

Starting pastors off on right foot: Lilly Endowment's Transition into Ministry program

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 24, 2009](#) issue

Many pastors remember struggling in their first ministerial position—isolated geographically or professionally, lacking ready access to mentors and peers. The first person to greet young Daniel Aleshire after he led his first worship service “told me my sermon was ‘the worst damn sermon’ he had ever heard.”

Aleshire was forewarned that the man was a troubled congregant. But the comments from the rest of the Baptist congregation months later “were so ambiguous that I was never sure how I was doing,” said Aleshire, now top executive at the Association of Theological Schools.

More than a decade ago, analysts of congregational ministry for the Lilly Endowment decided that seminarians’ customary year or nine months of internship at a church were not enough to prepare graduates for the pitfalls and anxieties facing a new pastor.

Lilly’s religion division in 1999 launched more than 30 Transition into Ministry (TiM) grant programs for Protestant seminary graduates that placed them in residency-like pastoral roles at sizable churches and provided other first-call pastors with an array of institution-based mentors and gatherings.

Some 800 new pastors have participated in the two-year transition programs run by mostly mainline Protestant congregations and denominations.

As of January, the Lilly Endowment had made grants totaling \$43.5 million for TiM, making it one of the endowment’s more ambitious efforts, according to Gretchen Wolfram, communications director.

Asked whether the current economic recession will force cutbacks, Craig Dykstra, senior vice president for religion, said in a statement that TiM “will continue for the

foreseeable future to be a key component of the Endowment's ongoing efforts to strengthen pastoral leadership for Christian congregations."

Two aims of the program, Dykstra said, are to develop and test new models of transforming seminary graduates into full-time pastors as well as to cultivate groups of "outstanding pastors" well prepared to lead congregations.

Another goal relates to questions of cost—for Lilly, and for seminary graduates who already have paid or owe a lot for their schooling. Dykstra said he hopes that insights from successful transition-into-ministry models would "encourage other congregations, seminaries, denominational offices and religious organizations to establish similar programs for new pastors."

Wolfram said that there will be "no cutbacks," although the grants "probably are not going to be on the scale of those earlier." It is hoped that the TiM experiments will continue to "generate excitement" and financial support for independent projects.

Polls tend to show that clergy rank among those professionals most satisfied with their work, but president James Wind of the Alban Institute contends that frustrations take their toll on beginning pastors. "They may stay in the ministry, but with heavy baggage—internalizing everything and developing bad habits in those crucial first years."

An upbeat interim report on TiM was published last August by the Alban Institute. Wind coauthored the 40-page report with David Wood, executive director of TiM. Wood said he was surprised to learn that the "most positive experience" for many participants was working with and learning from their peers.

Wood, a Baptist minister now living in Auburn, Maine, said in an interview that it is natural for "newcomers to compare notes with people going through the same experience." Moreover, Wood suggested that peer contacts are very important for "a younger generation that is much more into networking."

Lowell Michelson, 40, now senior pastor at a Lutheran church in Wichita, Kansas, that averages 200 at worship on weekends, said he enjoyed serving with two other transitioning pastors at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa.

While he admired the gifts and intuitions of senior pastor Peter Marty ("he has a great gut for ministry"), Michelson said it was rewarding to be "merging book

learning with parish ministry” in the company of fellow recent seminary graduates. “It helped to have someone to tell, ‘Hey, I think I just screwed up on that phone call.’”

Dallas-born Anne Jernberg, 28, now copastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Denver, graduated from Harvard Divinity School. Jernberg said in an interview that she was well prepared for a Baptist ministry by her two-year residency at Wilshire Baptist Church, an 1,800-member Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregation in Dallas. She served with four other TiM resident pastors under the guidance of senior pastor George Mason.

“The residency is a lifting of the curtain,” she said, “to see behind all the scenes . . . of pastoral counseling and committee disagreements, of financial struggles and celebrations.” She said Mason showed his own vulnerability and emotions, giving her and her colleagues “an accurate picture” of how painful yet joyous church life can be.

In experiencing a residency “in a healthy local church,” she said, “I gained the confidence and feedback I needed to hone all the skills I had and then had time to learn skills I didn’t have—understanding budgets, teaching children and working with deacons.”

TiM programs pick outstanding seminary graduates already viewed as potential church leaders, said Trace Haythorn, president of the Fund for Theological Education, based in Atlanta.

“Churches often had the assumption that new pastors needed to take their time until it was time to step up,” said Haythorn. But because so many baby boomer pastors are close to retirement, he said, “the demands of leadership are coming earlier than would have been expected in the past.”