

Ministers-In-Training

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[0 : 0 0] worth. How as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. In 2003 I graduated from the then Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh and accepted a call to become the minister of St Vincent Street Milton Free Church of Scotland as it was then.

I was ordained and inducted to the charge of the 12th of September 2003 and was immediately dropped in the deep end. I had never chaired a Kirk session or a deacon's court. I had never conducted a baptism or a funeral. I knew nothing about leadership in the church and had no experience of being a minister at all. As a result I made many many mistakes and in the process of making these mistakes hurt many people not the least my own family. For many many years perhaps till today you might say I was more of a liability than an asset to this congregation. You know that less than half of my contemporaries from college are still ministering in the Free Church largely down to the pressures in ministry they encountered. And as I look back I think to myself there has to be a better way of equipping and training our ministerial candidates because you see it's not always been this way.

In the 19th century Scottish church and even in the Free Church candidates were required after college to undergo a probationary year. And so Robert Murray McShane, the Boner Brothers, Alexander White and all the other great 19th century figures we associate with the the glory days of the Free Church trained not just in college they trained in situ. They shadowed a senior minister, they learned from him how to chair a Kirk session, how to conduct a funeral, how to resolve conflict, how to lead by serving. They were taught the principles of preaching in college but they really learned how to preach in a congregation.

Well after a gap of over a hundred years the Free Church of Scotland are reintroducing to my considerable delight a variant of the old scheme of training, a more historical, biblical and useful model not just of theological education but also of practical training. It is called the minister in training or as an American friends would call it internship. The moment three Free Church congregations are offering this internship program, St. Columbus in Edinburgh, St. Peter's in Dundee and St. Andrew's Free Church, we want to become the fourth in Glasgow City Free Church. So this is how it's going to work.

When a man applies for the ministry of the Free Church of Scotland he will undertake a four-year part-time course at Edinburgh Theological Seminary, the new fancy name for the Free Church College.

[3 : 2 7] At the same time he will be embedded in a congregation where he will be working and training part-time. In that congregation he will shadow the minister or in our case ministers and learn from him and from the other elders and the people in the congregation every aspect of ministry. And so for us in Glasgow City that's going to mean that he'll be trained in leadership, in youth work, in church planting, in preaching, in local mission, in church administration, etc, etc.

We plan to begin this internship program in September of this year and we already have an applicant in the pipeline, no surprises as to who it is.

You see in introducing this minister in training program we're not introducing anything new into the life of the Free Church. Rather we are reintroducing something from older days which should never have been lost in the first place. We estimate that each intern will cost the congregation £8,000 per annum.

So if we want to do this as a church we need to be in it together or not at all. Well perhaps you'll forgive the autobiographical and ecclesiastical introduction. What we're really interested in as a Reformed Christian this evening is the biblical justification for this change, for this appeal, for this minister in training program. Well it comes from a host of biblical passages but chiefly from the relationship between the Apostle Paul and Timothy the Evangelist. We could draw on many passages from the New Testament to prove this but I want to draw your attention to this passage here in Philippians from chapter 2 verses 19 through 24 where Paul is describing the three-way relationship between himself, Timothy and the Philippian Christians. From this passage we can glean the three principal benefits of a minister in training program where candidates for the ministry learn in situ here in Glasgow City Free Church. First testing, second relating and thirdly developing. Ultimately you know this is why we in Glasgow City want to invest in this internship program. Not just because it works and it's historical but because it's biblical. First of all then testing, testing. Look at verse 22 with me.

But you know Timothy's proven worth. You know Timothy's proven worth. Paul's about to send Timothy to the church in Philippi to encourage them and bring back to him news of their faithfulness to Christ and he wants them to know that he's not sending to them an untrained novice. He's sending to them a man, a minister of proven worth. Someone who has been tested because that's what the word translated by the ESV as proven worth really means, tested. Paul's not taking a risk by sending Timothy to the Philippians because he has trained Timothy. And both he and Timothy know what to expect.

[6 : 59] Phil Stogner, who I want to thank for this morning's brilliant introduction to church planting. Looking forward to the next two weeks. Phil Stogner recently summarized for me in a walk together the three reasons why a ministry ends. First, because of some immorality within the minister himself.

Second, because of an ill thought through building project. I have seen that among some of my colleagues. And third, because the minister becomes disillusioned through conflict or a steaming lack of success. Our present system of theological training does little if anything to safeguard or prepare our young men against these three dangers in the ministry. Too many men like my colleagues drop out of the ministry because the freshness of their enthusiasm is not tested. It's not proven in real life. By contrast, Timothy knew what to expect in the ministry because he was Paul's companion in mission. He saw Paul being put under great pressure by false teachers within the church and persecutors without the church. He saw how Paul dealt with conflict and disillusionment and how he conducted himself both in private and in public. And just as importantly, perhaps, Paul saw Timothy and have the opportunity to speak truth into Timothy's life. Paul could assess for himself the genuineness of Timothy's character, call and gifts. And Timothy passed with flying colors.

By contrast, consider Demas, another of Paul's missionary companions. In Colossians 4.14 and Philemon 1.24, Paul speaks about him in the same breath as he speaks about the faithful evangelist, Epaphras. So Demas had all Timothy's advantages in training. But in 2 Timothy 4.10, we read these haunting words.

Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me. Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me. As I say, Demas received the first, the same training firsthand from Paul, but proved faithless.

Too many men apply for the ministry, are licensed and ordained, but prove to have more of the Demas about them than the Timothy. Many of you, thankfully, will now have received your first vaccine against the coronavirus. That vaccine was rigorously tested before it was approved for use. How would you have felt if you had been offered a vaccine that had not been tested and was not proven?

[10 : 03] In the same way, a minister and training program, whilst not guaranteeing anything, will give us confidence in the character, in the call, and in the gifts of our ministry.

It won't guarantee that we won't get the odd Demas, but it will ensure we get more than our fair share of Timothys, men and ministers of proven worth. Testing.

Secondly, relating. Relating. 99.9% of gospel ministry is about relationships. And the most important relationship a minister has is with his Lord. But such a relationship is actually very challenging to pursue while studying in a theological college. I very clearly remember my mentor, Professor Dollar McLeod, once warning us as students to be on our guard against spiritual dryness in the study of theology. Many of my colleagues in ministry will tell you that their years in college tended toward being very spiritually dry. And one of the reasons for that is the lack of relationships both with the professorial staff, but also with real life congregations. Other professions such as medicine and teaching prioritise learning in situ because it fosters healthy relationships. The Free Church's new minister in training program brings back that level of relationship theological students have always needed, but of sorely lacked. Well, in Timothy's case, this worked in two ways. His relationship with Paul and his relationship with the Philippians, or to put it another way, his relationship with his mentor and his relationship with those God has called him to serve. First of all, his relationship to Paul.

Paul. Again, look at verse 22 with me. Paul describes his relationship to Timothy in this verse as being that of that as a father and son. Paul's the father, Timothy is the son.

There's in this relationship two things I want you to notice. In the first instance, the relationship Paul describes is very far from being merely professional. It's more in the nature of being familial.

[12 : 45] We must be very careful not to transform the church into a corporation. That's not to say we're to be anything less than professional in our approach, but we are to be far more.

Theological seminaries aren't the places to develop these kinds of relationships. There, by definition, we relate to those more senior than us as professors.

Not fathers, but professors. The truth is that students don't know enough about their professors to speak of them as fathers. And it's impossible for the professors to know their students well enough to call them their sons. But in a church setting where the ministerial candidate is being trained by a serving minister. He's able to get to know that minister really well and learn from him things that would otherwise be inaccessible. So he's able to watch that minister interact with people in pain, to deal with conflict among his office bearers, to plan out and lead evangelistic ministries, among many other things, or even just to prepare a sermon.

In addition, he gets to know the minister's private life, how he relates to his wife and his family, how he prays, how he deals with his own struggles and disappointments and disillusionment.

It becomes far more intimate than a merely professional mentoring program, because nothing's off limits, nothing. But in the second instance here of Timothy relating to Paul, I want you to notice that within this relationship there is accountability and teachability. Paul is the apostle and the father.

[14 : 32] Timothy is the son and not the apostle. Paul has the authority to send Timothy to the Philippians. Timothy is always learning from Paul, just as Paul is always teaching Timothy. There's a clear order of authority here.

One of the problems the free church has faced in recent years is that of order and authority. Especially when it comes to ministerial assistantships, we've been somewhat lost as a denomination.

I won't go into the exact details of the church law problems behind this, but it's led to great conflict between senior pastors and their assistants, largely caused by a lack of legally backed authority structures within the church.

The internship program is not an assistantship. The interns are not ordained, and therefore they are not on the same level of seniority as trained, ordained ministers of word and sacrament.

And as such, they are not confused by uncertain authority structures. The minister and the elders are in charge. The minister is leader, and that's the way it is.

[15 : 50] Of course, he must be humble enough and approachable enough to accept correction, but he's the one who sets the agenda. He's the father. And therefore, the minister in training, the intern is to be the son.

Teachable. Compliant. He's to be willing to learn. To be challenged. To be sent to the Philippians. That's a far better model of training than anything we have in place at the moment.

It's more historical and more importantly, it's more biblical. So relating to Paul. That's the first level of relating.

Second, relating to the Philippians. Relating to the Philippians. As I said earlier, 99.9% of gospel ministry is about relationships. In particular, it's about the relationships we are to have with those God has called us to love and serve.

Consider how it is that in verse 20, Paul says about Timothy, I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

[16 : 58] So Paul's sending Timothy to the Philippians, and there's a connection between them. Timothy is genuinely concerned for their welfare. And as far as Paul is concerned, it would seem from verses 23 and 24, it's just as good for Timothy to be with the Philippians as if he were with them in person himself.

We're going to build upon this theme in our last point. But what I want to say here is that the relationship between Paul and Timothy was important, but not everything.

What theological students struggle with is not just a lack of personal relationship with their professors, but a lack of relationship with the fellowship of God's people.

It may surprise you to know that in all my years here as a minister, I have learned far more from you as individual Christians than you have ever learned from me.

And I'm not just talking about common sense. I'm talking about how to do ministry. Let me give you a random example. It's not in my notes.

[18 : 08] Let me give you a random example. Margaret McKinnon, mature believer, many years, said to me in the march of one particular year, many years ago, please don't preach on dark prophecies in the month of February.

What words of wisdom? You wouldn't learn that in a theological seminary, but I learned it here from you. My ministry is enriched by the teaching I receive from you, both in word and by example.

That's exactly the point here. Too many men come out of seminary thinking that they've got nothing more to learn than their teachers, not learners.

And it's wrong in any number of levels, not the least of which, is that the best theological and experiential teacher, a minister of the gospel ever has, is his congregation.

As he watches them dealing with the real life problems they're facing and walks through it with them, he learns about how sufficient the grace of Christ really is.

[19 : 17] We all have a role to play in training our ministerial candidates, not just in our financial contributions or in our prayers. Our contribution is to teach them by our own experiences how the grace of the gospel works out in day-to-day messy living.

You see, the appointment of these interns probably places far more responsibility on us than it does them. Don't stand aloof from them.

Let them learn from you how deep and wide and rich the grace of Jesus really is. And then hopefully when they're ordained into their own congregations, they'll have had the best of teachers.

And they won't make the kind of mistakes that I did. Relating. And then thirdly and briefly, testing, relating, and then thirdly and briefly, developing, developing.

Our primary focus in initiating this minister in training program is on the development of the ministerial candidate. It's not about what we can get out of him during his time with us, how we can flog him until he's a dead horse.

[20 : 31] It's about what we can invest in his development. Always realizing that the kingdom of God is far bigger than Glasgow City Free Church. Well, in 1 Timothy 4 verse 15, the apostle Paul writes to Timothy saying, Practice these things.

Devote yourself to them so that all may see your progress. Our primary focus is on his progress and his development.

Recognizing that not one of us is the finished article and that we all need refinement and progress. Progress. And that emphasis was more certainly in Paul's mind back here in Philippians 2 and his discussion with his relationship with Timothy.

And in particular, Paul invested in three areas of Timothy's development. Three areas that we want to make the benchmark of our interns' progress also.

Focusing on Christ. Serving Christ. And ministering to Christ's people. Focusing on Christ. Serving Christ.

[21 : 44] And ministering to Christ's people. Focusing on Christ. The fundamental pillar of the ministry is the minister's own relationship to Christ.

What some people call his piety. It really doesn't matter how gifted a man he is. It's his godliness which is the fundamental pillar of his ministry.

Paul talks of Timothy's piety in verse 21. They all seek their own interests. Not those of Jesus Christ. See how Timothy is developing in godliness.

In putting the interests of Christ before his own. How can it be any other than that? When he's shadowing the same man who in Philippians 1.21 said of himself.

For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. And then later in Philippians 3 verse 8 writes. I count everything as loss compared to the surpassing knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.

[22 : 50] For Timothy and for our interns also. The primary aim of his training was to know Christ better. To learn from Paul how to place all the weight of his trust upon Jesus and his righteousness.

The primary aim of ministry is not inward development or outward development.

But upward development. Our closeness to Christ and our single-minded focus on him. This is something that theological seminaries just aren't set up to provide for.

But something which is going to be central to the ministry in training program. The piety of the candidate. 300 years ago the famous borders minister the Reverend Thomas Boston wrote these words.

Words that have haunted me ever since I heard them from the mouth of Professor Epitola MacLeod. A man may preach like an angel but be useless. A man may preach like an angel but be useless.

[24 : 00] Who cares how gifted the man is if he's not a godly man? Who cares how gifted the man is if he knows little to nothing about the grace of Christ or is not being daily refreshed by the gospel?

We've had simply too many ministers over the years who have been far more gifted than I will ever hope to be. But because they've lacked a personal focus on Christ have shipwrecked their faith, their family and their ministry.

Robert Murray McShane once said, he served an assistantship under Andrew Boner's uncle, John Boner in Larbert. He once said, what a man is upon his knees, that is what he is before God.

And nothing more. What a man is on his knees before God, that is what he is. And nothing more. Personal piety, focusing on Christ, is going to be the fundamental pillar of the minister in training program.

The intern's own relationship to Jesus and his gospel. Second, in serving Christ. The third secondary in which the intern is going to develop is in serving Christ.

[25 : 16] Again, in verse 22 of Philippians 2, Paul says of Timothy, he has served with me in the gospel. He has served with me in the gospel. Again, in Philippians 1 verse 1, Paul begins his letter with the words, Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.

There is no higher title that can be given to a person than that he or she is a servant of Christ. A servant, not a master.

A servant, not a lord. I don't really care for some of the fancy titles we give to church positions today. Director, coordinator, facilitator, and so on.

The highest of all titles to which a minister of the gospel can aspire is this. A slave of Christ Jesus. Too many young men go into the ministry because they see it as being a step up in status.

That from now on, people are going to look up to them. There should really be a plaque emblazoned above the door of Edinburgh Theological Seminary with the words of Christ emblazoned upon it.

[26 : 29] I am among you as one who serves. Not enough young men go into the ministry seeing it as a step down into service. Not a step up into status.

And so another fundamental pillar of our minister and training program will be to reinforce that the word minister means servant, not master. And that just as Jesus stooped down to make us great, so we who bear his image must be his servants.

Let me say this again. Ministry is not a step up into status. It's a step down into service. But there is no higher privilege in all of life than to be called a servant of Christ Jesus.

And then third and final area in which we're going to focus on the intern's development is in ministering to Christ's people. In ministering to Christ's people. Once again, we go to verse 20 here.

I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. In other words, Timothy is concerned about all those things which concern the Philippians.

[27 : 43] He is the ultimate servant in that not only does he do his job as a servant, but he's a servant in heart, body, and mind.

Everything about these Philippian Christians is important to him. He is Christ's image to them. He is with them in the highs and in the lows. He is with them in the joys and in the sorrows.

And not just as one whose job it is to be a minister, but as someone who serves them and is among them. So the minister in training is going to be exposed to every possible environment in which he may serve the rest of us.

Grief. Mental illness. Backsliding. Prosperity. The discipleship of new believers. Encouragement of those who are losing heart.

He'll be our servant. Just as I'm your servant. He'll learn that the two greatest ways that a minister can serve his people are by proclaiming the word of God to them and by praying to the God of the word for them.

[29 : 05] By being a preacher and an intercessor. He's going to learn through bitter experience that although we are called to be shepherds of God's flock, the sheep sometimes bite the shepherd.

And genuine ministers of Christ bear the scars of the sharp teeth of the criticisms, tempers and grievances of their flock. He's going to experience the seething hurt of their rejection.

But he's also going to experience the joy of restoring backslidden believers and of discipling new Christians. And yes, he's going to sit beside the beds of dying Christians, as I've often done.

And he's going to shake with fear and want to run away, as I've often done. But through the pain and the grief, he's going to give them the comfort of the promises of the gospel.

You see, our aim in this internship program is to produce well-rounded, mature Christian ministers ready to serve Christ and Christ's people.

[30 : 13] To produce men who know that they are weak, but that Christ is strong. And that the greatest need of the Free Church of Scotland today is godly shepherds who will feed God's people, not fleece God's people.

In short, ministers who are an awful lot better prepared for ministry than I ever was. I hope I've demonstrated to you the biblical and historical value of such a program, and why we in Glasgow City Free Church have as our strapline and equipping church why we want to be front and centre of this initiative.

Do you like what you hear? Do you agree that we need more Timothys and less Demas? Then with your feet squarely placed on gospel ground, invest in these interns who will be among you from September and pray for them.