoral imagination in the art of ministry. Over two years, you can really see the maturity and the gains for all of them. And you can see our whole church making progress, too, in deepening our Christian commitment together. There really is a transformation involved, and it is fulfilling for me to see it.

You know, it’s not necessarily the “best and brightest” who become the best pastors. But we really have drawn gifted people into the residency program. You can see these pastors grow in ability to read a person, read a situation in a meeting, find the right words to be helpful to people in need.

***Q. And are there places where the program “pinches” you?***

**A.** Sometimes there’s part of this job that can be maddening: it’s when the tables get turned. I am supposed to be the mentor, and they are supposed to be the “mentees.” But if you’re going to have a real relationship it is going to be a reciprocal one. So, mutual accountability sometimes pinches me. If I want them to be on time, then they need expect me to be on time. And if they have to have assignments due, then I need to have those assignments read, and be prepared for meetings.

A part of it too is being willing to subject myself to critique. If we are going to be real colleagues here in a learning community, then I need to be vulnerable with them. Sometimes that means saying where I do not think I did very well, and why; where I wasn’t happy with a sermon; or where I failed in this or that particular pastoral role. I need to let them see me process that, how I deal with it. That teaches them how it works, and it also lets them be pastors to me. And it keeps me sharp and keeps me accountable. That’s a good thing for all of us.

***Q. And the tendency of things to cluster?***

**A.** Then, too, part of what’s involved is a kind of make a mutual agreement. We understand that in this work we are not in charge completely of our schedules. This is a work of interruptions, the life in the Spirit. We can prepare and plan, but there may be things that pile up in ministry. So perhaps we are to preach a sermon Sunday and officiate a wedding on Saturday night. Then someone dies and they need to have the funeral on Saturday morning. Or someone has a crisis

and we have to leave a family gathering. It’s easy to be overwhelmed, begin to feel sorry for ourselves.

So we have a “no whine” rule. We just have a saying, “This is what we do.” We can’t control things clustering. But we are in a vocation. It’s a profession. It’s not a job where you punch a time clock. You are available. There’s a pastoral life here. You don’t have a personal life over here and a professional life over there. It’s all one pastoral life. Who you are and what you do are intimately related because of the nature of the work.

**Q. *What are your dreams for this program?***

**A.** My dream is that we maintain a robust residency program of our own here at Wilshire, but that we will also become a center of learning. Because of our resources for teaching, other people—other churches—will be able to cultivate a residency or internship program, support young people in discerning their vocations, and generally have a sense of teaching healthy ministry and leadership. We could be a kind of resource center, a catalyst for other programs to begin. To that end, we are beginning a relationship with four other churches here in Dallas and one in Mobile to help them start residency programs. While each will employ a slightly different model, we are trying to train pastors and lay leaders in those churches in how to do this work as best we understand. They will have to identify their own ways of doing it, but we will help start their efforts. By giving them the benefit of what we learn, they might avoid the mistakes that would be costly to them. So they can have the most successful programs possible.

*Personal note from the interviewer: Members of the congregation and others on the pastoral staff, as I spoke with them, all voiced the pride and joy of being a “Teaching Church.” I prized my time among them, whether at a lunch with senior members after a choir practice or in private conversations with numbers of members and officers in the church. At the lunch, I could see the residents and the pastors “work the crowd,” using the words of one retired pastor sitting with me at table. In conversations with the parish nurse, the coordinator of the Pathways program, the mission pastor, and the support staff, everyone seemed enthusiastic concerning the special “teaching” identity the church is assuming and its effects on members and the wider community alike.*