

# No Program? No Problem. Nurturing Vocation through Mentoring and Friendship



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BY HILLARY WICAI

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine the following ad appearing on Monster.com:

Young, energetic, well-educated, thoughtful communicators and counselors needed. Must be willing to work very long hours, including nearly all weekends and holidays, in a low-prestige, low-paid job with little room for promotion.

No church would ever advertise a ministerial position that way. But churches need young ministers, and any current minister would likely agree that the demanding job description isn't that far off.

Smaller churches are likely to be the first affected by a ministerial shortage, and some are already finding themselves without a minister. In a recent study, researcher Patricia Chang showed that smaller or rural congregations remain the most vulnerable to pastoral vacancies. Yet smaller congregations also "account for the vast majority of Protestant churches" in the United States.

This means that small congregations must be proactive about recruiting and retaining young ministers. Larger churches, however, have the staff, space and budgets to launch recruitment programs and well-funded internships. So what are smaller churches to do?

The Reverend David J. Wood, Coordinator of the Transition into Ministry Program, a Lilly Endowment initiative coordinated through the Fund Theological Education, wrote in 2001 that if "even 10 percent of current clergy committed themselves to apprenticing one young person into the ministry, the tide would begin to turn." It's now 2006 and it's not clear if the tide is turning. Perhaps less than 10 percent are heeding Wood's advice.

Happily, however, at least some are taking his advice. This is a look at a three ministers who demonstrate that not all solutions to the problem have to be program-oriented or reliant on substantial financial resources. These pastors help young people hear the call through one-on-one mentoring and other relational approaches that would be particularly well-suited to small congregations.

**DR. SAM MORRIS**

*First Methodist Church  
Columbus, Mississippi*

## Giving the call a chance

**L**OCATED ON THE TOMBIGBEE RIVER, historic Columbus, Mississippi is home to the Mississippi University for Women, the first residence of American playwright Tennessee Williams, and the First Methodist Church of Columbus, Mississippi.

Organized in 1823, First Methodist is the oldest church body in Columbus. It survived the Civil War, where parts of its tin roof provided material for Confederate soldiers' canteens. The church then made it through Reconstruction by instituting a method of pew rental to pay off its debt. First Methodist has a history of dealing creatively with crises. That's just one reason why Dr. Sam Morris fits in so well.

"I always knew somewhere deep inside that [ministry] was what I supposed to do," Morris says. "I can remember going home as a little boy after hearing missionaries and wondering who would carry that message." Morris's parents were very involved in church. But hearing his own call to ministry ended up being difficult, even for a kid whose parents were so active in the congregation.

Morris' father died when his son was only 12. "He was a large figure in my life," Morris says. The death of his dad amounted to a faith-shaking experience. "I prayed outside my dad's hospital room, but he died." The loss helped catalyze Morris's self-described "serious rebellion." Reeling from his father's death, he deduced that God must not love him. "I was an angry kid trying to make God show up," he recalls.

But a long list of people didn't give up on Morris, including his mother, his pastor and a few girls in his church youth group on whom he had crushes. They asked him to go on a retreat. He went—because of his crush. On the retreat, however,

Morris heard a voice: “You’ve been looking for me, but you’ve been looking in wrong places. Give me a chance.”

For a kid who’s lost his dad, it can take more than one encounter with the Spirit to change a mind, let alone behavior. A couple of weeks following the retreat, Morris was about to party and carry on with a buddy when he heard the voice again: “Why don’t you give me a chance?”

Unsettled, Morris went to his pastor’s house. It was midnight. He wanted to tell his pastor about these experiences and to let him know that he wished to do what God wanted him to do. The pastor’s wife came to the door. She listened and must have passed the message on to her husband, because at 7 o’clock the next morning, Morris’s pastor came to visit him. From that moment on, he mentored Morris into ministry. He even took Morris and the rest of the church youth group with him when he preached revivals.

And when Morris became a full-time minister himself, taking young people with him on preaching visits as his own pastor had done seemed only natural.

### **Coffee houses and impromptu preaching**

“There’s no lack of people being called. There’s a lack of nurture.” So goes Morris’s basic philosophy of vocational invitation. In the years before Morris became its pastor, First Methodist of Columbus did not see any of its members go into ministry. But over the past three years, the church has helped nurture a lay minister, has one student attending seminary, and is working with another who’s considering it.

And that’s just the last three years. Over the course of his career, Morris estimates that at least 70 young people have gone into ministry because of his mentoring. “I’m almost embarrassed to say that,” he says. “I feel really grateful to God to be part of the lives of people going into ministry.”

When asked about the secrets of his success, Morris says there is no one “right” way that works with everyone considering a call to ministry. Different people need different approaches. And each new generation demands new strategies for meeting and mentoring youth. Over the years, Morris has changed his habits of vocational mentoring to dovetail with the kind of young people he has in his church and to fit with their own communities and interests.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, when there weren’t many successful youth programs, Morris started a coffee house for young people. That led to invitations to other churches and coffee houses, and that’s when Morris started bringing young people with him to these bigger venues. “I discovered churches really liked that. They really responded to the young people.” He encouraged the youth to tell the congregations their stories about why they felt called and what they hoped to do in the future. “It is a story worth telling, and telling it sometimes leads others to a life-changing experience. That’s how they come to understand their call,” Morris explains.

Morris recognized that getting up in front of others and allowing yourself to be transparent could be intimidating. “It does take a kind of push,” he says. So he pushed.

Morris would tell his students, “We’re not out there to fix anyone else; we’re out there to share how God’s been working in our lives.” Morris believes they found it freeing to see that they didn’t have to know all the answers.

David White graduated from high school in 1973 and participated in one of the first groups of young people mentored by Morris. White still remembers the first time Morris asked him to preach. They were only ten minutes from the church they were visiting. “I was sixteen when he did that. I was terrified,” White remembers.

Morris remembers the relief on White’s face when he explained to the terrified youth that all he needed to do was tell his own story. “It’s not about being smooth and polished. It’s about opportunity,” Morris says. He knew they weren’t particularly ready to be preachers, but he encouraged them “to step beyond their fear and be willing to speak.”

White remembers the respect that Morris accorded him. “He really saw it was important to integrate the emerging capacities of young people. He didn’t see young people as future ministers; he saw them as ministers now—for other young people and also for adults,” says White. In doing so, Morris also showed the congregation that their youth “had significant gifts for the church and the healing of the world.” In other words, White says, Morris elevated the role of youth in the congregations they touched.

White went on to become an ordained Methodist minister and served as a youth minister for 25 years. Currently he is the C. Ellis Nelson

Associate Professor of Christian Education at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

None of this kind of work is possible without knowing the young people well. Morris met and continues to meet with them—a lot. At Bible studies, he often puts away his lessons just to talk with the youth. When he meets with them, he rarely stands in the pulpit and preaches. Ministry to youth “needs to be informal,” he explains.

### **Empowering—and leaning on—the congregation**

It also needs to be frequent and immediate.

“At the Ash Wednesday service, one of the young guys who’s responding to a call had lots of questions,” Morris says. It may have been a busy Holy Week, but Morris still made the time to answer those questions before they grew cold.

Morris knows that being available in this way remains vital but difficult. Many church members need their pastor, and for many different reasons. Older members with health care problems, for example, often want their pastor’s time. Morris admits he has to rely on lay leaders for those needs to be met.

That kind of reliance on lay leaders doesn’t have to be a weakness. It can be a real asset. When Morris leans on his congregants to meet some pastoral duties, his trust in their competence is empowering. “[It’s] caused people to become much more involved, and it’s helped them see their own gifts and callings—given them a boldness to step out and do things they wouldn’t have done,” says Anne Russell Bradley, a church member and one of the young students Morris is mentoring.

Under Morris’s mentorship, Bradley began considering becoming a lay speaker in the denomination. When she talked about that opportunity with Morris, he suggested she reach for more. “Now I’m in process of becoming a candidate for ordination,” Bradley reports. “He was the one who saw that call in me and put me on that path. He’s not afraid to do that.” Perhaps some leaders are wary of that kind of investment, but Sam Morris is not one of those leaders. “Sam is not afraid to see people’s potential and pull that out of them,” Bradley says.

But Morris admits he no longer has the time

for the trips he took with young people years ago. Instead, he says he now pays extra attention to his 32-year-old youth pastor. He also relies on other’s observations about whom to watch. When one member recommended he keep an eye on a particular young woman, Morris followed up and then asked to see her. “No one had ever asked her if God had called her,” Morris says. So he posed that very question. “It just started her on the path to thinking about it.”

And although Morris says that he loves preaching—he will only admit to being “okay at it”—he knows that his most effective ministry is not in the pulpit before large groups. It’s about one-on-one relationships.

“It’s always been about pouring myself into

a few who are in turn going to pour themselves into others.

It reproduces itself,” Morris says. Relational mentoring is a ministry that operates behind the scenes most of the time.

But the results—a cadre of young leaders with a passion for pastoral ministry—are making a visible and lasting difference in the lives of multiple congregations, both now and for years to come.

**“No one had ever asked her if God had called her,” Morris says. So he posed that very question.**

### **“They’re already ministers”**

When asked to talk about the larger picture of his ministry, Morris reiterates that his habits are less programmatic than relational. His basic approach remains simple: help young people recognize that they are already ministers. Over the years he consistently has gone to where young people are: coffee houses in the 1970s, youth groups today. He is not afraid to push youth while simultaneously reassuring them that they don’t need all the answers. And when Morris treats them as ministers, young people see themselves that way as well.

In the end, this kind of ministry would not be possible without Morris’s continued willingness to rely on the congregation for help. Without the extra time that lay volunteers give him, Morris wouldn’t be able to answer the calls and emails, or to visit with young people who need to explore vocational questions. “If my minister hadn’t come over and stayed with me through the years—where would I be? It’s a process that takes a lot

of mediation and a lot of hours,” Morris says.

Inviting young people into a life of service does not require ample money or resources. Morris’s mentoring work provides an excellent example. If the pastor is willing to spend the time, and the congregation is willing to give him or her that time by shouldering some of the pastor’s duties, then a congregation has all it needs for excellent vocational development: a mentor with a passion for good ministry and curious young people eager to learn what it’s like to follow in their pastor’s footsteps.



THE REVEREND JIM TIPPINS  
Summit Heights Baptist Church  
Powdersville, South Carolina

### New kid on the block

SUMMIT HEIGHTS BAPTIST CHURCH in Powdersville, South Carolina is just seventeen years old. At the church’s inception, members met in a local high school. Then they shared facilities with four other congregations before constructing their own building in 1998. Located in the middle of growing housing developments, Summit Heights is still young. And at 250 members, or 90 families, it is still a relatively new kid on the block.

Newness doesn’t scare Summit Heights’ senior pastor, the Reverend Jim Tippins: he’s used to being the new kid. His dad was in the Army. So Tippins grew up moving a lot and learning different cultures and perspectives. “Moving gives a certain take on building relationships quickly,” he says.

Through all the moves and into college, music remained one of the few constants in Tippins’ life. It was music that opened new doors for him. While in college majoring in music, he took a part-time job at a church as the student director of the college choir. Through that job he got to know students doing mission work. “The friends I made were clear and joyful in their faith and in their lives,” he says. “They were a real inspiration to me. I wanted that same type of relationship with God. From that point, my life really changed in terms of friends and practice,” Tippins says.

This was quite a change for him. Moving frequently had made Tippins a bit of a rebel. He was kicked out of high school during his senior year for alcohol abuse. So hanging with a bunch of students doing mission work was different. “Some of my old friends were very suspicious and antagonistic about [me] making such changes and doing things different,” Tippins recalls.

Bucking the expectation of peers is never easy. But Tippins says such a transition became possible for him thanks to additional positive influences. “All along I was involved with pastors and churches who encouraged me.” He worked at a church as a youth minister during and after college. One minister took Tippins with him on hospital visits. Another took him to Southern Seminary in

Louisville, just to see if he liked it. He did. Tippins decided to attend Southern Seminary. The church where he worked during and after college helped him pay for classes and books.

After seminary, Tippins served congregations in Louisville and St. Louis. He also worked with students entering and exiting the seminary. While in St. Louis, Tippins got a phone call about Summit Heights. The congregation had just started meeting. This was a whole new church, not the offshoot of an earlier schism. Tippins has been at Summit Heights ever since. But he's never forgotten those who helped him—even as a new kid on the block—turn his life in a different direction. Nor has he forgotten their methods.

### Turning members into ministers

A layperson at Summit Heights recently wrote an assessment of the way things work at the church: “Belief and teaching makes an impact and turns members into ministers.”

Turning members into ministers is no small task—but Summit Heights has turned out 34 vocational ministers. They are chaplains, campus ministers, and missionaries. Ten are pastors of churches. “We’ve helped them discover their gifts,” Tippins says.

Young people are encouraged to take part in the work of Summit Heights, like helping single women move, aiding widows, reading scripture or offering prayers. The church has an AIDS/HIV ministry and offers a ministry to carnival workers when they pass through the area. The youth go on a mission trip every year. They help with Bible school. In each of these instances, Tippins points out the obvious. “What we’ve been doing is ministry,” he tells the young people.

Then he asks the important follow-up question, “Do you feel compelled to do it more?” Two years ago, while speaking at a youth camp for 600 kids, 150 of those in attendance indicated they were interested in ministry when Tippins asked this question.

When your ministry involves turning members into ministers, individual talents start to come out of the woodwork. One of the church’s youth members spoke Spanish fluently and ended up translating during the mission trip. Tippins

makes it a point to notice such gifts. “Some of these kids don’t have anybody that tells them they’re making a difference. This church tells them that,” he says.

This happens despite the fact that Summit Heights didn’t launch a youth program until recently. “This church is young,” Tippins explains. “We didn’t develop a youth program until the church was ten years old. So we’re not really growing them up yet.” But, he adds, even without a formal youth program, “young people get the opportunity to be involved in ministry.... I wish we had more programs, but they catch it,” he says.

The youth “catch it”—a passion for ministerial service—because they see good ministry modeled

by other young people. Summit Heights has a free resource at its disposal: it sits close to several colleges and universities, including Furman University, Clemson University and Anderson College. Furman’s Church Related Vocations program has sent more than twenty college interns to serve at Summit Heights. Tippins regularly visits Clemson and

Anderson students as well; he does so through Young Life, Baptist Student Ministries and Campus Crusade. When these college youth get involved at Summit Heights, they help make ministry accessible to other young people. And they make love of ministry contagious.

“The young people see these [college] students and this church in action and see that it’s authentic,” Tippins says.

### Spending your “capital” wisely

“It is something special,” agrees Brad Sheppard, a chaplain at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Sheppard spent three years at Summit Heights as both an active member and an intern while studying church-related vocations at Furman. “I’m amazed how congregations don’t take advantage of colleges being in their neighborhood. What works there is not just about Jim; the congregation also embraces it,” Sheppard says.

In addition to reaching out to the young people at nearby campuses, Tippins reaches out to the local high school and middle school. He’s a first

**“Some of these kids don’t have anybody that tells them they’re making a difference. This church tells them that.”**

responder if the school experiences a tragedy. He sits in the school library. The students see him. They know who he is and that they can go to him with questions about anything. After a young person recently committed suicide, Tippins fielded questions from a friend of the victim: does someone who takes his own life go to hell? The friend had heard that belief expressed at a funeral. “Sometime preachers say things they shouldn’t,” Tippins told him. Honesty, even in the most difficult of circumstances, remains key to developing trust with the area’s youth.

Sheppard knows that this kind of honesty allows Tippins, in turn, to ask tough questions about being called.

Tippins knew, for example, that Sheppard was struggling with his call. “I was disillusioned with pastors and skeptical,” Sheppard explains. “The church I grew up in had a pastor come in and take over. He fired staff, including my youth pastor and did a lot of disruptive things. Over time a lot of people left.” Tippins understood Sheppard’s disenchantment with the church. He gave Sheppard time. In turn, “time with Jim gave me hope,” Sheppard says.

Tippins also kept asking Sheppard about his call. And it was Tippins who hopped in his car and drove Sheppard out to Louisville Seminary—just to see it and to get Sheppard thinking about seminary, just like a minister had done for him years ago. Sheppard later attended Princeton Theological Seminary. He graduated in 1997.

Through deliberate asking and follow-up encouragement, Tippins thus gives youth the opportunity for discernment. “If I see them doing something that’s compassionate ministry, I tell them I see it; and I say I hope they’ll look further at it,” he says. He introduces them to somebody doing similar work—or sometimes he offers them something to read. “I wish I could take them on a retreat to do that, but we’ve not done that because of resources,” he says.

Lack of resources could present a roadblock if Tippins let it. “There’s a church down the street that has a \$40,000 donut budget,” he says. Summit Heights doesn’t have that kind of money. But Tippins spends other forms of capital wisely. The hours that Tippins spends with his youth help compensate for the lack of financial resources at Summit Heights. There’s no substitute for presence, availability and accessibility.

The congregation helps keep the balance on Tippins’ time checkbook high. This allows him to focus on mentoring. “If they expected me to visit every church person’s home, there wouldn’t be time.” Recently a few members even stepped up to take Tippins’ place on several boards in the Powdersville community.

“I taught them the tune and they made up the words. Together it works,” Tippins explains, adding one caveat: “We just can’t dance; we’re Baptist,” he laughs.

His easy sense of humor points to a final source of “capital” Tippins believes is worth spending in the effort to get young people interested in ministry: vulnerability. “They see me and my wife and the people who are in ministry here as real and fallible kind of folks,” he says. When Tippins forgets to bring his sermon to the pulpit on a Sunday morning, it’s a mistake; but it’s also a learning opportunity for young members. “I think they realize I don’t have to leap over tall buildings to do what I do,” Tippins says.

Sheppard agrees. “There wasn’t a distinction between Jim the pastor and Jim the person. He was just a very different model of how to relate. He was not afraid to be a vulnerable human being,” Sheppard said. In Sheppard’s view, Tippins exemplifies what many ministers—regardless of their budgetary resources—should be doing: living out a model of ministry that’s real, attainable and human.

### **Time: a minister’s most valuable resource**

Tippins helps potential ministers discover their gifts by asking them about their calling, by providing opportunities for ministry, by modeling a human and accessible kind of pastoral care, by reaching out to young people, and by working closely with his congregation.

While every minister would love to have the kind of budget that allows for \$40,000 worth of donuts every year, Tippins uses the resources he has: nearby colleges and his congregation.

Perhaps most important of all, the congregation provides Tippins with more time. Time is one of a minister’s most valuable resources, and Tippins uses it smartly: he reaches out to college and high school students, makes himself available, offers encouragement, helps young people discern and—very often—is able to ask just the right question at the right time: This is ministry;

would you be interested in doing this?

“Jim was always very good at staying after a person,” Sheppard recalls. After watching his childhood church suffer under bad leadership, a disillusioned Sheppard had lost faith in the church as a guide for discerning God’s call in his life. “But Jim did something right, where I felt very trusting of him very early on. He just stayed after you,” Sheppard says. As a college chaplain, Sheppard knows how difficult that kind of persistence can be. “You may want to try to keep connected and keep things going with somebody but it takes commitment to do that.”

When this kind of commitment is given sufficient time to make its mark, changes occur in the lives of Summit Heights’s young people. And Tippins isn’t alone in his work. The nearby college students who come to Summit Heights help him model a ministry that’s not intimidating to young people. They make this ministry look appealing—and attainable. And young people who otherwise never might have considered ministry begin to see that it’s possible.



THE REVEREND CATHERINE BRAASCH  
*Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Smithfield, Nebraska*

### From PR to cattle ranches to ministry

WHEN CATHI BRAASCH GRADUATED with a journalism degree in 1974 from the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater, she had visions of being the next Woodward or Bernstein. So did a lot of journalism grads in the years following Watergate. The odds weren’t good: Braasch remembers about 2,000 journalism jobs available for 6,000 aspiring journalists. She quickly took a job in public relations instead.

PR was the first step in a busy professional career that has included health care management, human services and higher education. But Braasch felt herself pulled in a different direction even as she was making her way up the professional ladder. She felt called to church work, and so she volunteered as a lay minister until 1988. Her husband, Red, was a foreman for cattle ranches.

In 1988 three Lutheran associations merged to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The new national organization called Braasch to a full-time lay minister position. That’s when Red stopped following cattle around and started following Braasch to her various ministry posts. She served as the Mission Director with the Division for Outreach in the Pacific Northwest. In 1997 she began serving as the executive director of Women of the ELCA—a large-scale women’s ministry.

Even with all these duties, Braasch felt she should be doing more. “I had been sensing the call to pastoral ministry, but the time wasn’t right for my family. We had to set that call aside,” Braasch says. The thought of leaving her family or uprooting them so that she could attend seminary seemed too daunting. But she wasn’t willing to ignore her call completely. So Braasch took a step in the general direction by earning a master’s degree in Organizational Leadership from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington.

After ten years in the Northwest, Braasch got another call from the ELCA. This time the administrators asked her to move to Chicago to serve as the denomination’s Director of Rural Ministry. Her family’s experience with ranching

seemed like the perfect background; Braasch took the job. While in Chicago she also worked as the ELCA's Director of Leadership for Outreach Ministries, where she helped found new churches. Once again, however, Braasch sensed she could be doing more. She wondered if she had really answered her true call to the fullest extent possible.

But in the end, her preparation for formal ministry began falling into place. "All things came together, as sometimes God does," Braasch says. She was able to attend the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. She made that decision because "the sense of call had never gone away and the time became right to answer."

Some might see it as unfortunate that Braasch had to delay her training for so many years. But the skills she developed over those years—communication, leadership, church development in rural areas, even her and Red's shared love for cattle and sheep—provided the ideal training for the very first call Braasch received after seminary: a ranching-country church that needed to hone its leadership development skills.

Braasch and her husband had moved a flock of sheep and a herd of cattle six times over the years with all the career changes. So she and Red (and the sheep and cattle) were relieved that this new call came from Smithfield, Nebraska, a place where "the congregation is happy with a pastor who has manure on her boots," Braasch laughs.

### Home-grown ministers

Years of experience as a lay minister in the ELCA at the regional and national levels have given Braasch a keen awareness of the church beyond the local congregation. She now knows, for example, that she's unusual in her love of rural ministry.

"The basic challenge is that 70–80 percent of our first calls as ministers are to rural churches," she explains. The need is so great that some of those new ministers are called to serve two or three congregations at a time. Compounding this problem, the majority of new ministers come from urban or suburban settings; they lack the emotional and cultural preparation to serve in small rural towns. Because these ministers often move in and out of rural ministry quickly, Braasch says, rural congregations are left "feeling as if

they're training congregations and providing a service for the larger church." This shouldn't be the case. As a rancher and minister, Braasch believes rural congregations need to take the bull by the horns, so to speak, and face this problem head on. "We need to send our best and brightest to train and come back [to us]," she argues.

Braasch's own congregation serves as a case in point. At just over 500 members, Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church is quite large for a rural church but its pulpit sat empty for two and a half years. "Here's this congregation that should have been an attractive second or even third call for a minister, and it was left in the situation of not even having a candidate," Braasch says.

But the fault doesn't just lie with a bunch of city-born seminarians who feel uncomfortable in the country. The congregation must do its part as well.

Braasch notes that Hope hadn't sent one son or daughter to the ministry in its 113-year history. She finds this record ironic, given the congregation's history of producing

leaders for other venues—including a gubernatorial candidate and the president of the National Corn Growers Association.

But during the long months (and years) without a minister, Hope's members learned that they needed to develop lay leaders. When Braasch took the job as their minister, she encouraged them in that development but challenged them to think broader: why not also invite young people to consider the formal ministry? Her encouragement coincided with an important development on the regional level: the Nebraska Synod's development of Operation IDEA.

IDEA stands for Invite, Discern, Excite and Act. The Synod had seen too many of its congregations—like Hope—go without a minister for too long, and it projected that the problem only would worsen in the future. IDEA emerged as a response to this concern. The program includes a series of retreats and workshops that gets young people thinking about ministry. These events help current ministers identify who might be talented and interested. The ministers then help those young people to determine who is called and to what. And they don't shy away from asking the youth directly if they want to pursue the ministry. "Even the bishop asks [them]," Braasch says.

**"We need to send our best and brightest to train and come back [to us]."**

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But Braasch knows just plugging into IDEA wouldn't be enough, at least not for her congregation. "We also know we have to change the culture in the congregation, and that's a matter of the lay leaders," she says.

### Identifying potential ministers—early

So Hope formed a committee to identify potential young ministers early. After researching and attending FTE's Congregational Partners conference in Dallas, the committee drafted a proposal to establish an endowment that would help students go to seminary. They begin by tracking potential candidates. Braasch meets with the kids referred by the committee (or by others in the congregation). She is direct about making the invitation. "Folk here have told me you might be interested and that you have the makings of a fine minister. Have you thought about it?" she asks the young people.

She spent this past year paying close attention to two high school seniors. She started talking with them when they were sophomores. One of them is eighteen-year-old Kyle Dawson, a member of the speech, football and golf teams. He also plays the saxophone and sings in his high school chorus.

"I took it as a compliment, her thinking I'd succeed in the ministry. My parents were surprised I was even thinking about it," Dawson says.

If students show interest, Braasch gets them involved with the Synod retreats. There they can undertake additional discernment work and learn to listen closely to a call. But that's not all she does. In addition to taking advantage of IDEA and other outside programs, Braasch gives existing events and programs within her own congregation a vocational spin. She uses the regular activities of liturgical and congregational life to foster a sense of leadership among the congregation's children.

When there's a baptism in the church, for example, she has all of the children participate. Somebody holds the oil, the towel, the certificate and another might hold Braasch's book. Junior high students help wrap the baby in a blanket made by the women's group. And high school students like Dawson conduct a worship service once a month. They divide up the lessons and prayers; they also perform skits.

"It's cool to have her involved in the fun stuff

we do, like planning services," Dawson says. "It makes us feel like we're actually doing something important. If the head honcho is there, we are contributing and doing something."

Including youth of all ages not only allows Braasch to observe the children, but it also gets them excited about church leadership long before high school. "I'm watching some kids as early as first, second and third grades," she says.

Braasch knows who these children are and what they're up to. Nebraska's rural setting is her ally in this observation, and she uses it to her full advantage in the search for future ministers. In the stable and relatively small rural community of Smithfield, she can look at a kindergarten class and get a clear sense of what the make up of the youth group will be in seven or eight years.

She remains grateful to the larger programs outside the congregation that have helped guide Hope's progress. But even if IDEA had not been created, Braasch says, "We still would have done something." Hope was ready to start a new chapter in its history.

### Becoming part of the solution

Braasch has encouraged the congregation to make ministry recruitment a priority and to work at being a part of their own solution: if they send a student to ministry, that student's rural background might encourage him or her to return to a rural setting after ordination.

Even though he received extra attention from Braasch, young Kyle Dawson has decided not to be a minister. He is spending his first two years out of high school teaching school children through music as part of the Young Americans. He plans then to study music education at Nebraska Wesleyan University. That doesn't mean Braasch's techniques are unsuccessful. Dawson reports that he wants to continue being involved with the church. He particularly enjoyed helping with student-led worship services.

"They're really fun," Dawson says. "We've been told several times that people really enjoy them."

Braasch gets the students involved in the life of the church. They are a part of its congregation, its worship team, and thus are leaders already. They see that they can do the job and are excited by that.

Most importantly, Braasch asks them if they're interested in the ministry. To be asked is flattering.

Braasch currently has 60 children in Sunday school, and her eyes are on them all the time. She possesses a sharp sense of how things can and will develop over the course of many years at Hope Lutheran. She also knows there won't be a quick fix to this shortage of ministers.

Braasch's own strong call to pastoral ministry, one that unfolded only gradually, makes her uniquely suited to taking a long view. After all, ranchers are patient, forward-looking folk. Raising up new ministers who are committed to rural congregations as an end in themselves, not just a means to urban or suburban ministry, will not happen overnight. But for Braasch and others like her, it is worth the wait.

### Conclusion

If you want to recruit more ministers, ask.

Sam Morris, Jim Tippins and Cathi Braasch each made it a point to invite specific young members of their congregations to consider ministry. A Gen-X pastor once responded to queries about why he had bucked the trend and become a minister when most young people were steering clear of it. "Because I was asked," he said.

Morris, Tippins and Braasch respond with mentoring and leadership opportunities if they get a positive response to their queries. They know that discerning a call can be overwhelming and more easily ignored than addressed, especially for a young person whose friends are looking into more mainstream or popular professions. But if young people feel they are valued and contributing members of the congregation, they will respond more positively to a call. And giving them opportunities to lead can help enable these youth to see that the work of pastoral service is well worth pursuing.

In addition, the form of leadership modeled by pastors and youth leaders should be attainable, human and meaningful. Ministers shouldn't be afraid to make mistakes. The quirks and shortcomings of everyday life in ministry not only become a learning opportunity for everyone, but they also allow a young person to look at ministry and realize something important: you don't have to be perfect to be a minister.

Nor do you have to be superhuman. Morris, Tippins and Braasch are not working on this issue by themselves. Their congregations also play vital roles. The participation of the laity in

raising up excellent ministers remains essential, especially for congregations that do not have a lot of money or resources. If your congregation hasn't sent someone into ministry in years, even decades, do members feel any responsibility for the issue? They should. And if they do, there are several ways they can help.

A minister will struggle to find the necessary time to mentor young people who might be interested in pastoral vocations without the congregation's support. Lay leaders may need to make hospital visits, even preach occasionally, if the pastor is going to be able to mentor young leaders. This takes some sacrifice on the part of a congregation. But the payoff is significant. Not only does the congregation increase its chances of identifying strong young ministers in its midst, but individual members also enjoy the satisfaction and excitement that comes with taking on leadership roles in the life of a community of faith.

Finally, a congregation working to encourage its youth should be willing to call a young pastor. Many congregations shake their heads at this suggestion. They are comfortable with their experienced pastor. They might wish there were more ministers coming up in the ranks so that their church will have enough experienced ministers down the road when vacancies open. But if congregations consistently pass over young pastors, where will those ministers gain the experience that will turn them into seasoned leaders?

Raising up ministers does not necessarily require a large output of funds or the creation of new programs. Churches that can afford them certainly can benefit from such programs. But if your congregation is on a shoestring budget—and many are—then remember that vocational development also thrives on the basics: time, relationships, and most of all, a community that loves and encourages its young people to become who they were called to be.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When she is not writing about religion, journalist Hillary Wicai reports for Marketplace, public radio's daily magazine of business and economics. She is based in Washington, DC.