



CHURCH MINISTRY RESIDENCIES

Filling the Ministry Training Gap for the Next Generation

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A CHURCH HOMECOMING

From before our nation's founding, the formal preparation of vocational ministers and missionaries has largely been entrusted to degree-granting Bible colleges, Bible institutes, and seminaries. As a case in point, even the second U.S. president, John Adams, wrestled with his career choice as a young man, struggling to decide whether he would leave home for studies at Harvard to become a pastor, a doctor, or a lawyer (McCullough, 2001). Of course, many early American ministers such as Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, and Adoniram Judson also moved away to prepare for church and missionary service at historic ministry training colleges such as Yale and Brown, institutions that have since departed from Christian-exclusive teachings. Just the same, leaving one's home and home church to gain ministerial training in an educational institution is seemingly as American as apple pie.

Though pastors and congregations around the globe owe a debt of gratitude to the efforts of both historic and contemporary ministry training institutions, times are changing, and ministerial preparation is once again finding its way back home—into local churches—through the rise of church-based ministry residency programs. Besides the church's biblical mandate to disciple people for a life of Great Commission obedience (Matthew 28:19-20, 2 Timothy 2:2, Philippians 2:19-24), two trends are converging that emphasize the church's critical role in developing church ministers, church planters, and church-planting missionaries.



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TWO CATALYZING FACTORS THAT PROMOTE CHURCH MINISTRY RESIDENCIES

First, theological training institutions are struggling to survive. Of the three dozen American colleges and universities that closed since the onset of COVID-19, eighteen of them are Christian universities (Silliman, 2023). Besides closures, the potential student body for Christian universities is shrinking to unsustainable levels. Nadya Williams (2024), a researcher for Christianity Today, explains that **the single biggest factor in this decline is the long-predicted demographic cliff that America is now facing**. During the Great Recession, U.S. birthrates sharply declined and never bounced back; they remain below replacement levels. She states, “All things being equal, this means that freshman college classes are in a perpetual state of decline. Though educational institutions with deep pockets will likely be fine, smaller Bible colleges and seminaries will not” (Williams, 2024).

It is not just that the number of students is declining; so is the general interest in Christian universities. Seth Odell’s (2024) recent research on the crisis facing Christian colleges found that even **the phrase “Christian college” has experienced a 75% decline in Google searches since 2004**. He further notes that “as theological institutions try to financially stay afloat, a common trend is the loosening of acceptance standards. This reveals that some Christian college sustainability or growth may be as much about decreased selectivity as it is about increased demand” (Odell, 2024).


As Christian educational institutions decline and dissolve, **local churches remain as the foundational and God-ordained institutions for training future ministers**.

Even legacy institutions such as Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) are working to link theory and practice to the local church. Instead of facilitating learning only in the isolation of the classroom, DTS supports learning happening within the community of faith as the student serves in a ministry context and reflects on that experience (DTS, 2025).



The second trend is far more encouraging: The **younger Gen Z and Millennial generations are leading a resurgence of church attendance in the United States**. According to recent research from Barna (2025), “Millennials and Gen Z Christians are attending church more frequently than before and much more often than are older generations. The typical Gen Z churchgoer now attends 1.9 weekends per month, while Millennial churchgoers average 1.8 times—a steady upward shift since the lows seen during the pandemic.” Though these younger generations are not pursuing theological education in Christian universities in the same manner that previous generations have, they are far more engaged in their local churches and are interested in spiritual matters.

These trends superbly position the local church for training up the next generation of gospel ministers through church-based ministry residency programs.



God is drawing
younger leaders
to local and
global church
participation.
Therefore, local
church leaders must
understand the
times and steward
this equipping
responsibility well.



WHAT IS A CHURCH MINISTRY RESIDENCY?

Available for both men and women, church-based ministry residencies differ from internships. According to Dave Miller (2022), the co-founder of Leadership Pathways, “a ministry residency is intended for a person who is aiming to serve in full-time ministry within a fixed amount of time, such as two years”; interns’ roles are typically far more seasonal and are designed to manage lighter tasks. Further, **“a church ministry residency program provides a structured, intentional environment where young leaders can grow theologically, develop practical ministry skills, and gain pastoral wisdom**—all while being deeply rooted in the life of a local church. It is not just about classroom learning; it is about formation in the context of real ministry” (Gilbert, 2025).

CHURCH MINISTRY RESIDENCIES PROMOTE FIELD PREPAREDNESS

Local church participation in the development of pioneer church planters is of utmost importance. Organizations such as Christar, which serve to establish churches among the least-reached, must ensure that church-sent global ministers are field-ready for the work of church planting in some of the world’s most challenging contexts.

Like local church-planting efforts in the United States, church-facilitating mission agencies need biblically qualified ministers with developed pastoral qualities and elder-level capacities who will faithfully do the arduous work of serving on pioneer church-planting teams. The skills, grit, and character necessary for this work are most effectively cultivated in the context of local church community.

As Easton (2025) states, “Most of a church’s efforts should be placed on helping the everyday member of the church become a disciple of Christ who understands their sentness. But to see missionaries raised up that are ready to go to the areas of low access to the gospel, churches with a sending vision and pipeline are greatly needed.” Church-based ministry residency programs done in partnership with a mission agency, like Christar, offer a structure for developing sustained Great Commission effectiveness.

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CHURCH MINISTRY RESIDENCIES

REDUCE AVOIDABLE MISSIONARY ATTRITION

According to research findings shared by the president of Missio Nexus, Ted Esler (2024), missionaries currently serve for an average of twelve years. However, this is an average that includes the career-long service of soon-retiring Boomer generation missionaries. Esler's reported figure is an average, whereas the median of missionaries' service years would likely be far lower. Another survey of 745 former missionaries, on the topic of missionary attrition, found the average years of missionary service to be nine years (Rowe, 2018). Other sources have even mentioned the average years of a missionary's service to be seven years (Esler, 2024). This goes to show that **missionary attrition is impacting the effective fulfillment of the Great Commission**. The primary reasons for avoidable attrition include issues that are largely preventable and practically addressable through church ministry residencies.

Though there are exceptions, "The current cultural climate in the West encourages entitlement, resentment, and fragility rather than grit, perseverance, and sacrifice. This cultural trend inevitably infiltrates the church and affects those whom the church sends as missionaries" (Pratt, 2024) and magnifies the need for intentional development and discipleship of the next generation of church planters.

To develop missionary preparedness and reduce avoidable attrition, churches like Fellowship Bible Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas have developed church residencies that **comprehensively prepare young leaders through practical experience**. The church aims its church residency program at the head, heart, and hands. To develop their "head" knowledge, residents spend one year studying the Old Testament and one year studying the New Testament. To develop the "hearts" of emerging ministers, the church requires every resident to actively participate in a twelve-step program and to work through their own personal issues. To develop the "hands," each resident is given hands-on learning and leadership experience within the local church and through a variety of global ministry opportunities (B. Pope, personal communication, September 30, 2025).



CHURCH RESIDENCIES CAN BE DONE IN ALL SIZES OF CHURCHES

Nathan Sloan (2018) of Upstream Collective researched how a variety of church ministry residency programs across the nation use a contextualized version of the head, heart, and hands model. This framework can be implemented by all sizes of churches. In fact, smaller and medium-sized churches often grant residents more ministry leadership and teaching opportunities than large churches. The head, heart, and hands missionary development model helps churches of all sizes instill ministry-sustaining traits into residents—traits that are necessary for field-preparedness and long-term service.

Taking a deeper look at this accessible church ministry residency model, Sloan (2025) sees the head or “knowledge” aspect of residency as instilling missiological and theological foundations and clarity. The heart or “character” aspect of the model is focused on developing spiritual vitality, marital and emotional health, clarity of one’s ministry calling, commitment to the local church, and interpersonal skills. Finally, the hands or “skills” aspect of the model is emphasized for developing interpersonal skills, missional lifestyle, practical skills, and leadership ability.

CHRISTAR IS AVAILABLE TO FACILITATE YOUR CHURCH RESIDENCY

Christar Church Ministry Residencies provide a framework for churches to utilize this head, heart, and hands model in a two- to three-year program for next-generation believers pursuing vocational ministry. The program provides a residency structure and coaching for host churches, while offering residents hands-on pre-field training and a support-raising and employment structure. Residents also have the option of earning an accredited degree while serving in a local church.

The program leverages Christar’s church partnerships, in-house donor-supported worker structure, relationships with theological institutions, and global field opportunities for developing field-ready missionaries. By means of a written three-way agreement, Christar seconds the resident to serve under the ecclesiastical authority and structure of the host church. Residents typically work 25 hours per week to develop their ministry character (heart) and skills (hands), and 15 hours per week are spent on a structured educational program (head) through one of Christar’s partner schools.

Though Christar residents will typically have a mission field trajectory, it is understood that not all residents will go to the mission field and that some will continue to faithfully serve as Great Commission-minded ministers within American churches. For residents desiring to serve abroad, it is preferred that the residency host church be willing to commission, serve, and celebrate them as their sending church.

As the training for vocational ministry comes to rest more heavily on local churches, Christar comes alongside, bringing over 115 years of church-planting experience and a deep commitment to seeing the next generation well-equipped for effective service. To learn more about Christar’s Church Ministry Residencies please visit christar.org/residency or contact Christar’s Church Engagement Director, Andrew Broeckelman, at andrew@imi.org.

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