

FROM M.DIV. TO REV.

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Making an Effective Transition from Seminary
into Pastoral Ministry

by J.E. Eubanks, Jr.



From M.Div. to Rev.: Making an Effective Transition from Seminary into Pastoral Ministry

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To Marcie

You have walked through so much of this with me, from the first uneasy steps of candidacy through the several calls to ministry, and through the beginning of a project that gave way to many hours of writing to become this book. May it be, at very least, a testimony to your faithful love, care, and companionship.

I love you with all of my heart.

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INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS

INTRODUCTION

“They didn’t teach me about that in seminary!”

Perhaps you’ve heard such a comment from recent graduates from your school. I certainly did while I was in seminary. Often it followed a former classmate’s story of being blind-sided by this struggle or that problem. Sometimes it was even said about mundane, everyday concerns, like worship leadership, visitation, or the transition from seminary into ministry. Usually the comment was made half-jokingly, but there was a hint of resentment, nevertheless.

Of course, seminaries cannot teach us everything we will need to know for ministry. If they were even to attempt to do so, the degree would require so many credits that no one would enroll! The professors know this, and work hard to reduce the problem as much as possible. The wise seminarian will be aware of this, as well, and will take measures to prevent it from catching up to him more than it has to.

While entire books could be filled with details about what they *aren’t* teaching you in seminary, I want to focus on one particular area that may be a weakness in the curriculum: the process of ministry candidacy, placement, and transition. I was fortunate; there was an elective class on that subject at my seminary (with surprisingly low enrollment). You may not be so blessed, or you may not be able to take the class for one reason or another. (Or perhaps you are reading this book as a part of that class!)

For whatever reason you are reading this book, I congratulate you: you have already demonstrated that you will likely fair better than many of your classmates in the placement process. By simply taking the step of picking up a book on this subject, you have categorized yourself as a seminarian who cares about his own placement enough to put some effort into it; believe it or not, some of your fellow students do not possess the same level of concern.

My interest in seeing seminarians and others well-placed in ministry began with my own placement— actually, my second placement—**before** I was even in seminary. I didn’t really know what I was doing, but I found myself working with an elaborate system of exchanging information and building relationships, some of which would end abruptly while others would lead to deeper interest. While at the time I felt I had navigated the waters successfully, time would teach me that I had not been careful enough in some ways.

After enrolling in seminary, my interest increased when I took the class on the process of candidacy and transition into ministry. Some of my friends had already graduated, and while some were placed well, others struggled with their placement. I had also heard some shocking statistics about how few in ministry make it past the five-year mark, and I didn’t want to be another casualty in just a few years.¹ It occurred to me as I worked through the assignments for that class that what I was doing

1 I’ll touch on some of these statistics in future chapters.

would largely determine whether I would thrive or struggle upon leaving seminary. As you can imagine, my level of investment skyrocketed!

The following summer, that interest turned to passion when, working with my seminary and through an independent study course, I undertook a research project that included a survey of all Master of Divinity graduates from my seminary over the previous six years—more than 300 graduates. I wanted to learn about how they went through the candidacy and placement process, and figure out what worked and what didn't. Most importantly, I wanted to know what truly effective placement looked like, and what factors led to effective placement. (I'll describe my research in detail in the next chapter.)

Since then, I've learned a lot about candidacy, placement, and transition. I've learned it through research and studying research; through books and articles on transition; and through interviews with others, some following up on my research. I've also made another transition myself, this time completing the "from M.Div. to Rev." cycle: I accepted a call to full-time, ordained pastoral ministry in 2007. You can be sure that I learned a lot about candidacy and transition from that.

In fact, that is the main reason I would urge you to read this book. It isn't because it is well-researched, backed by good statistics, or ground-breaking in its ideas (though I hope and believe it is all of those things to some degree). It isn't because I have developed an elaborate set of guidelines and principles for cracking the code to effective pastoral placement (I myself am skeptical of such concepts). It is because, by God's grace and through the experiences He has given me, I have unearthed some helpful ideas that have been a guide to me, and to many others, who have employed them in our candidacy and transition processes. We set before us the aim, not merely of placement, nor even simply of timely placement, but of effective placement. In God's gracious provision, He has provided that for me and others. What you will find on the following pages is a collection of ideas that, also by His grace, will help you along the way to your effective placement, as well.

BACKGROUNDS— HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

It may be helpful to recount my own candidating history. Although, at the time of this writing, I am currently serving my first pastoral call after seminary, I have a fair amount of experience with candidacy and placement. To be specific, I've actually held five different paid ministry positions, and I went through some form of candidacy with four of those. (There was a fifth time when I went through candidacy but eventually returned to school.) If you will indulge me, I'll summarize my candidacy and placement experiences to establish some of the context for this book.

Beginnings in Ministry

While I was in college, I volunteered with Young Life; this was a great experience, and at times I was greatly encouraged at how God used that ministry, and me through it. A year into my ministry with Young Life, I got to know a student (Iain) whose father was/is a pastor. Over time, I got close with Iain and with his family, and his father (Richard) and I began to go hunting together.

One day we were making plans by phone for another duck hunt, and Richard mentioned that the man who was serving their small church as Youth Minister was leaving, and if I knew anyone who might be interested in a part-time youth ministry position, he would appreciate a recommendation. As we talked, Richard asked me: would I be interested in that position? I was astounded, and flattered; I had longed for such a position for what seemed like several years. I said I would pray about it, and we agreed to meet for lunch the following week to discuss it.

Lunch went well; Richard gave me a brief history of the church, another brief history of the youth ministry, and told me exactly what he wanted. Was I interested? Yes— but wasn't there more to it than that? Didn't I need to be interviewed by someone— the elders, the parents, the youth ministry committee? There was no youth ministry committee; Richard was as representative of the parents as anyone, as he had two kids in the group (and one about to enter it); and the elders would likely agree with Richard's decision, but I would meet with them the following Sunday.

Sunday came, and I met the elders along with Richard in his study at the church property. They heard my testimony, my account of my sense of calling to the ministry, and asked about my experience (which was all volunteer experience at that point). I left the room, and a few minutes later they came out and welcomed me to the staff! I later found out that they were in agreement almost as soon as I had left the room, and the remaining minutes were passed in prayer.

So there I was, a 22-year-old college student with no substantial church ministry experience² and no training at all, and I was about to start a youth ministry— from scratch, as far as I knew. The candidacy process, in this case, was the easiest part of the whole experience. In one form or another, I remained on that staff for four years— way beyond the average for a typical Youth Minister.

My Introduction to Real Ministry Candidacy

In my fourth year there, shortly after Marcie and I were married, I had a strange sense of restlessness: I had this feeling that God was stirring my heart up to prepare me for a change— and I was confident that this change would take me away from my (then) current ministry to something else. Uncertain of what to do about it, I decided I would put my name and resume³ out there and see if God would make it clearer through the candidacy process where I was supposed to go.

As I look back now, I have to say that this was when I was truly introduced to the candidacy process. Everything before then was of no significance in terms of candidating experience.

My options were, admittedly, limited. I was fairly young— 25 at the time— without even a college degree, let alone a seminary degree. My experience was only in youth ministry. This was fine, however, because I planned to remain in youth ministry. I completed my denomination's Youth Ministry Data Form⁴ and submitted it to the denominational Christian Education office, which handles that sort of thing. I also called a friend of mine who had gone to work for the a sister denomination as their coordinator of Christian Education and Youth Ministry. Both offices were more than happy to circulate my information.

We began to hear from a few churches here and there, mostly basic inquiries for more information— sometimes with an list of questions, sometimes with a form to fill out, sometimes just asking for some occasion to speak by phone. The first church we heard from was in Florida. After an hour-long phone interview, they invited us to visit for a weekend. We went, and found that these visits were non-stop 48-hour interviews. We were picked up (late in the evening) from the airport by the senior pastor, who asked us questions for the entire 45-minute drive to where we were staying. We were welcomed by our hosts with another 15 or 20 minutes of introductions and questions before being allowed to get to bed. Breakfast the next morning was the same, with questions left and right, before the elder drove us to the church for an official interview with the search committee (that lasted nearly two hours). That was followed by lunch, after which the associate pastor and his wife took us to a Sunday School class picnic at the lake, which lasted most of the afternoon. After supper with

2 I had volunteered as a leader at the church I grew up in for about a year and a half; I had also done a summer internship at that church. That, plus my Young Life years, were the sum total of my ministry experience at that point.

3 A quick word about wording here: technically, the “proper” rendering of the word is “résumé” -- but this is sometimes seen as obtuse over-correctness. “Resume” isn’t correct in either way (accented or not). Throughout the rest of the book, I’ll use the most common form, “resume” (without the accents).

4 In my denomination, the Youth Ministry Data Form is a specialized version of the denominational Ministry Data Form, which I will discuss in detail in a later chapter. This form is what the denominational offices use to help with placement.

the associate pastor, we got back to the elder's house in time to get to bed at a reasonable hour. I had been asked to teach Sunday School the next morning, followed by attending worship, then lunch with two parents who drove us around and gave a tour of the town for the rest of the afternoon. We had just enough time to pack before returning to the church for the evening youth group meeting, of which we were just observers. Then off to the airport.

We heard from that church late the next week... it wasn't going to work out. More packets mailed out, more phone calls, phone interviews, e-mails, etc. produced some interest, little clarity, and a few serious queries for further information. I figured out that I knew what I wanted to do— what I felt called to do— more than most of the other guys out there; at least, I articulated it more completely. The result was that the documents I presented simultaneously drew more interested and did a lot of the “weeding” for me— I got a fair amount of response simply because I had a lot to say, but most of the churches I sent information to were able to determine I wasn't for them strictly based on what I sent.

Pressing On...

After the trip to Florida, my next trip was a whirlwind out to Texas. I went by myself, because they indicated this was just an exploring visit, not so much an advanced interview (they would bring me back for that, if need be). I left my house around 5am on a Tuesday, flew to Texas, went full-throttle for about 40 hours, and flew back the next evening (touchdown right at midnight). This trip, in addition to being the single-most exhausting candidacy experience I've ever had, was a big lesson for me in humility: it seemed like everything I said was followed by the insertion of my foot into my mouth. In retrospect, I am not surprised in the least that I never heard from them again.

But for a few more phone interviews (which developed into nothing), the opportunities dried up as we moved into the fall. This was providential, however, as it forced us into the best decision we could have made: focus on finishing my undergraduate degree. I had been sputtering along, at this point barely into my “Junior year,” and at that pace I would not have finished until late 2003 (12 years after beginning)! Instead of changing ministries, the best transition to make was to change focus and return to school full-time. I quit work altogether, took 53 credit-hours in one calendar year, and graduated from the University of South Carolina in December 1999.

Of course, while I was finishing school we began to consider what opportunities awaited us after my graduation. This actually began as early as April of '99, because some possibilities landed in our laps. One of the churches, being in a fairly nearby city, brought me up for a Sunday morning worship time, followed by lunch and then an extensive interview. It didn't work out, but it got the ball rolling on our candidacy process.

I spotted another church's ad in the back of a Christian magazine. It turned out that I knew the pastor of this one, although briefly. We exchanged philosophies of ministry, and both he and I were astonished at how similar they were. For a while, it looked like this was going to be a lock— in April, 8 months before I was available— but it fell through near the end, because of some concerns on the part of their Session that related to past staffing issues.

After that, we didn't really continue the search until mid-summer, but at that point it took off. Around July, we suddenly had three churches we were talking to at once, and two scheduled trips with the invitation for a third. We had a trip to Virginia scheduled for one weekend, a trip to Michigan scheduled for two weeks later, and tentative plans to travel to another town in Virginia after the Michigan trip.

Honestly, as we were driving to the first interview, we were more inclined toward the Michigan church than any other. However, once we got to Virginia, we began to get more interested in what was happening there, so that on the way home we were asking, "Are we missing something here? It seems too good..."

We took the job in Virginia only days before our plane was to leave for Michigan; the folks in Michigan wanted it that way, and we were thankful they were willing to wait for the Lord as we sought His will. We quickly called things off with the third church as well.

We only stayed in Virginia for 18 months; in retrospect, God used that time greatly to prepare us for future ministry, but some of the difficulties faced there also represent the beginning of an understanding of how vital effective placement truly was and is. From Virginia we moved to St. Louis to begin seminary. We toyed with the idea of candidating again as we were preparing to leave Virginia, but decided that God was clearly taking us to seminary, so nothing really developed from that.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

As I moved through seminary, I began to rethink my sense of calling— that is, what I believed it meant for me to be called to what I was. I no longer felt I was cut out for a life-long ministry to students as a Youth Minister; God seemed to be moving me in a different direction. I'll go into greater detail about this in a later chapter, but for now it will be enough to say that God was leading me into pastoral ministry as a solo pastor. When I began exploring candidacy toward the end of my seminary career, I found that candidacy was quite different in this domain of pastoral ministry.

For example, I received a number of letters during my candidacy, explaining the circumstances surrounding the search at a given church. These letters represent a stark contrast to previous experiences. In each, there was a tone of respect and an attitude of consideration that I had not often seen before in the candidacy process. It was prominent enough to cause both Marcie and me to comment on the difference between a search for an ordained— or ordainable— pastor (perhaps especially a solo pastor) and a search for a non-ordained youth minister.

In the past, the "norm" had been the utter antithesis of this. We might hear from a church we were candidating with, or we might not— and this was not relative to their expressed interest in us. We had a church call us for a second phone interview after not hearing from them for several months. One church owed us money for plane tickets to come to the interview, and they conveniently "forgot" that they had not paid us— right around the same time that they decided they weren't going to hire me; it took a phone call from me to finally get a check in the mail. And right after an in-person interview, a pastor at one church actually looked me in the eye and told me he would call me in a few days; I never heard from him again.

But this round proved to be quite different. Whether it is the position I was applying for (solo pastor vs. youth minister), the status of my qualifications (finishing an

M.Div. and ordainable vs. having only a B.A. and not ordainable), or life-stage I was in (33 at graduation, married with children vs. being in my 20s and recently married), something changed— and I don't think it was simply the fact that I was working with different churches.

Starting The Research

The first signs of this change were one part of many factors that led me to begin the research I did in 2004. I had seen a number of my classmates graduate with greater or lesser degrees of confidence about the call they had accepted. I had enough experience in the candidacy process to know that it was difficult— but I didn't understand what kept one classmate from finding placement while another saw quick success. And it seemed like almost everyone was wondering how to do this effectively.

Beyond that, I was beginning to hear reports of statistics that showed many pastors leaving the ministry after just a few years, and of others placing for only a year or two before moving on to another ministry, only to move again shortly thereafter. I began to ask questions about the candidacy and placement process:

- Why were so many students having difficulty finding placement?
- What caused others to find placement so easily?
- What was behind the difficulties that placed pastors seemed to be experiencing?
- Could there be a connection between the candidacy and placement process and a stable, effective ministry?

I didn't have anyone in particular to ask these questions of; I was just asking them to myself. Then I thought: what if I could ask those who had made a transition recently? Could that reveal some answers? I decided I would try to do a survey of recent seminary graduates, asking them some of the questions I was asking myself.

To begin, I thought about what the ideal was. It seemed to me that the goal of candidacy and placement was to find a good ministry call, with the work going into both candidacy and placement being as effective as possible. I determined what I believed an "effective placement" would look like, and I began to share this model with friends, the faculty at my seminary, and with pastors I knew. Many had helpful input, and before long I had what appeared to be a good model.⁵

Along the way I formed some hypotheses about what it would take to achieve such an effective placement— I had some ideas, based on my own experiences and those of my friends and classmates, of how someone could pursue an effective placement intentionally. So I wrote a four-page survey that, I hoped, would test my hypotheses and reveal where I was right. I also hoped it would fill in the gaps, suggesting ways to achieve effective placement that I had missed.⁶

My hypotheses and survey were based on a few presuppositions: I was assuming that there was a spiritual dimension to the transition process, and that seminarians were taking that part seriously. In other words, I was assuming that they were prayerful about their own candidacy and placement, and that they (and the churches and ministries they were candidating with) were relying on the Holy Spirit to guide and

5 I describe this model in Chapter Four: Factors for Effective Placement.

6 A copy of the survey instrument, as well as a brief tabulation of the results, can be found in the Appendices.

drive the process.⁷ I also assumed that they had a valid and tested call to ministry, and that they and others had confirmed that the ministry was the direction that the Lord was leading them. And I assumed that they were concerned about their own placement— that they were putting at least some effort into finding out what the Lord had next for them. These assumptions led to my focus on the “nuts and bolts” of the process: what did they do, when did they do it, how did they do it, and with whom did they do it.

Thanks to the help of many, I eventually surveyed over 600 seminary graduates, and I had a response rate of over 60%: almost 400 graduates responded to my survey. There were those who went into church and parachurch ministries; campus ministers, church planters, and pastors; solo pastors, senior pastors, associate/assistant pastors, and youth workers. In short, my survey returned a solid sample of a broad range of ministry directions, all coming straight out of seminary.

Many of my hypotheses were confirmed and advanced to greater levels. I also learned a number of things I never could have guessed. From my research, I developed the principles found in this book: something of a “blueprint” for effective placement. These principles opened the door for me to participate in preparing students at my seminary to transition well— and many of these students have reported that the principles I developed were keys to their own effective placement. Today, I regularly have seminary students and ordained pastors who contact me and seek my assistance in navigating the transition process, and these principles continue to bear much fruit.

I benefited from them, too. After completing my research, I put my own principles to work and saw the Lord bless my efforts. As you’ll see throughout the rest of the book, God used each of the principles to effect the steps that led me to the church that I now serve, and it has all of the markers of an effective placement for me.

My goal for every student to be well-placed after seminary, ministering with confidence in an effective placement where they can grow, thrive, and serve others as they grow. I hope this book will serve in some small way to accomplish that goal.

⁷ I later realized that this particular presupposition was inaccurate; to compensate for it, I have included a chapter in this book entitled “A Spiritual Season” in which I offer some advice and guidance on how to better approach the process with spiritual discipline.

PART 1:
STARTING POINTS

BEFORE CANDIDACY

If you're approaching your final year of seminary, what should you be doing to prepare for the time between now and graduation? What can you do now, more than a year from graduation, to ensure that the stage is set for an effective candidacy?

Six things:

- Grasp your calling
- Get the experience
- Gather the tools
- Know the hurdles
- Keep it humble
- Tag your mentors.

Grasp Your Calling

The starting point is a sense of calling. Has God called you— and is He calling you—to serve Him in vocational pastoral ministry?

Not everyone is called to be a pastor. Not everyone is called to serve in vocational ministry. Not even every student enrolled in seminary is. I would wager that you know at least a few classmates who are wrestling with exactly this. A number of my classmates did.

One fellow student had an experience that I've since learned is, unfortunately, far too common. My classmate (I'll call him "Steve" since there were about 10 Steves in my Beginning Greek class— even though this guy wasn't one of them!) had become a Christian late in high school, and had become active in a campus ministry while in college. The leaders of Steve's college ministry had done Steve a great disservice: through their words, actions, and examples, they had given Steve the distinct impression that real Christians— those who were serious about their faith— went into full-time vocational ministry. In fact, there was a hierarchy; serious Christians went into a vocational ministry like campus work or youth ministry; as they matured, they were expected to aspire to be an ordained pastor— and eventually a senior pastor (and of course, the size of the church they served was a valid metric of how mature they were); and the really hard-core, sold-out Christians eventually became long-term overseas missionaries.

Steve came to seminary with this mindset fully ingrained into his head. Steve was a good student and a smart guy, so he didn't have difficulty with the academic side. Steve's passion for ministry training, on the other hand, waned quickly: most of the first-year seminarians had a zeal about preparing for ministry that Steve lacked. By the spring semester, Steve had begun to seriously doubt whether he was called to ministry.

Fortunately for Steve, the professors at our seminary didn't share the mindset that Steve's college ministry leaders had. They encouraged Steve to explore God's calling for him— at least, whether God was calling Steve into vocational ministry. They

gave him permission to have a sense of calling to something else without feeling like an inferior Christian. One of our professors helped each Master of Divinity student work through a process he called, “Discovering Your Divine Design,”¹ wherein he counseled them in discerning how God had gifted and shaped them for service in ministry and in other ways. By the end of his first year, Steve had decided to leave seminary and work in the field of Accounting (where he had gotten his undergraduate training). Steve went on to serve as a ruling elder in his local church, and continues to thrive in his non-ministry vocation— exactly where God intended him to be, as far as any of us can tell!

Steve’s problem was that he didn’t have a true calling to ministry. This manifested in two ways: first, he had been given an improper “outward” calling to ministry, by leaders who told him he was a lesser Christian if he didn’t pursue a career in full-time ministry. Secondly, he lacked an inward calling to ministry, and the incongruence of the two left him in a state of confusion.

Early in my adult life, a wise pastor helped me to discern my own ministry calling. He talked me through three distinct parts of a true calling to vocational ministry:

- The Inward Calling
- The Scriptural Calling
- The Outward Calling

The inward calling to ministry is, in most cases, the easiest one to discern: your heart cries out to minister to others. Maybe you find yourself counseling others through their spiritual struggles. Perhaps you willingly take up leadership or service tasks in your church that others aren’t able or willing to handle. It could be that you surprised yourself the first time you had a teaching or speaking opportunity, and now you can’t do it enough. Charles H. Spurgeon suggested that the way to discern whether you possessed an inward calling to ministry is to ask, “Can I honestly see myself doing anything else with my life?” If the answer is, “Yes” then go and pursue that career instead!² There are dozens, if not hundreds, of ways to sense an inward calling to ministry. I know that many seminarians do sense an inward calling to ministry; I trust that, and consider that to be a foundational aspect of a calling to ministry— but it is vital to keep in mind that it is one aspect of a few.

Second to the inward calling is a “scriptural” call to ministry. We must ask ourselves, what does the Bible teach about those who are called to ministry? One way to proceed with considering whether you should continue to pursue a pastoral call might be to dig deeply into a study of the Word. Do a survey of those who served as leaders throughout the Scriptures, and consider whether there are normative factors in their calling. Dig into Paul’s teachings on gifts, and look at what gifts he teaches are crucial for leadership and servanthood in the pastoral office. Do some serious exegetical work in the pastoral epistles and construct a biblical portrait of the elder/overseer. Study the writings of Peter, James, and John on those who lead the church.

1 The title of this process is actually borrowed from the sub-title of a book by Aubrey Malphurs: *Maximizing Your Effectiveness: How to Discover and Develop Your Divine Design* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), which is a great work on the same subject. If you are questioning your sense of calling, you’ll find this and other books on the topic (many of which are listed in an appendix) helpful guides in discerning where God may be leading you.

2 See C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Purnell and Sons, 1958), p. 26.

There is more study to do here than most will have time to complete between now and when the Lord places them! I would strongly suggest spending devotional time in this sort of study— so that regularly, in your time in the Word, you are more deeply affirmed from Scripture of your call to ministry. Incidentally, if God is **not** calling you into vocational ministry, such a study should reveal that— or at least suggest that— to your heart, as well.

Finally, is there an external call to ministry? You should ask, “Who first encouraged me to attend seminary, and why? How was I affirmed in my call to ministry by seminary professors and classmates? What do those whom I served, and those whom I served under, during field education and/or internships have to say about affirming my call to ministry? Am I involved in leadership in the church now— and if so, what do those whom I serve under say about a call into ministry?”

Between now and when you first were led to begin seminary study, there should be many people (dozens? more than that?) who have first-hand experience with your efforts in ministry, and who can speak honestly and informedly to whether they see God calling you into ministry. You must find these people, and ask them. You must invite them to be frank, even blunt with you. If they have any love for the church and for you, they will tell you whether they see God calling you into vocational ministry.

Get The Experience

The next thing you *MUST* do is get the experience.

By now, you’ve probably figured out that you’re not going to learn everything you need to know for ministry in the classroom; there are plenty of essential ministry skills that can only be gained in the doing. You’ve heard this before— but what are these elusive skills and experiences?

- **Preaching experience.** Unless you think you’ll be fine (you won’t) with just a handful of sermons under your belt— the ones you preached in class— you should find some opportunities to preach before you start candidacy.
- **Teaching time.** In your first year of ministry, many of you will spend more time teaching than you will preaching; logging time here can be easier to come by, but shouldn’t be taken for granted.
- **Familiarity with leadership.** It’s highly possible that you have never been singularly in charge of an event, an ongoing activity, or a group of people. Yet these circumstances will occur all the time in ministry, and you need to be ready. Often even a short stint leading a team (planning a church-wide retreat, for example) can render valuable leadership experience.
- **Comfort with counseling.** Unless you specialize in this, you won’t necessarily spend a lot of time in formal, structured counseling; nevertheless, you WILL see a lot of time where your people ask you sincere, important questions over the fellowship hall table, or stop you after the Bible study to tell you something intimate and vulnerable. I’ve actually been surprised by how much counseling I do in my pastoral ministry— especially pre-marital and couples counseling. Getting more comfortable with this now (under the supervision of others) will take some of the edge off when you’re on your own.

- **An initiation to visitation.** It's almost impossible to overstate how much visitation most pastors do— and how foreign and awkward it can be until you've gotten the hang of it. Asking your pastor or a leader in the church (like an elder) if you may tag along while he visits will give you both exposure and a model.

There are others that will also be prominent: small group leadership, organizing and leading meetings, developing reports and budgets, leading in worship.

Where do you gain these vital experiences?

Look at what you already do. Maybe there are opportunities for some of these in the job(s) you already have; some, more than others, of course. Ask to be given more leadership, and you might find a number of necessary experiences coming your way.

Look (and ask) around your seminary. Most seminaries have plenty of leadership opportunities that current students could fulfill, and they know of a lot more. Helping to lead a community Bible study, giving prospective students a tour of campus or hosting them in a class, or leading worship for chapel may be readily available to you. Your seminary will certainly know of nearby preaching opportunities, too.

Talk to your pastor(s). Finding out what needs there are in your local congregation may be the easiest way to find all of these experiences. Teaching Sunday School is not the only path of service in the local church (though it is a good one!). Ask to sit in on meetings, come along to visit a home-bound member, or lead worship. Be willing to serve.

Find local ministries to serve. There are many church-affiliated and parachurch ministries that need volunteers, and some may also be hiring interns or part-time staff. Here you may get experience with administrative leadership that might elude you elsewhere— and you'll likely have ample opportunities for teaching and counseling, as well.

Serve as a student pastor. For the ultimate orientation to pastoral ministry, there may be a church nearby that needs a part-time or interim pastor. Here you'll see it all— but you will likely find them quite forgiving of your inexperience, as well.

Getting some exposure— even a little— to each of these areas of experience will serve you well in ministry, and it will give you a great way to process what you're learning in the classroom. If you aren't already, start with getting the experience.

Gather The Tools

The third thing you can do to prepare for an effective season of candidacy is to assess the tools you'll need for ministry.

You're already gathering some of these tools as a part of seminary education: the know-how to do many of the tasks that will be before you is key, of course, but even more important is having a catalog and library of information to go to when you need answers. The truth is, most seminary graduates don't so much remember a lot of what they were taught as they remember which class they learned a specific idea in, and we go to the materials from that class to get the particulars for the moment. Thus, taking good notes and becoming familiar with the textbooks for the classes you're taking is important— not just for now while you're earning the grades, but for later when you'll need to reference that material again.

Furthermore, there are other resources you'll encounter during your time in seminary. I once quipped to a classmate that, "Seminary is 50% bibliography," and that has held true for me. The book recommendations that your professors make in an aside in class, the titles written by guest lecturers and chapel speakers, the articles you reference for exegetical papers—all are invaluable to your future ministry. A member of my congregation visited my study at one point and commented about the number of books I have. This particular member works in a fairly mechanical service industry, so it only took him a moment to make a connection: "These are your tools, aren't they? You've got about as many tools in your toolbox as I do."

On a more mundane level, as yourself: what other things will I need for ministry? And by "things" I mean the physical, tangible tools that you will use as a pastor or minister. Depending on factors such as what demographic you anticipate ministering to, what role you will have, etc., you may identify any of the following (or other similar things):

- **Musical equipment.** Do you play guitar or another instrument as a part of your ministry? If so, do you have the equipment you would need if you were to begin work in that area of ministry today? Maybe you need to upgrade your instrument, or fortify your equipment list with amplification, microphones, a more capable mixing board or effects unit, etc.
- **Computer hardware and software.** Most of us use a computer to some degree, yet there are still a lot of guys who do seminary in a very low-tech way. (If this is true for you, it may be that you don't need a computer for ministry, either.) Do you have a computer that will serve your needs in ministry? Does it have the software installed that you will need to serve your people? Many classmates of mine assumed that their churches would buy them a new computer when they accepted a position—and some did, for sure, but others couldn't afford one right away. Consider whether you need to upgrade your hardware or software (or acquire new hardware and software) in preparation for your new ministry.
- **Clothing.** I think this is one of the most overlooked areas for seminarians. Take a look in your closet; now, picture your pastor or the kind of ministry worker you sense a call to become, and think of the circumstances that they might find themselves in. Could you dress for all of those occasions with what you already have? Could you lead worship on Sunday morning, or teach a Wednesday evening study, or attend a Session meeting in the context you'll minister? Would you be appropriately dressed for the funerals you will attend, the visitation you'll perform, or the day-to-day events and activities? I'm convinced that any American pastor needs to have a suit, a sportcoat or blazer, a few ties and dress shirts, and pants and shoes to match—no matter how casual you anticipate your circumstances will be. One graduate I interviewed served at a church that is rarely more formal than flip-flops and shorts, but he admitted he was surprised at how frequently his suit came out.
- **Special pastor stuff.** Does your ecclesiastical tradition use vestments such as a pulpit robe or alb, stoles, or clerical collars? Are there other accoutrements that your pastor regularly utilizes? You may not even be aware of

these— or if you are, you might not realize just how many things you will need. Begin to ask questions of the pastors and/or ministry leaders in your church and denomination about what sorts of vestments and other tools you might be gathering. You may want your own pulpit Bible, a nice copy of your denomination's hymnal, or a bound copy of your denomination's book of order. You won't know what these are until you ask.³

Okay— so one take-away here is that you probably need to spend a lot of money to get all of these tools together! But if you're like most seminarians, this is one of the most financially-strapped seasons of your life. How can you possibly get all of the things you need?

I have a few suggestions here. There are other creative ways to do it, but these have worked for my friends and me:

Books: look for used book sales at libraries and at your seminary; often you'll find titles for free or very inexpensively. You might also utilize used book services online or second-hand bookstores locally.

Clothes: I don't know what it's like in your family, but my mother still loves to give me clothes for Christmas or my birthday. If you have a family member who gives clothes, ask them if you might make specific requests (you might tell them that it will serve your future ministry— they may like knowing they are helping you gather your tools). There are good second-hand clothing stores in many towns and cities, too— or check with your seminary to see if they have a clothing exchange.

Equipment (computer and other): 90% of the musical gear that I've owned has been second-hand, and a number of computers have been, too. There are many sources for used and refurbished equipment, both online and locally. For musical equipment, you might also check with some of the larger retailers (again, both “brick-and-mortar” and online) for “scratch-and-dent sales”. Many computer manufacturers offer refurbished, open-box specials, and clearance items (Apple does this, and so does Dell). These make great Christmas and birthday gifts, too— especially if you have a similarly-minded relative with whom you exchange gifts.

Pastor stuff: short of finding a retiring pastor who will give or sell you his stuff, finding real “bargains” on these won't be easy. I know a couple of guys with hand-me-down robes, which is a big money-saver; but finding someone who is BOTH your size and willing to part with his robe is difficult. Shopping online may turn up bargains (as compared to buying from a local retailer) on stuff like stoles and other ready-made vestments. For example, Murphy Robes offers a “factory outlet” section on their website.

All of the above: you've got a big milestone coming up, right? You'll be graduating from seminary! Some of your family or close friends may want to give you a nice graduation gift that will serve you in your ministry. (Many will do the same for ordination, by the way.) If you get nothing else from this, then I've given you something to think about when they ask what you might want for graduation/ordination presents.

3 You'll find, also, that some of these are options for you in your tradition, even if some or most of the pastors you know don't embrace them. As a Presbyterian pastor, most of my peers prefer a tie in contexts when they are serving others pastorally; I began wearing a clerical collar not long after my ordination, and have found it to be a great and useful option for a variety of reasons. This point in your seminary study is a good time to begin to think about how you will conduct yourself, and why.

One more thing; some of this will be tax-deductible, especially if you buy it in the same year that you begin your ministry. Save your receipts and ask a tax professional which expenses will serve you an extra duty on April 15.

Know The Hurdles

What stands between you and your first pastorate or ministry? If you think it is only graduation and candidacy, you may be in for a big surprise.

If you're affiliated with a denomination or other ecclesiastical affiliation— or if you intend to serve in ministry in one— there are probably additional requirements beyond the simple academic exercises. Most denominations have some sort of formalized process for ordination wherein a pastoral candidate is examined and tested in his readiness for ministry. Some denominations do a better job of shepherding ministerial candidates through the preparation for this than others. There may also be requirements that your seminary has beyond classroom study, such as field education.

My advice: make sure you understand the process before you, and know what your part in all of it is. It may not be very involved — but it might be that you simply don't know how involved it really is!

For example: in my denomination (the Presbyterian Church in America), ministerial candidates must go through a series of steps in order to be “ordainable”— and in most cases the available ministry positions require (or at least prefer) ordainable candidates. Here's a summary of the steps between first sensing a call to ministry and final ordination in the PCA (as the saying goes, your mileage may vary):

1. **Becoming a “candidate for gospel ministry” under the care of your presbytery:** To do this, you must have met with the Session at your church and discussed your testimony of faith and sense of calling to the ministry. They must then write a letter to your presbytery (which is the regional affiliation of the churches and pastors in that geographic region) on your behalf, asking that you be placed “under care” of the presbytery as a “candidate for gospel ministry”. The presbytery will also examine you (usually through a committee first) and hear your testimony of faith and of your call to ministry. Once you have been approved at this stage, you are officially under the care of a presbytery (which, in some presbyteries means almost nothing, unfortunately— but others do a very good job with it). According to the PCA's Book of Church Order (BCO), you must have been a member of your PCA church for at least six months before you may come under care of a presbytery, you must apply to come under care at least one month before the next meeting of presbytery, and you must be under care to become an Intern of presbytery.
2. **Becoming an “intern of presbytery”:** The difference between a candidate and an intern is that, while a candidate is “under care” in the sense that the presbytery has assumed some level of responsibility for the development of the candidate for ministry, the intern is supervised in fulfilling specific tasks to gain experience for ministry. Every presbytery has a slightly different set of tasks and expectations, but all of them have the same goal: to give interns a comprehensive set of experiences that will expose them to all aspects of pastoral ministry. According to the PCA's BCO, an internship

must be at least one year long; most interns will find that it will be difficult to fulfill every requirement within a year, and would prefer more time. Your internship will be done in conjunction with your local church; your pastor (or possibly a ruling elder) will oversee and supervise this stage of your training.

3. **Candidacy:** Typically (and minimally— if you're looking for the least number of steps), the next step after completing your internship is to find a pastoral call. In the PCA, you cannot be ordained unless there is a specific local church who has called you to be a pastor. Thus, the next step is to find placement (and that's what most of this book is all about!).
4. **Ordination Trials:** After you have a call, the presbytery where the church that calls you is a member will begin the process of examining you for ordination. These will begin at a committee level, where you'll likely taken both written and oral exams on areas of knowledge including theology, Bible content, church history, PCA history, and the Book of Church Order. You'll also be required to preach before presbytery, and there will be oral exams before the entire presbytery as well. I won't spend a lot of time on these, though there's much to tell— I've blogged about them before. (And here, and here.)
5. **The ordination service:** After you're approved by your trials, the ordination service is the final step. A "commission" from presbytery (like a committee, but with acting authority) will fulfill this function, administering your vows, giving a charge to you and to the congregation, and laying hands on you to complete this momentous event. This event has a similar significance to a marriage, and will be a great time of celebration and worship.

So what? Why am I telling you all of this? Because it's important to know the hurdles.

A classmate of mine bumped up against this very problem about 4 months before graduation. I knew he was entering his last semester, and I asked him how his search was going. To my surprise, he reported that he had quit searching for now! It turns out that no one had ever told him about the required internship, and he knew that he was stuck until he completed that crucial step— yet he had not even become a candidate under care of his presbytery. He was forced to take an additional year AFTER seminary to work through the lingering steps to be ready for ordination, and he had to work hard to get it all done in a year.

Don't let this happen to you. Make sure that you know the required steps to obtain the credentials and approval you will need to fulfill your calling in ministry.

Keep It Humble

So you're getting a seminary degree... what does that mean to you?

For many (most?) of us, it was an accomplishment that we were/are pretty proud of. It means a lot of hard work: difficult study, learning new languages, writing papers, reading mountains of books. It also means building new friendships, getting to know some amazing professors and others, getting to study the Bible and other wonderful fields of study with intensity.

For some of us it also means working full-time or nearly so to support ourselves and our families as we accomplish all of the above.

Your seminary degree is a great achievement, and something you ought to take great pride in. But it is also something that you need to keep a healthy (read: humble) perspective about.

Frankly, many people in your future congregation won't care so much about your achievements in seminary—or if they do, it may be because they are intimidated by what you know that they don't. They won't have a clear understanding of how hard you worked, or how difficult it was for you to learn all that you have. At best, they will appreciate the fact that you know the answers to tough questions, and that you have gathered the tools you will need to minister the Word of God effectively.

You need to begin to cultivate now the attitude that will allow you to minister to them in the future.

When you complete your degree, you'll be awarded a “Master of Divinity” (or perhaps a “Master of Arts etc.”) Degree—which is to say, you may feel compelled to consider yourself a master of these materials! But be careful: as you have probably become all too aware, you haven't mastered very much through the seminary process. If anything, seminary may (and probably should) have served to reveal to you how little you have mastered, and how much you have yet to learn.

A case in point: I didn't know of anyone in my preaching classes who earned an “A” on their sermons. I certainly didn't—and shouldn't have. Think of what such a message would communicate to a seminary student? For many of us (including me), these were among the first real sermons we had ever preached. Yet preaching is an art-form that takes years of practice to master, and often hundreds of sermons to become adept at. One pastor I know suggested that it took a pastor his first 100 sermons or so just to find his own style and voice in preaching. Should a seminarian be given any inclination of mastery after having preached his third or fourth?⁴

Another factor to consider is that, despite your best efforts, you will likely have very little real-world experience applying the many things you have learned. You know lots of facts, and you know many good methods. But you don't yet know people—especially the people you will be called to serve and shepherd in the context of your first pastoral call.

Who will those people be? Some of them will be better-educated than you, academically. Others won't have anything approaching a graduate degree, yet they will have many years of life experience and knowledge in fields you may never have heard of. All (or nearly all) of them have some things you don't: they know who they are, who the people in their congregation are, what the dynamics of that congregation are, and what the community and culture that they live in are like.

A few years ago, the TV show *Ed* centered around the lives of a few old classmates in their home town. One of these, Mike, had completed medical school and returned home to work with the old, well-established Dr. Jerome, who had served that

4 In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell estimates that it requires about 10,000 hours of work in a field before someone becomes an expert. For preaching, this represents roughly 1000 sermons—in other words, 10 years or more of preaching—to be an expert at sermon preparation (and many more to be an expert in sermon delivery). This should give all of us a healthy perspective on our mastery and “expertise.”

community as the only doctor for decades. Dr. Jerome was a real curmudgeon, and showed Mike almost no respect as a doctor—frustrating Mike almost to the point of quitting—until finally Mike learns that Dr. Jerome has been waiting for Mike to begin to respect and care about the people he cares for as much as he cares about the medicine itself. At that point (not until the third season, by the way) Dr. Jerome finally begins to treat Mike with the respect and authority that Mike deserves.

Ministry is very much like that: until we respect the people we serve (or will serve) in ministry as much as we respect the knowledge and office of ministry itself, we won't have their ear and our efforts will be like spinning our wheels in the snow: no traction.

You've done good work in your seminary degree; don't undervalue it. But don't assume that because you've earned a "Master of Divinity" that you're fully prepared for the humbling work of ministry.

A more reasonable title would be, not Master of Divinity, but Apprentice of Divinity. You've (almost) completed a huge step along the way toward gaining the knowledge and tools you will need for good ministry. Now it's time to begin shaping the heart of a pastor by seeking an appropriate level of humility.

Tag Your Mentors

The last thing you must do to prepare well for the transition while in seminary is to make a list: who will your mentors be in ministry?

You will inevitably face circumstances that you won't know how to handle, or will need some basic orientation for. Your first wedding or funeral; the first time you do a hospital visitation; the first Session meeting you moderate or Board meeting you oversee. You may not know how to lead worship effectively, or how to lead another through basic discipleship. There will be a thousand blind spots, things you didn't know that you didn't know—until you were in the midst of needing to know!

You will have questions. How do you start to counsel one of your parishioners? How do you stop counseling without leaving them feeling abandoned? Are you spending too much time (or too little) preparing your sermon or lessons, or too little time (or too much) meeting with your congregants? Which issues are worth fighting for? How do you repent well when you've sinned against one of your members? What do you do about the strange situation that you never saw coming? Are you pushing for change too fast?

Where will you turn for answers to your questions? Where will you go for advice about your blind spots? You will serve yourself well if you've thought through who you will call or meet with in these times of need.

There will inevitably be some that you can't list at this point. Perhaps you will work under a seasoned senior pastor, or there will be experienced elders and/or deacons in your congregation who can guide you in the moment. There will certainly be other pastors around—perhaps in your presbytery, or other like gathering—and some of these will present themselves as available for such advice. Maybe, as it was in my case, there will be willingness in the man who put you in contact with your new congregation, and he will offer his wisdom and experience when you need it.

But even these present gaps that need to be filled elsewhere. In the midst of a funeral, your elders and deacons won't be as available for guidance; they will assume that you know what to do—not just preaching the sermon, but ordering the service,

guiding the family through their grief, leading the church in serving the bereaved. When you have conflict with your senior pastor, you will probably want to avoid talking to anyone close to the situation. There will be times when you need your mentors to know you, not just ministry in general.

Seek out, therefore, a few trusted mentors— men who know you, whose experience and wisdom in ministry is trustworthy, in whom you know you can safely place your confidence— and approach them. Simply ask them if they would mind if you called them from time to time when you need advice on pastoral ministry. I would be astonished if they refused.

It will be a lot easier knowing now than waiting until the first incident presents itself. Go ahead: get out a sheet of paper and make a list (maybe five names?) and begin asking these friends for their willingness. When you call them on the way to the hospital or as you wait for your first counseling appointment, you'll be so glad you did this now.

A SPIRITUAL SEASON

Your candidacy, placement, and transition into ministry is an inherently spiritual affair.

You know this already; I don't need to be condescending about it, or act like I'm telling you something you don't already know.

And yet, in all of my research, in my interviews with others, and even (maybe especially!) in my own experience, I've come to recognize how easy it is to take this aspect for granted— or to neglect it altogether. When I first began my research into the topic of pastoral transition, I assumed the spiritual element; as I mentioned in the introduction, I conducted my survey with a default position that took for granted that those seeking to transition into ministry from seminary were prayerful about it, that they were regularly reading the Bible, that they engaged in worship often, and that they were sharing their souls with their family. I felt this was an area where I could safely make some presumption.

I have since learned that presumption in this area is anything but safe. Many of those I surveyed and interviewed reported how spiritually burned-out they were by the end of seminary. Often I learned that one or more fundamental areas of spiritual formation were simply neglected altogether. One interviewee said that he didn't read his Bible at all during his last year of seminary. Another, responding to a question on my survey that asked what they would do differently in their transition process, answered, "I would pray about my transition" (NOT, "I would pray *more*" but that they would pray at all!).

So I want to spend some time practically discussing how you might navigate the whole process of events in a spiritually-astute manner. I am going to assume that you know that you should be spiritually-engaged during this season of your life; but I'm not going to assume that you are actually doing it! Rather, I'll work from a pastoral perspective, trying to encourage you about each area, with some advice specifically on how you might spend your time in these basic parts of spiritual life.

Bible Study

First of all, you need to be reading your Bible.

This always strikes me as an almost-silly thing to say— yet, I find it easy to neglect my own Bible reading, and I know many other pastors who also struggle to read the Bible regularly. I knew a lot of classmates in seminary who were very disciplined about their devotional life, but I also knew plenty of others who, like me, have struggled with the spiritual disciplines.

If you are already disciplined about reading your Bible, I commend you, and congratulate you on a gift from God that not every Christian receives. You will still find some suggestions applicable to you in this section; toward the end, I'll offer some suggested readings related to the transition process.

On the other hand, if you struggle with Bible reading then I want to offer encouragement for you, as well.

Things to Remember about Christian Devotional Reading

Penance

We don't read our Bibles as a form of penance. Most protestants will zealously reject the Roman Catholic idea of penance in the form of atoning for sin by repetition of certain prayers a prescribed number of times, etc. However, many of us do the same thing in our own way: if we missed a devotional yesterday, we'll try to do penance by reading twice as much today. If we haven't read our Bibles for weeks, we'll demand of ourselves that we read for a half-hour every day without missing one.

We'll do this for other things, too: if we were mean to our wives, ignored someone's pain, or wasted time when we should have been working— and we feel convicted about those things— we might turn to Bible reading as a way to make up for them. Whatever our sin is, we frequently turn to self-flagellation of some sort to attempt to make atonement for it. Bible reading can be done as a form of such flagellation.

We don't need to atone for our sins, through Bible reading or anything else. Christ has already atoned for our sins! If you are in Christ, then you are free from the guilt of your sin, and free of any need for self-atonement. (Good thing, too, because self-atonement isn't possible anyway!) God doesn't love you any less because of your sin, and He doesn't love you any less because you missed a devotional, or a dozen devotionals in a row. God's love for you is constant because Christ has atoned for all of your failings.

Love-Earning

Likewise, we don't read our Bibles as a way to gain God's love. Too often we approach God as if His grace and love for us is one-dimensional: He is gracious and loving toward us in our sin, but in all other ways we have to gain His favor. This leads to a life spent in attempts to earn God's love and favor, to gain His blessing through meritorious acts.

This can be our motivation in our devotional time, also. We may think, "If I spend my time reading God's Word, He'll love me more! He'll give me more blessings! He'll be glad He bothered to save me!"

Just as God doesn't love you any less because of your sin, neither does He love you any more because of your obedience, your service to Him, or your piety. God already loves you as much as anyone can be loved— and He demonstrated that love 2,000 years before you were born, when He sacrificed His own Son to pay the ransom for your soul. God's love for you is never-ending, and it is already as great as it can possibly be. You do not need to earn God's love, even through your devotional life, for it is already yours.

Life Expressing

We read our Bibles because we will grow spiritually from reading the Bible. We read them because God communicates with us through His Word, reminding and teach-

ing us of our need and His provision. We read them because we need the truths that the Bible contains. We read our Bibles because of our identity.

We have an identity through our faith in Christ: we, who were strangers and aliens in a foreign land with no home-country, who were orphans without a family or inheritance, who were enemies with the living God— WE are now the opposite of all of these. We are citizens of a holy nation, and part of the celestial city. We are no longer enemies with God, but are reconciled to Him, so much so that He has adopted us as His own and called us children of God! We have an identity, and it is in that identity that we do all that we do— including reading our Bibles.

We read our Bibles because, as children of the living God, we need to hear the words our Father would say to us. They are life-giving, strengthening, faith-building words, and they teach us of ourselves and our identity. They instruct us in what it means to be who we have become in Christ, and in how we might properly live according to the name we have been given.

Our Bibles are worth reading, not because doing so makes God overlook or forgive our sin, and not because reading them earns His pleasure; either of those perspectives subtracts from God's sovereignty and places the determination for our spiritual well-being on ourselves. Our Bibles are worth reading because the Word of God is good for our faith and for our spiritual health.

Strategies for Bible Reading

If you're stuck in a Bible-reading rut and need some un-sticking, here are some things to consider.

All Study Is Devotional

The odds are good that even in your last year of seminary, you have one or two exegetical and/or theology classes left. These may be the key to jumpstarting your devotional Bible reading.

"Wait," you say. "Those classes are part of the reason I feel so stuck!" It's understandable that, when studying the Bible for a class, your devotional approach to the Bible might seem to dry up. That can be true especially when you're asked to do things like making an analysis of the keywords in the original language or consider the text-critical differences of the early manuscripts. What do you do about the very technical and academic approach to the Bible that you are asked to regularly assume in seminary?

You must learn to embrace the spiritual value of those things, and you must learn that a division of the academic from the devotional— of the head from the heart, so to speak— is a false dichotomy. Everything that a seminary asks of you has devotional value, no matter how academic.¹ Remember, what you are doing in those classes is learning how to more closely and accurately determine the meaning and intention of

1 I acknowledge that this is true more often in evangelical seminaries than in others; nevertheless, even in a theologically-liberal seminary where the authority and integrity of the Bible is highly challenged, there can be devotional aspects to the most critical exercises. Those men I know who came through a more liberal theological education with their faith intact did so because they saw every note of criticism and every challenge to biblical accuracy to be an opportunity for them to strengthen their own understanding and belief in Bible truths.

the text—which means that, through the most minute details, you will learn more of what the Bible says and how it says it.

Seminary is an opportunity to learn how to connect head and heart more fully in Bible study. Like so many aspects of seminary, this is vital preparation for real ministry. You will be faced with the same kind of work on a weekly basis, if not daily, and whatever difficulty you have with this now will carry over then; it won't get easier, it will get harder. What is more, if you cannot connect the study you are doing for sermon and lesson preparation with the devotional, heart and soul-oriented application, you will rob your congregation of the truths the Bible has for them.

Start learning how to approach your academic study devotionally. As you work through the assignments and exercises, ask yourself what application each assignment draws out for you. Consider how the information you gather through the exercise may aid in explaining the meaning of the text to others, and how it helps you understand the text on a personal level. Think about how this new knowledge might affect the way that you would preach or teach that passage. Determine whether the conclusions you draw lend clarity to the meaning, and decide if those conclusions are necessary and/or useful in a devotional sense.

Finding Time

Approaching your academic work with a devotional spirit is helpful, not only because it re-shapes the way you do your assignments, but also because it means that you've done some devotional reading already that day!

But you don't have those assignments every day, and there are times when you may have trouble finding time to do the devotional reading you want to do. It can be a lot easier to find time than you might think.

You probably own more than one copy of the Bible. Try keeping copies in different places all over your house. A Bible in the kitchen, another in the bathroom, one in the living room, and a copy by your bed—suddenly, anytime you have a few spare moments, you can grab a Bible and read it. Keep one in your car, too; how many times are you waiting in a drive-through line and could read a verse or two?

Remember that we must be careful not to be legalistic in how much time we must spend reading the Bible to consider it “devotional” reading. Is 15 minutes enough? How about five? How about just one minute, reading just one verse two or three times through? The length of time is not as important as how much God's Word is hidden in our hearts where we might meditate upon it. If you use a calendar to organize your day, look over it for occasions when you have small windows of time spent waiting. Maybe in the moments between when you get to class and when the lecture begins, the few minutes after you're ready but before your carpool picks you up, or the time in the grocery store line as you await checkout, you could grab some quick devotional reading.

Routines (Good & Bad)

Sometimes we can find help in routines for our devotionals. At other times, they can become a prison.

Perhaps, like me, you have struggled over the years with the warring desires of rising early for a lengthy and satisfying time spent reading God's Word, and the lure of

a comfortable bed during the sleepy moments of waking. I have tried time and again to develop this discipline, to no avail.

I want to be careful not to fall into a mystical or legalistic concept of morning devotionals. I don't believe that rising early for devotional time is inherently any more special or powerful than Bible reading at other times during the day. But I love the thought of rising early and spending the waking moments in God's Word and in prayer.

Your routines, or desires for them, may be different. I had a friend in college who didn't feel like her devotionals were complete if she didn't have a cup of coffee with them, sitting in a certain place, and with absolute silence in her apartment. I knew someone else who felt like their time had been violated if they had an interruption—and he would bark at his wife or children if they spoke to them, “**I'm having my Quiet Time!**” How contrary!

Familiarity can be good, and the routines you establish for devotionals may be a great aid to you for their regularity. But they might also become enslaving, preventing you from any sense of having communed with God in His Word unless things were “just right.” Or they could become mystical, where the very practice of certain activities (like nestling into a favorite chair with a cup of coffee at your side) take on voodoo-like ritual qualities. Use routines well; be careful that they don't begin to use you instead.

Re-Starting

If you have fallen out of the habit of reading the Bible, all you have to do is start again.

I once had a member in a congregation I served who came to talk to me about feeling distant from God. I asked her if she prayed regularly; she replied that she did, but that her prayers felt repetitive and dull. Then I asked her if she read her Bible. “Oh, yes,” she said. “I try to read all the way through my Bible every year!”

“That's wonderful,” I said. “How is your progress lately? How far have you gotten?”

She thought about it, and she couldn't remember. I asked her if she had read it that week, and she said no. I asked if she could remember the last time she read it, and she thought for a moment before replying that she couldn't. After a few more minutes of interrogation, it turned out that she had begun her reading plan in January, but had gotten bogged down in Leviticus sometime around early February and had stopped reading then. (It was June when we spoke.) After a few weeks of unfulfilled good intentions, she never started back up again, because she was so far behind she knew she would never finish her reading plan within the year. She figured she would just wait and start again next year.

I believe her problem is an all too common one: when we think about our aspirations for Bible reading, we often aim too high. We set a goal that we cannot reach, and therefore we are always discouraged. As I told my congregant, I think that reading through the whole Bible in year is a wonderful goal; but I also think that abandoning Bible reading altogether when it becomes clear that the goal won't be attained is a tragic consequence of too-lofty ambitions.

When you haven't read the Bible for a while, just pick it up and read. Open to a Psalm and read just one, or if you're ready for more then read two. Or go to one of the smaller epistles toward the back of the New Testament and have the satisfaction

of reading all the way through a letter in one sitting! (Nevermind that it was only 15 verses.) Try the same with one of the Minor Prophets. Or just read the opening chapter of Genesis, John, or Acts.

In other words, ease back into Bible reading; don't approach it with a level of ambition you won't yet have the stamina to sustain. Work up to those larger goals.

Bible Reading Plans for Candidacy & Transition

Here are a few plans that may strengthen and encourage you during your season of transition.

- **Gospels.** Work through one or more of the gospels. Pay attention to (at least) two things: how our Lord accomplished the work of redemption for you, as well as for the rest of His sheep; and how He conducted His own public ministry. With regard to the latter, consider His boldness, His loving approach, His self-sacrifice, and his commitment to a singular message. Remembering that you are not Christ, nevertheless consider how Jesus' ministry style and practices might be put in place in your future ministry.
- **Pastoral Epistles.** Make a careful study of the pastoral epistles of Paul: I & II Timothy and Titus. Examine the advice that this apostle offered to these young pastors, and what priorities in ministry he urged them to embrace.
- **Paul's Epistles to the Churches.** Pick a letter written by Paul to one of the New Testament-era churches. Read through this letter, noting the sin and problems that Paul addressed. Notice also how Paul addresses them, and what answer he consistently gives to them.
- **Leadership.** Do a survey of those God names and calls to lead His people throughout Scripture. Consider each one's strengths and weaknesses, gifting, and the need he/she fulfilled in their leadership.
- **Spiritual Gifts.** Survey the New Testament teachings on spiritual gifts, and consider each gift separately. Focus especially on the spiritual gifts that are strongest in your life and ministry, and ponder how the Scriptures speak to the use and function of those gifts.
- **Psalms.** Read the Psalms, specifically with the worship of the local church in mind. Note how the Psalms might have served as the book of worship for the Old Testament people of God, and consider how the Psalter may also have use for worship in a church you might pastor.
- **Revelation.** Study John's Revelation, keeping (at least) two things in mind: 1) how did Christ speak to the churches that He addressed in the Revelation, and what did He address for each church? And, 2) what is the final fulfillment of all that Christ is accomplishing and has accomplished in His work of redemption? Through this study, consider how these two emphases are applicable to daily church ministry.

These are just ideas; all of Scripture is both useful and necessary for ministry, so whatever you choose to study will have application in that context. These ideas are not designed to be an exhaustive look at ministry in that way; rather, they are presented for the purposes of encouraging you as you prepare to enter into vocational ministry.

Prayer

Prayer, like devotional Bible reading, can often fall prey to neglect or disengaged routine. Without repeating much of what was covered in the previous section, there is still work to be done in urging and challenging you to give attention to this vital area of spiritual formation. I offer here encouragement to pray, and how you might pray.

Ways to Refresh Your Prayer Life

Pay less attention to length, eloquence, and orderliness. Remember that prayer mustn't be long to be effective. Sometimes a prayer may take the form of hours-long conversation with the Lord. At other times, an utterance as brief as, "oh, God!" may suffice. Likewise, how precise your language or articulation in prayer can become a distraction if you let it; remember how Paul encourages us that, when we lack words for precision, the Holy Spirit intervenes on our behalf.² Order in prayer— working through a particular list or making priorities— may also hinder you from praying freely.³ In heart-felt and effective prayer, length, eloquence, and orderliness matter far less than honesty, fervency, and earnestness.

Soak yourself in the Psalms. It is easy to forget that God has provided us with a prayer book: the 150 prayers of the Psalms are themselves a rich resource for both learning to pray and for regaining a renewed vigor in prayer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "The Psalter is the great school of prayer."⁴ The Psalms contain every emotion that you will encounter, and they engage that emotion prayerfully in a manner that is biblically-consistent— after all, they are Scripture! Learn to pray the Psalms as a tool for prayer.⁵

Make use of good prayer resources. In addition to the Psalms, we have the blessing of generations of prayers offered before us— many of which have been recorded and offered as both models and aids for our own prayers. You may find collections like *The Valley of Vision* by Arthur Bennett to be a goldmine of worthy prayers. You might make use of a *Book of Common Prayer* or something like the Daily Hours. There are many of these available, and almost every tradition has one or more that are both consistent with the tradition's theology and helpful to work it out in prayer.

Get quiet. It is a challenge today to get away from noise and distraction. Most of us have constant access to music, the internet, and/or television. Few settings and contexts are free of other people to speak with or, at least, to watch. Our schedules are full, and our minds are engaged. You must therefore be deliberate to find times and ways to get quiet for prayer. This may mean setting aside time in your day for undistracted prayer, be it 10 minutes in the morning before you get dressed, some moments before you go to bed, or scheduled in the middle of your day. It might be as elaborate as some hours or a whole day when you will retreat to a quiet, private place

2 Romans 8:26-27.

3 Don't get me wrong here: often, making a list of needs for prayer, items of praise, and reasons for thanksgiving can facilitate focused prayer, and may allow you to pray more and longer than just praying off the top of your head. It may also protect you from meaningless repetition and babbling. But these tools, when held too highly, may also keep you from the intimate fellowship with God and means of grace that prayer is.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 47.

5 Toward this end, I recommend Eugene Peterson's *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* and Stanley Jaki's *Praying the Psalms: A Commentary*.

for extended prayer. Or it may be one day a week when you commit to leaving your car radio off and spending all of your commuting time praying as you drive.

Meet with others. Committing yourself to an occasional or regular time to gather with one or several others for prayer can be both an intense opportunity for fellowship and excellent accountability to pray. There have been seasons in my life when such scheduled meetings were the only consistent time of prayer that I had. (There have also been times when I longed for the fellowship of prayer that these represented, and that was absent from my regular practice.) For two semesters of my time in seminary, I met every week with a classmate to pray for each other in our candidacy and placement; these semesters were, for me, a rich time of fellowship and a season of great spiritual growth in learning to pray for myself and for others.

Things to Pray for During Transition

Pray that God would lead you in your search. Pray for wisdom and discernment. Pray that He would grant you awareness of key factors for your decisions. Pray that your priorities would be rightly aligned with His for your particular calling. Pray for clarity, and that He would make straight your path to fulfilling your calling in service to His church and Kingdom.

Pray that God would lead the search teams you have contacted. Pray that they would be wholly submissive to His will and leading. Pray for their hearts to be made ready to follow the pastor He would call to them. Pray that He would give them wise and discerning insight into the candidates they are considering. Pray for the information that they need to make careful decisions to come to light quickly and clearly. Pray for their endurance through the search process. Pray that God would fill their pastoral needs in the timing of His will— and pray that His timing would be speedy!

Pray that God would protect your heart from discouragement and fatigue. Pray for Him to prepare you for the reality of rejection. Pray that you would be able to see His work of protection in those opportunities that tell you that you are not the right fit. Pray that God would protect your heart from bitterness and disappointment. Pray for God to raise up friends and supporters around you who will buoy your spirits and refresh your commitment to your calling. Pray that you would be able to press on when the search has become long and your endurance is tested.

Pray that God would protect your heart from a competitive spirit. Pray for earnest hope and expectation for yourself and for your friends who are also seeking placement. Pray that you would know how to love and support one another through the season of candidacy that you will all face together. Pray that you would be able to rejoice with those who find placement before you do, and that others would rejoice in your placement in spite of their own lack of it. Pray for God to overcome on your behalf those temptations to envy, jealousy, and slandering of others in your heart and mind.

Pray for God's sustenance of congregations during the difficult seasons of transition they are encountering. Pray that the churches that you have encountered who are seeking a pastor would be sustained by God's grace, and would weather the season of transition in a healthy manner. Pray for the members of the congregations to be made ready for their new pastor. Pray that God would tend and care for them through the leaders that are present, as well as through sister congregations and others who may come

alongside them during this season. Pray for their patience and perseverance through a time of unknown and uncertain future.

Pray that God would make you ready for transition into ministry. Pray that the remaining weeks/months/semesters that you have in seminary would be useful for your pastoral preparation. Pray for your spiritual health and maturity to be well-founded and grounded in His grace, mercy, and love. Pray that you would gain the knowledge you need, as well as the experience, wisdom, and love to lead a congregation or ministry well in the capacity to which you will be called. Pray that He would prepare you (and your family) for the joys, difficulties, successes, and trials that lay before you in your calling to ministry.

Like the suggested Bible studies, these are just starting points. You might add more than double to this list, or it may be sufficient for sustaining your prayer life with regard to transition. And there are many other needs in your life to pray for— many of which, you alone will know. Nevertheless, it is my prayer that these suggestions will be nourishment to your soul through transition.

Corporate Worship

Are you worshipping well?

Worshipping while in seminary can present one of the greatest challenges of that season of life. In fact, I knew a handful of classmates who confessed that they felt they had lost the capacity to worship, because (among other things) their seminary education had presented too many stumbling-blocks.

What were/are some of their struggles?

- **Temptation to critique.** Often, our own study of things like homiletics and worship leadership will create a default-mode of critical examination for sermons, music selections, prayers, and other parts of the public liturgy. It is easy to think, “I would have preached that sermon differently” when you are not the one preaching it.
- **Racing minds.** Anyone who has been in seminary for a while has a mind that is in a near-constant state of high-gear. It is tempting to think about everything but the worship of God.
- **Burdensome work-loads.** The seemingly never-ending state of unfinished assignments presents an ongoing burden of interruption to the worshiper. This is true for everyone, and no less so the seminarian.
- **Knowledge distractions.** Something said (or unsaid) during worship will spark an idea that a knowledgeable mind wants to engage. We have learned so many wonderful and fascinating things! We want to allow those thoughts to mature right away— even at the cost of our worship.

I’m not listing these to suggest new ways to worsen your worship! Rather, my goal is to point out some of the things that might be preventing you from worshipping well.

What can you do about the struggles of worship?

You can start by *seeking to be well-prepared for worship*. This subject is worthy of a book in itself, but a few ways to better prepare for worship include approaching corporate worship prayerfully; reading the sermon text ahead of time, if possible; learning to anticipate corporate worship with eager expectation; seek forgiveness from

those you have sinned against, and extend forgiveness to others; disciplining your heart and mind for focused, concentrated worship; and getting a good night's rest. Strive for learning how to worship well as a member of a congregation, even in the face of the knowledge and experience you are gaining.

You should also *spend concerted effort on seeking humility*. Many of the struggles that I and others faced in seminary (that perhaps you are facing, as well) stemmed from a prideful approach to worship and the pastors/leaders who served us. Remember that they, too, struggled through the studies that you have taken up—and unlike you, they finished those studies! Your pastor(s) have experience, wisdom, and training that you do not yet have; it is nothing short of arrogance that a seminary student might criticize the leadership and/or preaching of his pastor the way that some do.

Remind yourself of the magnitude of the Gospel. We worship God because we are aware of how worthy of our praise He is; how much He has accomplished on our behalf; how dependent upon Him we are, daily; how much He loves us. If you're struggling with worship, ask yourself how much you are remembering the Gospel during it. Have you forgotten His grace? Have you taken for granted His mercies, new every morning? Have you made little of your sin? Reclaim the place at His feet that He has secured for you.

Ask your professors how they have learned to worship well. One of the greatest indirect ministries that I received from my seminary professors was watching them worship with their families in our congregation. And one of the most interesting conversations I had with a professor was talking about how he worships with his family: they had arranged to have the hymns for the coming Sunday e-mailed to their house, and they practiced them with their children. They held hands during the congregational prayers, and sang harmonies together. They encouraged one another with what they had heard and learned during the sermons. Most of all, though, my professors (all of whom had been pastors themselves, at one point) came humbly and readily to sit under the leadership and teaching of a man they had helped to train for ministry, and they willingly submitted to their congregation in worship. Your professors may be the best models for you in worship.

Your private and family devotional life will also shape how you worship. If you are neglecting your personal Bible study and prayer during the week, of course you will struggle to worship on Sundays. If you and your wife have unforgiven sin between you, naturally you will not be ready of heart and mind for worshipping God. Attend to your private worship, be diligent in your family devotions, and corporate worship will come more naturally to you.

Commit yourself to set aside the time for worship. Worship and rest are inextricably connected in Scripture, and for good reasons—one of which is that you cannot ably worship with a mind that is not at rest. You must learn the discipline of putting aside the unfinished work that is before you: regardless of how many pages you have left to write, how much reading is still incomplete, or how big the pile of dishes you haven't yet washed, you will never worship fully and devotedly without learning to turn away from the work and turn to the Lord.

Don't neglect to pray that you would become a better worshiper! This is a prayer item that you will never exhaust. Pray that the Lord would teach you to worship in spite of yourself. Pray for the humility that you need, and the awe and wonder at Christ's

grace that would move you to worship Him fervently. Ask God to draw you to Himself and bind you to others in your congregation as you worship together.

Why is it so vital that you worship well? First, because you were created to worship God, and to bring Him glory. You will never enjoy Him more fully than in corporate worship. Second, because our worship is a reflection of what we love— and if we struggle in worship, it means that we have either begun to idolize something else or our love for God has dulled. Third, because it will give you the nourishment and sustenance that you need to persevere through your work as a student (and other work).

And finally, because you may never again be free to worship God in the way that you are now free to do so. Most pastors have some level of responsibility during (or surrounding) the corporate worship that they engage in through their ministries. Many (like myself) serve in a setting wherein we are leading a central part of worship almost every week. This may be your last season of worship that is unfettered by the responsibilities of ministry.⁶

Learn to worship well, and delight in the worship that you get to participate in during seminary.

Family Life

You may not immediately think of family as a context for spiritual engagement, at least in the same way that Bible study, prayer, and worship are. *But it is such a context.*

Every seminary family is different: some spouses are much more active on-campus, attending or taking classes and perhaps even earning degrees themselves, while others (by choice or necessity) have not been as present. Some relationships were forged in the seminary context, while others were longstanding before seminary was a nascent thought. Some are eager and supportive of their spouse as soon-to-be pastor, while others are much more reluctant and even apprehensive about that prospect.

Regardless, if you are married then neither your marriage nor your ministry will survive for very long without the unequivocal support, cooperation, and participation of your spouse. Therefore, your family life (to whatever degree you have a family) must be a part of the process of both the preparation for ministry and the transition into it.

This must begin at the spiritual level. You cannot neglect the engagement of your spouse in the spiritual relationship as you prepare to move into pastoral ministry.

What are some ways that you may do this? How do you enter the season of transition, spiritually, with your mate?

Read the Bible together. You need to spend time as a couple⁷ in Scripture together, seeking wisdom and growth from the Lord. Share with them what you have been reading lately, and talk about it with each other. What has she been reading for her devotionals? Where has he felt like God has been ministering to him from the Word? Open your Bibles and build one another up with the Word of God.

Talk openly and frequently about transition. Work hard to get on the same page about where you both are in the transition process, and where you need to be. How do you

6 Which is not to say that you won't be engaged with the worship of God in your ministry! On the contrary, it is a privilege to worship God in the way that pastors get to worship weekly. But it won't be the same— and those differences are significant.

7 And as a family, as appropriate.

feel about transition right now? Excited? Scared? Nervous? Frustrated? Motivated? What is on their mind about it? Are there any opportunities that stand out to them? What priorities do they believe are important? How ready do you both feel for the candidacy process? How about for the transition? Dig in and shoot straight with each other about what's on your heart and mind regarding your transition into ministry.

Be encouragers. This is a difficult season to go through— even if you're not going through it alone. You both need the vitalizing support of the other. Where do they feel ready and prepared for ministry? In what ways do they need to be built up? How about you? Learn ways that you need encouragement from each other, and then provide that encouragement.

Pray for one another. You will face the transition differently, and you will have different needs. Be faithful to lift up the other's needs before the Lord in prayer. Does your spouse feel differently than you do about where you are in the process? Are they trusting in God's leading as they should? Do they struggle with discerning what is best? Do they know how they can be praying for you, as well? Support one another by praying for each other.

Pray with each other. Don't just pray **for** your spouse— also pray **with** them! Share with them in the fellowship of giving praise to God, offering thanksgiving for the call into ministry, and asking your heavenly Father for His hand to be upon your candidacy and transition.

Take advantage of this window of time, with its focus on your future ministry together, to continue, renew, or establish patterns and habits for spiritual engagement with your family. You'll grow from it during your transition, and you'll have a strong precedent to begin a new ministry together.

Other Spiritual Development

Two other areas that might deserve some focus for spiritual formation are reading and discipline.

In the midst of finishing seminary, you may not think more reading is what you need! But it may actually be exactly what you need: reading that is devotional, that encourages your soul toward readiness for ministry, or that gives you a healthy break from your study can be restorative to your soul. Pick up a book by Henri Nouwen, Brennan Manning, Walt Wangerin, or Jerry Bridges to encourage your weary spirit. Take up and read Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones's *On Preaching & Preachers*, or one of Eugene Peterson's books on pastoral ministry to encourage you in preparation for your soon-coming transition into service.

Likewise, do not neglect the other aspects of spiritual discipline as further focus on your spiritual formation. One approach to these might be to consider the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22-23. How are these aspects of the fruit of the Spirit made manifest in your life? What areas of spiritual discipline need greater attention in order to better see these borne more fully in your life? (You also might re-evaluate the other areas of Bible study, prayer, corporate worship, and family life in light of the fruit of the Spirit.) Other disciplines also come to mind, as well: for example, whether or not fasting has been a part of your spiritual practices, it may be worthwhile to begin occasional or regular times of fasting as support to your prayer and worship. Jesus

expected his disciples to be people who fasted,⁸ and pastors (as well as those preparing for pastoral ministry) should take up the practices that Jesus expected of his disciples. Likewise, therefore, ministry of caring for the poor (almsgiving) may be another spiritual discipline that you consider redoubling your attention toward during your time in seminary.

Pastoral ministry is a spiritual work, but your personal spiritual practices won't change substantially from seminary into ministry. The practices and disciplines you establish now, and that you have been establishing up to now, will be what you can expect your ministry to enjoy down the line. Re-commit yourself to a devotional life!

8 “And *when* you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But *when* you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:16-18, emphasis added.)

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