

Frequently Asked Questions about a Ministry Residency Program¹

What is the difference between a Seminary Education and a Ministry Residency Program?

Seminary education leans more toward information. It stresses mastery of Biblical and theological knowledge. More preparatory in nature.

Residency education leans more toward formation. It stresses mastery of skills like preaching, pastoral care, congregational leadership, management, and administration. More participatory in nature.

What is the difference between an internship, seminary field education and a residency?

Internships are more about helping individuals explore ministry as a vocation. Interns get a taste for ministry, which help in the discernment process of a call to ministry.

Field Education closes the gap between the academy and the church, and leads students into a deeper engagement with congregational ministry and a more informed discernment process. A seminary enlists willing churches to receive seminarians and expose them to ministry in a congregational setting. Field education expectations vary from school to school, as does the duration of the internship (usually no longer than a year). Students and churches are accountable to seminary.

Ministry Residency Programs are usually two years in duration and residents are paid a stipend. Residents learn all aspects of being a pastor: preaching, administration, Christian education, outreach, pastoral care, conducting weddings and funerals, working with church council, deacons, finance and personnel committees, etc. Congregations play a crucial part in this formation of pastoral identity partly by loving residents into the pastoral role, entrusting themselves to the care of the resident, and providing encouragement and systematic feedback.

What characteristics does a church need in order to have a successful ministry residency program?

1. Willingness to be a “teaching congregation.” Using the medical model of “teaching hospitals” as a point of comparison, “teaching churches” provide opportunities for inexperienced but trained ministers to practice pastoral leadership under the watchful eye of more experienced practitioners. The congregation is willing to have less experienced ministers “practice” with them. A teaching church is also open for residents to ask the “why” question about what it does, and is willing to learn alongside the resident. Key lay people of the church are willing to take time with residents to guide them through the subtleties of church culture and polity.

¹ This document is heavily borrowed from George Mason’s *Preparing the Pastors We Need: Reclaiming the Congregational’s Role in Training Clergy* (Alban Institute: 2012). This book is the primer on Pastoral Residency Programs, based on the model established at Wilshire Baptist Church, a CBF congregation in Dallas, Texas.

2. A “healthy” congregation. Healthy congregations want to reproduce themselves and invest resources into raising up new pastors to lead other churches. Healthy congregations have a long record of holding together through times of dispute, and display an adventurous spirit to try new things. Healthy churches can keep stability and creativity in tension.
3. A Pastor who loves the work. The pastor should have a good relationship with the congregation and who has a proven track record of service. The pastor needs to have a strong enough sense of self to make room for the pastoral resident to celebrate the ministry of the younger pastor, to delight in his/her growth, to hear compliments from the congregation about the younger pastor without feeling threatened personally. The pastor should view the work of resident supervision as a central part of his/her ministry.
4. A clear mission. The congregation needs to be educated about the ministry residency and intentionally embrace the ministry residency program as integral to the church’s mission.
5. Adequate financial resources. “How much money does it take to do this?” That’s the first question many churches will ask, and it’s an important one. But it is not the most important question, because money follows mission, not the other way around. Whether financial support for a ministry residency program comes from a church’s budget, from special gifts, from grants and foundations, or from estate gifts by parishioners who generously planned ahead to support future generations of congregational leadership, a vision for work like this must first be in place. If the mission is right, it’s more likely the money will be right along when the time is right.