



# Becoming a **Pastor** — *Reflections on the Transition into Ministry*

## A Special Report by the Alban Institute

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This report seeks to call attention to a promising set of new experiments that share a common purpose and have the potential to make a collective impact on the way people enter pastoral ministry in the 21st century.

In distinctive ways, more than 30 project teams drew hundreds of new seminary graduates, a variety of denominational and judicatory leaders, a large number of congregations, several seminaries, and thousands of congregation members into a shared effort to change the experience of pastors at the thresholds of their ministries.

This report will identify some of the motivating concerns that gave rise to this effort and it will highlight significant discoveries that can lay the groundwork for long-term, systemic change in the way people are prepared for practical pastoral leadership.

The name for this collective endeavor is the Transition into Ministry initiative (TiM), an effort funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and participated in by a total of more than 700 beginning pastors. At its core this initiative seeks to reshape the preparation of Protestant pastors by supplementing the seminary training received in the M.Div. program with a focused apprenticeship in a “community of practice.”

Based on the assumption that pastors will be better prepared to lead congregations when they have had the opportunity to become reflective participants in a local community of practice, these projects seek to counter a two-centuries-long trend of viewing pastoral preparation as something that is largely completed upon graduating from seminary.

This report has three parts.

We begin with an introduction on the special challenge of the transition into ministry, which provides a context for viewing the 34 projects in this initiative. Then we turn to the projects themselves, describing their salient features and taking a closer look at a few. Finally, we conclude with a reflection on some of the significant discoveries from this initiative, which together form a foundation on which to build yet more new approaches to the work of preparing a new generation of pastoral leaders.

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## Why Should We Care? (from Part One)

What happens to people as they cross this threshold has great consequences.

For the individuals who step into pastoral ministry as their personal vocation, everything is at stake. Some new ministers fall in love with the ministry, find a life's work that gives them great satisfaction, and construct a way of life and a web of relationships of the greatest personal meaning and value. Others never find the joy in ministry and experience their early years as an ordeal that leads to depression, breakdown, even resignation.

Many, if not most, clergy live in between the two poles, experiencing an oscillating mixture of high and low moments and emotions.

In all cases, characters are set, expectations met or dashed, career paths determined, habits of pastoral practice established, family lives patterned, and worldviews and life stances confirmed in this liminal period of moving into a role and an environment not of one's own making.

For those in congregations who call these newcomers into positions of leadership and responsibility, the stakes are equally high.

Will this new pastor be someone I can trust and relate to? Will she respond creatively, competently, and faithfully to the crises, challenges, and opportunities present in the life of the congregation as a community and in the individual lives of those who live and move within it? Will this person incarnate the Gospel and mediate grace? Will he be a spiritual companion and friend able to help a congregation discern its calling and fulfill its mission in the world?

Or will this pastor crush hope, fail to connect, flounder in confusion, and hold the congregation back?

Given the enormous energies, time, and resources that go into most "call" processes or appointments of new pastors, these are questions that impact the health and hope of congregations and denominations at many levels.

For those in the wider world around these congregations—who may be oblivious to these pastoral comings and goings—there is a great deal at stake as well.

Will these pastors flourish and build congregations of people that love the neighbor, practice compassion, contend for justice, and contribute to the healing of the world? Or will these pastors struggle, lose heart, and fail to call forth all that their congregations have to give to their neighborhoods, communities, and the wider world? More concretely, will there be meals available for the hungry, clothing and jobs for the poor, shelter for the homeless, and other tangible acts of mercy and justice offered to the community and wider world, or not?

### Paying Attention to the Transition

With so much at stake in this transition, it is important first to understand why it has become so difficult in the past half century, and then to search for the best ways to help new pastors negotiate it successfully. For many reasons, the transition into ministry has become more complex and, for many, more lonely. The experiments we report on here offer specific examples of ways to provide missing infra-structures of support and practical education (which we call communities of practice) which demonstrate that it is possible to change some of the dynamics of the contemporary transition experience.

This report focuses on one coordinated effort to pay attention to this pivotal season in the life of a pastor. In the pages that follow, we report on the experience of more than 700 new pastors, a corresponding number of congregations, many pastoral staff members and teams of resource providers from at least 11 Protestant

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denominations, thousands of individual congregational members, as well as several seminaries, judicatories, and educational agencies, who together have focused new energy and attention on the process of threshold crossing from seminary to first call. Working in a variety of ways, these individuals and institutions are part of a shared initiative supported by Lilly Endowment Inc.

Begun in 1999, the initiative is titled simply "Transition into Ministry." This initiative brought a range of participants, denominations, and strategies into a shared endeavor to improve the way that graduating seminarians make these pivotal transitions.

Taken together, this collection of projects can be seen as a significant new approach to the formation of pastoral leaders for American Protestant congregations.

While it is too early to measure the full impact of this effort, and while there is much important future work yet to be mounted, there are significant early discoveries in these projects that merit consideration by those who care about the future of the church's ministry.

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### The Alban Institute

For more than thirty years the Alban Institute has been an independent center of learning and leadership development that serves as a major resource for American congregations facing the challenges of a changing society.

Today the opportunities have never been clearer for congregations to be vital communities of faith, health, and leadership.

As an independent center for learning and collaboration, crossing boundaries of denominations and faiths, the Alban Institute is helping shape the strong congregations of tomorrow by building up congregations and their leaders to be agents of grace and transformation to shape and heal the world.

We do that by interpreting, synthesizing, and generating knowledge and making it available to congregational leaders in ways that are accessible and motivating through consulting, publishing, research, and education programs.

We are a trusted voice with valued approaches to learning and leadership development. As a safe place to do vital work and help people make connections with peers and learning facilitators, the Alban Institute helps create vibrant learning communities.

The Alban Institute is located in greater Washington, D.C.

For further information visit [www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org).

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### Lilly Endowment Inc.

Lilly Endowment Inc. is an Indianapolis-based, private philanthropic foundation created in 1937 by three members of the Lilly family—J.K. Lilly Sr. and sons J.K. Jr. and Eli—through gifts of stock in their pharmaceutical business, Eli Lilly and Company.

In keeping with the wishes of the three founders, Lilly Endowment exists to support the causes of religion, education and community development. The Endowment affords special emphasis to projects that benefit young people and promote leadership education and financial self-sufficiency in the nonprofit, charitable sector.

In recent years Lilly Endowment's religion grantmaking has been focused on major, interlocking efforts aimed at enhancing and sustaining the quality of ministry in American congregations and parishes. The Endowment has focused on supporting programs and projects that address four broad questions: How do we identify, recruit and call forth a new generation of talented Christian pastors? How do we best prepare and train new ministers for effective and faithful pastoral leadership? How do we improve the skills and sustain the excellence of pastors currently serving congregations? What are basic questions about the current state of the practice of ministry that we need to answer to improve the quality of ministry?

Responding to these questions prompts a series of important additional questions that must also be explored and addressed in order to make progress in this arena. These include questions about these topics: the characteristics of vital and healthy congregations; the knowledge, skills and practices of faithful and effective pastors; the ways the Christian faith is transmitted to the next generation; how young people are encouraged to explore their faith and consider ministry as their life's work; the shape of theological education; how to get new pastors off to a good start; the experiences necessary to renew and sustain enthusiasm and excellence in the ministries of established pastors; and the role religion has played and continues to play in the lives of individuals as well as in American society.

The Endowment's efforts are based on several convictions about what is essential for supporting and sustaining strong and vital congregations. The first is that the quality of pastoral leadership is critical to the health of congregations. When well-prepared, thoughtful, imaginative, able and caring pastors lead congregations, these communities of faith tend to thrive.

Theological education is absolutely pivotal, and seminaries play a critical role in preparing pastors for their leadership in congregations. Theological schools engage students in an exploration of the wisdom of the Christian tradition and train pastors how to bring biblical and theological insights to bear on contemporary issues.

There also is ecology of institutions, including congregations, regional and national judicatories, colleges and universities, seminaries, independent agencies, retreat and conference centers, publishers and other supporting organizations, that must work collaboratively in addressing challenges and in maintaining strong and vibrant religious traditions and communities.

Major research projects support these efforts and provide a solid portrait of 21st century American society and church life. This base of information enables pastors and religious leaders to make informed decisions about their ministries and the broader public to understand more deeply the role of religion in American life.

In summary, the Endowment supports efforts:

- to deepen and enrich the religious lives of American Christians, primarily by helping strengthen their churches;

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- to support the recruitment and education of a new generation of talented ministers and other religious leaders;
- to encourage theological reflection and religious practices that recover the wisdom of the Christian tradition for our contemporary situation;
- to support scholars and educators who seek to help the American people better understand contemporary religion and the role it plays in our public and personal lives; and
- to strengthen the contributions that religious ideas, practices, values and institutions make to the common good of our society.

For further information visit [www.lillyendowment.org](http://www.lillyendowment.org).

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### Transition into Ministry Program (TiM)

The Transition into Ministry (TiM) grant program was launched in the fall of 1999 by the Fund for Theological Leadership and was designed to fund projects that focused squarely on the first years of ministry and engaged directly the transition of seminary graduates from the classroom to the local congregation.

The Transition into Ministry grants program is an effort of the Lilly Endowment to strengthen pastoral leadership in congregations by supporting programs that help young pastors move through the difficult transition from student to pastor. The ultimate goal is to nurture and foster leadership habits and practices in new pastors that will enrich and strengthen congregational life. Furthermore, it is hoped that this effort will assist seminaries, denominations, and congregations as they seek to raise up a new generation of pastors.

In all, thirty programs dealing with the Transition into Ministry grant program are currently funded by the Lilly Endowment. There are more than 700 participants (past and present) in these programs: 150 in Congregation-Based Residency programs and approximately 600 in Institution-Based First Call programs.

The Fund for Theological Leadership, created in 1954 when leading educators, clergy and philanthropists joined together out of concern that the quality of those entering the ministry had declined and that the best and brightest students were choosing other careers, is a leading ecumenical advocate for excellence and diversity in Christian ministry and theological scholarship. Their work supports the next generation of leaders among pastors and scholars. They provide fellowships and a network of support to gifted young people from all denominations and racial/ethnic backgrounds—encouraging those with gifts for leadership to consider vocations in ministry and teaching and nurturing them in their exploration and study.

For further information visit [www.transitionintoministry.org](http://www.transitionintoministry.org).

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### The Reverend Dr. James P. Wind

The Reverend Dr. James P. Wind is president of the Alban Institute. Dr. Wind is a prominent voice in the wider conversation about the role of religion in America and the value of congregations.

He has written two books (*The Bible and the University: The Messianic Vision of William Rainey Harper* and *Places of Worship: Exploring Their History*) and co-edited five others (*Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies*, *Clergy Ethics in a Changing Society*, *New Dimensions in American Religious History*, and *American Congregations, volumes 1 and 2*). He has also published numerous articles and reviews in a wide variety of journals and magazines, including a regular column in *Congregations* magazine. His most recent publications are *The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations: An Alban Institute Special Report* (September 2001) and *Finding a New Voice: The Public Role of Mainline Protestantism* (December 2001) which was written in conjunction with the Aspen Institute.

Dr. Wind has served as president of the Alban Institute since 1995. He also serves on the board of directors of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, the board of the Cathedral College of Washington National Cathedral, and the advisory board of *Religion & Ethics News Weekly*, the PBS weekly news program that premiered the fall of 1997.

An ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, he served as a pastor (full- and part-time) at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois from 1978 to 1990. Prior to coming to the Alban Institute, Dr. Wind served as Program Director, Religion Division, at Lilly Endowment.

From 1985 to 1990, Dr. Wind served as Director of Research and Publications and Senior Associate of the Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics in Chicago, Illinois. From 1981 to 1984, Dr. Wind was a Research Associate at the Divinity School's Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion, where he was Director of the Evaluation of the Study of Congregations.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, he lives in Reston, Virginia, with his wife, Kathleen. They have two children, Joshua and Rachel.

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### Reverend David J. Wood

David J. Wood has been the coordinator of the Fund for Theological Education's Transition into Ministry Program since January 2002 after completing a three-year term as associate director of the Louisville Institute, a Lilly Endowment program for the study of American religion based at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

An American Baptist pastor, David has served as youth minister, associate minister, college chaplain and senior pastor in a variety of settings, including a year on the ministerial staff of The American Church of Paris, France.

He earned a bachelor's degree from Oral Roberts University, a Master of Divinity with honors from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a Master of Sacred Theology from Yale University Divinity School.

He was a Merrill Fellow at Harvard University Divinity School in 1996. He has lectured and published a number of articles on religious leadership in a changing culture, including "Where Are the Younger Clergy?", which appeared in both *Congregations* and *Christian Century* magazines.

David directs the Transition into Ministry Program from his new home in Maine, where he has returned to pastoral ministry in a local congregation.

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### Q & A with Rev. Dr. James P. Wind and Rev. David J. Wood

**Question:** What is at stake with the transition into ministry?

*Jim Wind:*

I think the phrase “transition into ministry” captures an enormous moment in the life of the Christian community. It is often thought of as the simple process by which a person moves from being a seminary student to being a pastor in a congregation. Although that is the heart of the meaning of the phrase so much more is going on.

When a person makes that shift, many things are happening. First, an individual moves from being a student and a learner about a religious tradition to being the leader of a real flesh and blood community. That is an enormous change that has gotten more difficult and complex over time.

A second thing that is at stake here are the local religious communities that receive new pastors. How that transition goes will depend much on whether each local congregation is a well-functioning place, a happy place, an effective place—a place where faith is alive. We see in all too many cases that those transitions do not go well and these congregations flounder. They lose their sense of purpose; people are disillusioned, all sorts of things happen.

A third thing that happens in the transition into ministry is that the faith tradition renews itself or at least has the opportunity to. When a new generation of leaders rise to take their turn at leading the Christian community, what’s really going on is a fresh moment where the tradition either finds a way to come to life again in new circumstances or doesn’t.

The transition into ministry is also important for people who never set foot in a congregation because if the new minister entering the congregation really comes alive to the role, and if the congregation really gels with that new minister, then the world is changed. Hungry people will get fed. Poor people will have opportunities to make a living. Illiterate people will learn how to read. Financial resources will be redirected. Communities will be healed, and lives will be made richer.

These are things to consider as we strive to help a person move from being a seminarian to being a full-fledged pastoral leader.

*David Wood:*

I would add that from the standpoint of these beginning postures, that we think there is a lot at stake in terms of how they learn the ministry. Though somewhat theoretical at this point, there is increasing evidence that shows how one learns ministry is how one ends up performing ministry over the long term.

The more attention we pay to how one learns the ministry in these earliest days will establish, we think, patterns of performance that will play out over a lifetime.

Learning ministry in a way that performs it qualitatively or performs it well is really what we’re trying to get at in this report. In mainline Protestantism so little attention has been paid to how ministry has been learned that I believe there is good reason to think that this is really having a detrimental effect on the overall quality of the ministry in the church.

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The attention we pay to young pastors will affect the ongoing quality of ministry.

**Question:** **What did you find out about the role of the seminary in this transition and the role of the congregation and the new pastor?**

*Jim Wind:*

I think there was a division of labor that had been accepted for several generations that has got called into question in this study. The seminary sort of prepared people for the job. Then people sort of plunged into ministry in a congregational setting, often sink or swim, and had to figure it out on their own.

The genius of the Transition into Ministry (TiM) Project funded by the Lilly Endowment is that we've had a chance to watch and learn about the Biblical and theological tradition in an academic setting but also examine the moment of truth that comes when young pastors begin in the practice of ministry.

For example when doing a funeral, classroom study of Biblical texts about the resurrection from the dead is certainly needed, but how and where you actually learn to communicate those texts to a grief-stricken family is an entirely different enterprise.

In the Transition into Ministry Project we've been recovering the old-time wisdom of the church— not uncritically, but recovering a wisdom that says you learn how to minister by doing the ministry with other people. There is a practical wisdom that you can only learn by practicing it— not just by hearing about it in a classroom.

We have watched congregations and the pastors of congregations take on a role of educating new pastors through mentoring and teaching a practical knowledge. These experiences provide an opportunity to gain wisdom that you just can't get in the classroom.

**Question:** **What excited you most about the findings of this report?**

*David Wood:*

I think one of the most exciting things was to learn how important this experience was to these beginning pastors. We've received testimony upon testimony from these young pastors, most of whom are very well qualified to begin with.

All of them will wax eloquently about the importance of working alongside peers as well as others who are more experienced in the work of ministry. They all talk about how crucial this context for learning was for them and how convinced they are that this window of experience is going to have a permanent impact on their performance over many years.

Regardless of what each student's individual gifts and abilities were going into the Transition into Ministry Program, each came to realize that they were much better equipped to become teachers of ministry themselves because of the practical experience they gained learning at the side of others who are teachers who are actually in ministry.

**Question:** **With the release of this report what are your expectations for the audiences that read it and the impact it may have out there in the world?**

*Jim Wind:*

I think there are several distinct groups that will benefit by the findings of this study.

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First, the people who have been doing this work themselves. There hundreds of people—pastoral students, mentors, and those conducting research on the transition process—who can become energized by the findings in this report.

The study lifts up a great significance of what they've done and provides affirmation that they have contributed to something that has a value beyond their own experience.

Secondly, we hope that congregations will read this and ask themselves how they can contribute much more intentionally and creatively in the shaping of the next generation of their leaders.

Thirdly are denominations and their leaders. The Alban Institute has been around for more than 30 years, and one of the things that we've watched is how much pain denominations have gone through trying to negotiate this transition into ministry.

The Transition into Ministry report brings great news for those denominations. Where the moment of change from student to pastor was often regarded as a great problem, it can now be seen as an enormous opportunity for growth—personal growth of the seminarian who is becoming a pastor, for pastoral leaders who have undervalued themselves in terms of their ability to teach about ministry, and for congregations to say they really do have a stake in this and a role to play.

One of the great joys for me has been learning about how congregations have come to a new sense of themselves and a new sense of energy by engaging in intentional efforts to try to help pastors become more effective and creative and healthy leaders.

*David Wood:*

The Transition into Ministry Program provides an opportunity for a new dialogue between students, seminaries, congregations and denominations. As people enter into the ministry or participate in the many aspects of pastoral formation, the Transition into Ministry program opens up a wonderful arena for collaboration.

**Question:**

**So where do we go from here? What are the next steps?**

*David Wood:*

We have a Transition into Ministry website that goes deeper into all of the different programs that are talked about in the report. There will also be increasing amounts of testimony posted there along with resources for people who want to go deeper into either one of these programs or into the Transition into Ministry experience as a whole.

Alban is establishing a blog that will make this report available for anybody that wants to download it and that will also provide a context for interaction around the report. We hope it will be a real meeting place for people who want to learn more about our findings.

*Jim Wind:*

I think we're looking for ripples out from what we're reporting on. My hope is that this report will be discussed in seminary faculty sessions and in seminary boardrooms, and that a lot of thought will be given in the seminary communities about how they can build on the great things that we have learned how to do and now find ways to creatively engage the world to practice in new ways.

I hope that the report triggers echoes of the kind of creativity and agency that we saw in the people who participated in these projects themselves.

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One of the great stories in this Transition into Ministry work is that a whole group of denominations, congregations, seminaries and other institutions moved out of habitual patterns—through hand wringing and frustration—and are now trying to patch up things that didn't seem to be working.

*David Wood:*

These new collaborations have also relieved much of the finger pointing and blame that has arose from congregations not happy with new pastors.

*Jim Wind:*

In the Transition into Ministry Project all kinds of people tried to do new things. Each took responsibility and tried to learn together and to create new patterns – new patterns for old congregations and new patterns between the denominations and the new pastors.

Establishing new patterns is of incredible importance—one of the most important things we've learned in this effort. I hope that many denominations and seminaries will read this and see opportunities to develop new programs and new strategies that could better serve their entering pastors.

I also think that local congregations, their established clergy, and new clergy will learn from the lessons provided in this report and foster new ways to work together towards ministries that can be truly life-giving.

*David Wood:*

Another thing that has really surfaced in this program has been, not a diminishment of the importance of mentors, elders, and more experienced practitioners, but also how important it is to have peers in learning, those who are at one – at the level of beginner.

Working together and learning from each other is probably the most singular, positive experience named by participants in these programs. They feel like that experience of having peers who are learning alongside them makes the mentoring experience that much more important and effective.

I think to many of us learned ministry either on our own or we didn't learn it with the sense of the importance of being connected to others who are our peers. I think for many of us we lost something in that absence, and I am happy to see that this generation of pastors seems more partnered in mission and has a desire to share ideas.

Those partnerships are now being translated into one of the most significant ways in how one learns ministry, and the young pastors who have learned through the Transition into Ministry experience claim an ongoing plan for peer mentorship in their pastoral careers.

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For further information or to request a copy of the special report from the Alban Institute contact Bob Todd at [bt@bobtoddpublcity.com](mailto:bt@bobtoddpublcity.com).

Additional resources can be found at <http://alban-transitionintoministry.org> and <http://www.transitionintoministry.org>