

Wilshire Baptist Church: Salt and Light

By Ann Bell Worley

Each Sunday morning, worship at Wilshire Baptist Church begins with sounds of the pipe organ ringing through the sanctuary. More Sundays than not, these sounds give way to a voice in the waters, welcoming worshipers to witness the baptism of a new brother or sister in faith. The words of introduction vary from week to week, but the words that follow have developed into a well-known ritual. After baptizing the candidates and pronouncing their ordination to Christian ministry, Senior Pastor George Mason touches their lips with salt and echoes Jesus' words, "You are the salt of the earth." He then hands them a lighted candle, saying, "You are the light of the world."

These words from the Sermon on the Mount have become an integral part of the language of baptism at Wilshire, underscoring the church's commitment to cultivate and nurture a sense of call in each of its members. Wilshire encourages new disciples to 'flavor' and 'brighten' the world through their Christian vocation and takes concrete steps to support all of its members as they respond to God's call. One might even say that Wilshire is in the business of harvesting salt and lighting candles. Especially since the early 1990s, Wilshire has embraced its collective call to be a teaching congregation, developing practices and programs that help members to discover their calling and discern vocational direction. The challenge of calling out the called has become an integral part of Wilshire's self-understanding, an organizing principle for the church's shared life.

The Church in its Setting

Wilshire Baptist Church is nestled in an established yet changing neighborhood just north of the Lakewood area in Dallas. Once considered a suburb, Lakewood is now better described as an urban neighborhood, encircled by Dallas's I-635 Loop. Founded in 1951 following an internal conflict in Lakewood Baptist Church, Wilshire Baptist has enjoyed a fruitful half-century of ministry with no further division. Its name derives from the nearby Wilshire Theater, which is no longer in business. While the city and surrounding area have changed considerably over the past 50 years, Wilshire has profited from decades of stability, with many original members still in place and a number of four-generation families on the rolls. Because of its unique blend of historic Baptist principles and mainline Protestant theology, Wilshire draws members from all over the city of Dallas and outlying areas. It thereby retains a suburban feel even in its urban setting.

The city of Dallas remains a stronghold of conservative Christianity across many denominations; yet in terms of its broader characteristics, Dallas offers a mainstream or even liberal-leaning version of American culture. In this setting, Wilshire is unique: it is an evangelical church with ecumenical character, worship inspired by sacramental liturgy, and moderate Baptist theology. Wilshire defies stereotypes. It is a sizable Baptist church in the heart of the Bible Belt that practices ordination of women and follows the Revised Common Lectionary—unusual habits within Baptist circles. While the Southern Baptist Convention became embroiled in controversy through much of the 1980s and 1990s, Wilshire decided to remain true to historic Baptist principles: the priesthood of all believers, the autonomy of the local church, freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state. Wilshire formally severed ties with the

Southern Baptist Convention and became a founding congregation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a network of churches and individuals formed in 1991 to help moderate Baptist congregations achieve their mission more effectively. The church also has affiliations with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Greater Dallas Community of Churches, Dallas Area Interfaith, and numerous other ecumenical and interfaith ministries and organizations.

Wilshire counts approximately 3,100 members, of which an estimated 1,800 are resident members. Roughly 1,100 families make up the active membership. Weekly worship attendance runs 1,200 to 1,400 in two morning services, and Sunday school averages 900 to 1,000. Membership is primarily white and upper middle class, although the congregation does reflect some socio-economic and racial diversity consistent with its immediate surroundings. Fourteen full-time ministers, including four pastoral residents and one music resident, serve the congregation along with numerous support personnel. The annual operating budget tops \$3,000,000; around 20% of the budget is designated for missions. The church facility and grounds are in excellent condition, with renovation and beautification efforts ongoing.

Four senior pastors have served the church since its founding and have provided stability through their long tenures. The present senior pastor, the Rev. Dr. George A. Mason, has served Wilshire since 1989. Before him, the Rev. Bruce McIver pastored for 30 years and served as pastor emeritus for 12 more until his death in 2001. Mason and McIver have played a vital role in shaping Wilshire's culture of call. The church's clergy apprenticeship program, now known as *Pathways to Ministry*, developed out of their shared passion for nurturing young ministers and has become one of the church's identifying marks. Through Mason's leadership and his predecessor's legacy, Wilshire has become a teaching congregation, a cultivator of salt and light, nurturing the call to vocation in all of its members and the call to ministry in particular.

Practices and Programs

Wilshire's culture of call developed in the heart of its ministers and in the life of the congregation. It began not with monumental projects but with already-existing congregational practices and habits. Clergy and laity worked together to expand these habits into strong and stable initiatives. Today Wilshire's commitment to 'calling out the called' fuels a spectrum of growing programs and practices, which continue to evolve as the church discovers new ways to be an agent of God's call.

Habits of Being

The lifeblood in Wilshire's culture of call is the priesthood of all believers, the notion that all people of God are called to ministry, some to ordained ministry in particular. The priesthood of all believers permeates the language of every worship service, every church conference and every committee meeting. It is the language people hear and the language people speak, the language of the pulpit and the language of the pew. It is both part of the congregation's culture and a shaper of that culture. These 'habits of being' that flow from the priesthood of all believers are evident almost everywhere: in worship, in lay initiatives and in the church's operations.

Worship. Sunday morning worship is the cornerstone of community at Wilshire, and the 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. weekly gatherings are the primary setting for forming the church's culture of call. Wilshire's ministers are steeped in the language of call and give voice to it frequently and creatively as in the ritual of baptism described above. Hymns and litanies chosen for each service promote a sense of mission, stirring worshipers to consider God's call. The Lord's Supper includes an invitation to God's table and a corresponding appeal to respond to God's invitation. Baby dedications, for example, remind the congregation that every life comes from God and every life returns to God.

Sermons and prayers refer frequently to Christian vocation, an emphasis that arises naturally from the Scripture readings, from the liturgical season and from pertinent events in the life of the church and surrounding community.

In short, worship services at Wilshire offer multiple opportunities for congregants to consider their Christian calling. Within each element of worship, Wilshire ministers invite congregants to respond as well as to receive; they continually keep the notion of Christian vocation before the people. The call to ministry is not an occasional emphasis but a constantly recurring theme: some Christians are called to serve God and the Church in their particular line of work, and others are called to serve in vocational ministry. Wilshire celebrates and encourages its members to answer all such callings.

Lay leadership. In the 1990s, Wilshire's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers motivated some congregants to create a ministry of their own. Seasoned by their time in Wilshire's pews, a small group of members took the notion of Christian vocation to heart and developed a curriculum to support the discernment process. *Serving by God's Design* is now an eight-week course organized and led by lay members. Offered each fall and spring, the course helps Christian disciples identify and pursue their calling by finding points of intersection between their gifts and passions. Together with a corresponding notebook comprised of reflective assessments and group and individual exercises, the course continues to evolve as leaders find new and invigorating ways to frame the material. *Serving by God's Design* is the result of Wilshire members practicing what Wilshire's culture preaches.

Strategic Planning. Wilshire is a church that knows itself. Before the church began organizing particular programs for cultivating the call to ministry, Wilshire went through an important process of self-discovery that led to its departure from the Southern Baptist Convention and its alliance with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Instead of being weakened by years of turmoil in Baptist life, Wilshire recognized that the denominational crisis brewing on the national level actually offered an opportunity for congregational growth through self-examination: here was a chance for the individual church to strengthen its identity as an autonomous congregation in fellowship with others.

Having already solidified its distinctive Baptist character, in 2001 Wilshire entered a process of congregational discernment and strategic planning to identify indigenous strengths and resources for the future. Those strengths included a well-educated membership, active lay leadership, historic Baptist heritage, appreciation of the arts, fiscal soundness, and visionary leaders. With these strengths in mind, Wilshire began to conceive of itself as a teaching congregation, uniquely positioned to help members discern their calling in the context of the church.

Wilshire adopted a new five-year strategic plan on 6 January 2002. The plan outlines seven priorities: 1) Pursue spiritual formation, 2) Mobilize servants, 3) Multiply believers, 4) Reach people locally and globally, 5) Nurture today's changing families, 6) Strengthen financial stewardship, and 7) Provide facilities and technology to support ministries. Each of these priorities capitalized on the church's existing strengths; all together, they established a shared vision for Wilshire as a teaching congregation.

Along the way, Mason introduced the idea of a clergy apprenticeship program to a representative group of church members. After hearing his proposal with enthusiasm, the group offered both helpful input and unanimous approval. Mason took the idea to the church's formal strategic planning process, and clergy apprenticeship became part of the conversation about Wilshire's overall vision for the future. Wilshire's commitment to building a culture of call is now written into the strategic plan itself, under the broader category of 'Mobilizing Servants': "Wilshire will nurture and train a new generation of Baptist ministers in a premier church-based clergy apprenticeship program." And the *Pathways to Ministry* program, the end result of Mason's earlier brainstorm, became integrated into the overall vision of the entire congregation.

Pathways to Ministry Program

Wilshire enjoys a long record of interest in training young ministers. Until recently this commitment has taken the form of occasional internships, sometimes fulfilling seminary requirements for supervised ministry or field education. Fueled by conversations between their senior pastor and ailing pastor emeritus, however, in 2001 the church's passion for clergy apprenticeship took on new life. *Pathways to Ministry* was the result.

Mason and McIver shared a concern about the crisis of leadership facing Baptist churches, especially within the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. They took seriously the Church's responsibility across denominations to address the paucity of young people entering vocational ministry, and they dreamed of creative ways to engage the issue in their own faith community. The *Pathways to Ministry* program symbolizes this dream come to life. And it became possible only with the participation of a supportive and enthusiastic congregation.

The *Pathways to Ministry* program succeeds because it is a logical and passionate outgrowth of the congregation's shared commitments and strengths. As it has developed, *Pathways* consists of three interrelated programs for three distinct populations: *YourCall* for high school youth, *internships* for college and seminary students and the *Ministerial Residency Program* for new and aspiring clergy. In chronological terms, the internship program for college and seminary students came first, followed by the residency program for new ministers and then the *YourCall* program for youth. Each program is supplemented by an online forum specific to its population and goals.

YourCall. The *YourCall* program for youth is the newest subheading under the *Pathways to Ministry* umbrella. The congregation's initial interest in providing ministry opportunities and experiences for college students, seminarians and aspiring clergy quickly ignited a broader commitment to helping the church's young people develop a sense of God's calling at an early age, whether that calling led to pastoral ministry or to another profession.

As it contemplated resources and options, Wilshire received encouragement from *The Samuel Project*, an initiative funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. and housed at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, to design a program for nurturing the call in high school youth. After a year-long brainstorming and birthing process, Wilshire launched *YourCall* in January 2005. Fourteen students enrolled. Partial funding in the amount of \$15,000 from the Samuel Project allowed the church to hire a part-time *YourCall* supervisor to work in tandem with Wilshire's pastoral staff and with the students themselves.

YourCall aims to fan the flames of theological thought in high school youth and to introduce ministry as one among other viable vocations. In its broadest sense, the program guides gifted young people toward a lifetime of service to God through their work. This goal is accomplished through several forums, including semester-long modules of study, weekly online discussion and reflection, bimonthly gatherings with guest speakers, quarterly meetings with the senior pastor, and occasional meetings with mentors—either members of Wilshire's staff or carefully selected congregants. Semester-long modules of study and weekly online interaction provide basic structure to the program, while various meetings supplement the current subject of study and offer time for group interaction and learning.

Two modules of study are offered each school year, running August to December and January to May. Summertime remains open for extracurricular trips or service projects in addition to the normal youth group activities. Students who begin *YourCall* in the first semester of their ninth grade year and continue through high school graduation will complete a total of eight modules of study, including theology, biblical interpretation, worship and liturgy, ethics, Baptist history, church history, mission-justice, and a final integrative module.

YourCall operates from a webpage, the primary medium for communication among participants. This online platform is an essential element of the program; it capitalizes on a mode of communication that today's busy teens enjoy using and use frequently. *YourCall* participants visit the site at least once a week to read the supervisor's weekly posting on the semester's module of study and to offer their own reflections and questions to the group.

YourCall is open to any students in grades 9-12 who express interest. Students may start the program at the beginning of any semester and jump into the current module of study. *YourCall* students are not separated out from the rest of the youth group. In fact, continued and active involvement in Wilshire Student Ministry is required of all *YourCall* participants. But *YourCall's* online and real-time community gives interested young people additional opportunities to consider life and its questions from a deepening theological perspective.

Wilshire leaders are making plans to track *YourCall* students through college and perhaps seminary; they hope to determine how helpful the program is over the long term as former participants make vocational decisions. In Wilshire's determination, success will finally be measured by how many *YourCall* students find a way to serve God and the Church through their life-work, regardless of what form that work takes.

Summer and Semester Internships. Wilshire began offering internships to college and seminary students in the early 1980s, long before *Pathways to Ministry* in its current form was conceived. At that time interns were funded by monies given in memory of a beloved young adult. But the bulk of these funds were exhausted in the 1990s, so Wilshire began training interns on an *ad hoc* basis with funding from disparate sources. In recent years, Wilshire has regularly hired four or more college students as summer interns and made individual arrangements for seminary students to serve as semester interns. Recognizing this trend, in 2005 the church decided to incorporate funding for summer interns into its regular budget and to fund semester internships separately on a case by case basis.

Summer internships are available to college students in a variety of specialties, including music, missions, singles, youth, and children's ministries. Summer interns work primarily with the program minister in their specific area and on a limited basis with the rest of the church staff. Responsibilities may include teaching classes, directing ensembles, organizing events, sponsoring camps or mission trips, attending conferences, and shadowing ministers in various other functions pertinent to their roles. Many but not all of the summer interns are Wilshire members returning for the summer from college.

Semester internships are available only to seminary students interested in pastoral ministry and may be offered in the spring, summer, or fall semesters. Seminary interns work primarily with the Senior and Associate Pastors, often in fulfillment of field education requirements set by their academic institutions. These internships consist of regular meetings with the pastoral and worship staff, shadowing ministers in hospital and homebound visitation, and leading in worship in various capacities, including preaching. Semester internships for seminary students are arranged by the senior pastor, the student, and the seminary or divinity school.

Wilshire invites its interns to participate in *CallAnswers*, an online community for college and seminary students considering vocational ministry. Through this resource, Wilshire keeps in touch with many students—beyond the interns—who grew up in the church and are discerning a call to ministry while at colleges and universities around the country. *CallAnswers* is a forum for theological reflection among peers and a place to seek insight and advice from mentors in ministry.

Many Wilshire interns eventually enroll in seminary, and many of Wilshire's seminary students pursue post-graduate studies in religion and theology. At present, 15 congregation members are studying in seminaries and divinity schools across the country. Wilshire provides \$500 scholarships every semester to each of these students; the scholarships cover textbook costs and help maintain relationships with these members of Wilshire's extended family who are pursuing vocational ministry in other cities and settings.

Ministerial Residency Program. The residency program for new ministers is a hallmark of Wilshire's commitment to clergy apprenticeship and a direct outgrowth of the conversation about vocation between Mason and McIver. What began as an idea to host one pastoral resident for a two-year term on Wilshire's staff gradually developed into a

substantial program hosting several pastoral residents concurrently. The residency program continues to grow and expand each year: recently Wilshire created a new residency position in music ministry.

Borrowing a concept from the medical community, a residency in pastoral ministry allows recently ordained seminary graduates to gain experience in a congregational setting, serving two-year terms as ministers on the staff of an established church while engaged in a mentoring relationship with the pastor and associate pastors. The end goal is for pastoral residents to leave the program with two years of hands-on experience, an invaluable asset for anyone heading into his or her first post as pastor of a congregation.

Wilshire's first pastoral resident began serving the church in 2002 with funds set aside by McIver before he passed away. Early in 2003, the Lilly Endowment Inc. awarded Wilshire a grant to expand the residency program over a five-year period. With the grant money in place, Wilshire has added two new pastoral residents each fall (2003, 2004, and 2005), reaching a maximum capacity of four full-time pastoral residents on staff at a time. Each year, as two new residents begin and two current residents move into their second year, two seasoned residents graduate from the program to service in other settings. Wilshire is committed to continuing the program beyond the current grant period; it hopes to incorporate the residents into the overall budget and eventually create an endowment for the program.

During their two-year terms, residents focus primarily on pastoral ministry, including regular worship planning, sermon crafting and critique, pastoral care, and church staff responsibilities. Pastoral residents frequently lead in worship. They preach, offer prayers, perform baptisms and preside at the Lord's Supper table. Pastoral residents also may be called on to officiate weddings and funerals.

In addition to these duties, pastoral residents also rotate through six areas of targeted emphasis—worship, discipleship, fellowship, stewardship, mission and witness—on a trimester schedule. In this rotation, they work closely with different program ministers. During their discipleship rotation, for example, residents engage in regular conversation with education ministers for each population within the church: preschool, children, youth, adults (various ages) and singles (all ages). During their witness rotation, residents work closely with the minister of missions. Desired competencies and curricular components are outlined for each of the six ministry areas, including various reading assignments and periodic colloquia.

Wilshire's first music ministry resident, funded by an internal grant, began serving in the fall of 2004 and will continue for a three-year term. This term is purposely longer than the pastoral residency, allowing extra time for theological study and reflection since candidates for music ministry may not have attended seminary. The music ministry resident works closely with Wilshire's minister of music and concentrates mainly on worship planning and leading ensembles. He or she meets with the pastoral residents for weekly reflection and joins in three of their rotations: worship, discipleship and stewardship.

Upon arrival at Wilshire, both pastoral and music ministry residents are assigned a host family, a faith partner, and a lay mentoring committee. Host families exercise a ministry of hospitality, which may include shared meals, invitations to local cultural events and creative gestures of encouragement. Faith partners share a covenant of confidentiality with their assigned resident and offer support through prayer and regular communication. Lay mentoring committees, comprised of three to five persons selected by the senior and associate pastors, meet monthly with the resident; they offer important feedback from a lay point of view and act as a sympathetic sounding board from the pew.

While ministerial residents are encouraged to participate in *CallAnswerers*, which offers provocative questions, theological insights and peer counsel, they also are invited to join the *CallNurturers* network. Whereas *CallAnswerers* targets seminary and university students, *CallNurturers* connects established ministers and seminary professors who share a concern for supporting the call within congregations.

Wilshire’s residency program for young ministers has been well-received across a broad spectrum of the congregation. Members point to the residency program as a source of new life and vitality in their church; they identify it as one of the primary ways in which Wilshire is fulfilling its calling to be a teaching congregation. Wilshire members know they are not mere spectators, observing the residency and *Pathways* programs from afar; to the contrary, they are shareholders and participants.

Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Call

Wilshire Baptist Church’s wealth, privilege, and resources admittedly make it unique among churches. Yet Wilshire’s culture of call has reached its current state of maturity not solely because of these assets, but also because of the shared vision and intentionality of the congregation. The real success of Wilshire’s culture of call lies in practices of faith that are available to every church, regardless of financial resources. The passion for raising up ministers at Wilshire is far more valuable than anything money can buy. And some of the most compelling characteristics of Wilshire’s culture of call—congregational discernment, vocational language and educational mentoring—are available to any congregation willing to invest the necessary time and effort.

Congregational Discernment

Wilshire enjoys a clear sense of congregational identity and purpose. The early years of Mason’s tenure proved determinative for the church’s future. When the Southern Baptist Convention fell into conflict in the 1980s and early 1990s, like many other congregations Wilshire began to understand that the very soul of the denomination was at stake and that momentum had shifted into the hands of a new, increasingly fundamentalist leadership. When the church made the difficult decision to withdraw from the Southern Baptist Convention and begin a new fellowship of churches (the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship), Wilshire became a proactive rather than reactive congregation. Its members stepped out and said, “This is who we are,” rather than remaining in a denomination that no longer felt like home and defining themselves by who they were not.

The hard work of navigating through denominational controversy held welcome, if unexpected, benefits. Not only did Wilshire emerge from the process with a clearer sense of identity, it also came away with new enthusiasm for pursuing God’s call as a congregation. When Wilshire embarked on a strategic planning process, members took the time and discipline to turn their eyes inward and “know thyself”; in turn, they became better prepared to turn their eyes outward and participate in God’s work within the larger Church. It quickly became apparent that calling out and training a new generation of church leaders was a great need across the spectrum of Christian denominations. Wilshire gained a renewed sense of purpose when it recognized this need and committed itself to answering the challenge.

Although Wilshire’s culture of call developed naturally out of the church’s identity, it did not happen overnight or by accident. Congregational discernment played a role at each stage of the process. Mason asked hard questions of the congregation, walked with them through difficult decisions, and pursued intentional changes in the church’s culture. Though personally committed to creating a culture of call, he did not want the energy for this culture to come solely from the pastor’s office. The programs that Wilshire gradually created reflected this commitment: they were not simply the pastor’s projects but also, if not primarily, the congregation’s shared creation and responsibility. The pastors, staff and congregation worked in tandem to identify people and resources capable of moving their vision forward. And together they built a solid foundation for the long-term development of a culture of call at Wilshire.

Because every church enjoys different strengths and resources, every church must find its own unique way to be an agent of God’s call. No congregation can simply duplicate what another is doing. But any church *can* engage in a process of intentional discernment to identify educational, denominational, cultural, personnel, financial, or other resources at their disposal, and to name already-existing practices of faith that might contribute to the development of

a culture of call in the congregation. Those practices and strengths already present in a church provide the best foundation upon which to build a passion for vocational development. As the famous line from *Hamlet* goes: "To thine own self be true."

Vocational Language

A second practice that makes Wilshire's culture of call successful involves the use of vocational language. Both in worship and in various church meetings, Wilshire leaders routinely invoke the language of Christian calling, emphasizing that every baptized Christian is called to ministry. As a result, the entire congregation now uses the same expressions, identifying their work or volunteer service as their "ministry" or saying that "every member is a minister." The use of such language at Wilshire is both culture-creating and culture-sustaining; it provides a cyclical benefit. The *Serving by God's Design* curriculum and the *Pathways to Ministry* program connect explicitly with the language people hear in worship and in casual church gatherings. Every aspect of church life at Wilshire is seasoned with the language of Christian vocation, and every success the church counts with regard to nurturing the call can be traced back to this elemental practice.

Creating a culture of call in any church requires persistent attention, and the continual use of vocational language in worship and other church gatherings offers a powerful way to imbue a congregation with the value of vocational discernment. The summons to Christian service must be more than an occasional, special emphasis. It must become a regular part of the liturgy, the church's native tongue. Pastors and other ministers can begin building a culture of call by keeping the language of vocation always before the people, in various elements of worship, Sunday school teaching, business meetings, mission-trip commissions, and ordination services, among other settings. If Wilshire's example holds true, the language will begin to permeate the culture like candles passing the flame at a Christmas Eve service. Soon the value of nurturing vocation will spread through the entire congregation. The persistent and intentional use of vocational language can create a culture of call, and once learned by the congregation, will help to nurture and sustain it.

Beyond promoting the general notion that all members are called to Christian service, Wilshire's use of vocational language has generated an additional positive outcome. While Wilshire helps mature members to look back on their years of vocation or volunteer work as a genuine Christian calling, it also helps young people recognize that ministry in the church can be a joyful, even desirable vocation—not a burden or stigma. Evangelical language regarding vocational ministry has long been weighted by the notion of "surrender," as if ministry is a burden that a few unlucky souls may be doomed to carry. The old, misguided line, "If you can do anything else besides ministry, do it," has been replaced at Wilshire by a new language: a faithful call for young people with interest and gifts in vocational ministry to pursue that call whole-heartedly with the support and encouragement of their church.

This unexpected outcome also serves as a warning to anyone concerned about nurturing Christian vocation in young people: watch your language when it comes to talking about ministry! Pastors and other ministers do well to avoid the stereotypes and clichés that discourage young people from considering ministry as a vocation. Language is world-creating and has the potential either to dissuade or encourage gifted young people in the early stages of vocational discernment.

Educational Mentoring

Mentoring relationships comprise a third key practice in Wilshire's culture of call, particularly in the *Pathways to Ministry* programs. The mentoring relationship provides opportunities for ministry not only to be taught, but also to be *caught*. The appeal of ministry can be contagious. When mentors invite young people into their lives as practicing ministers, they provide an education in ministry that is exhilarating, challenging and sustaining.

The *YourCall* program for youth, the summer and semester internships for college and seminary students, and the residency program for young ministers each have mentoring components at Wilshire. Because *YourCall* students are in early stages of vocational discernment, their mentors serve in small groups as adult confidants—role models *in* ministry who engage young people in conversation *about* ministry. College and seminary interns work with one ministry mentor in particular over a period of several months, shadowing his or her work in the church and on location at camps, conferences, or mission trips. While interns may assist with administrative tasks, their primary role is to be active learners in ministry. Mentors for interns are not mere task masters, but rather serve as role models and educators in their particular field of ministry.

Ministerial residents work with their mentor—the senior pastor for pastoral residents or minister of music for music ministry residents—over a period of two or three years. The mentoring relationship is vital to the residency program and is thus a primary consideration when prospective candidates are interviewed. Because residents serve as full-time members of Wilshire’s staff, they interact with their mentor in both group and individual settings several times a week throughout the duration of their residency. The senior pastor and minister of music help residents interpret trends in the church culture and process observations and questions that arise in the normal course of church life. They also offer thoughtful critique and suggestions when residents lead in worship, conduct rehearsals, or perform functions of pastoral care. “To be enabled and entrusted with true ministerial authority is such a gift for a young minister transitioning from the role of student and intern to the role of pastor,” says Amy Grizzle, 2005-2007 pastoral resident. “To have support from a mentor and model congregation as I emulate a ‘first pastorate’ gives me hope and vision.”

Mentoring at Wilshire is intentionally educational and teaches both explicit and implicit lessons. On an ‘explicit’ level, mentors help shape and refine the pupils’ sense of calling while sharing stories and insights about ministry in general. On a more implicit level, mentors teach their pupils that ministry is a communal endeavor. Says David King, 2004-2006 pastoral resident: “True mentoring moves beyond simply a relationship of supervision and leads both parties to a mutual support of one another.” The shared labor and interaction between mentor and pupil is evidence that ministers need not—and should not—work in isolation. This lesson may well be one of the most important that aspiring ministers can learn from a mentor, since one main reason ministers leave the pastoral office is a long-term sense of loneliness and isolation. Young people bound for ministry from one of Wilshire’s *Pathways to Ministry* programs begin their service with an experience of ministry as a *collaborative* and *shared* process. Mentoring teaches them from the outset that ministry is best undertaken in the company and support of others.

Ministers at churches of every size and budget have opportunities to mentor young people. They can capitalize on internships and other similar student involvement as ideal occasions for shaping the life of a young person aspiring to ministry. Such a focus will not require any more money on the church’s part. But it certainly will require additional resources of time and attention on the part of the mentor.

Is the time commitment worth it—for the mentor or for the congregation as a whole? Members of Wilshire Baptist Church say yes. Aspiring ministers intercepted by a culture of call in a local congregation and invited into an educational mentoring relationship will learn that they are not alone in their passion and need not be alone in their work—two lessons that will have a profound impact on their calling and practice of ministry.

Sharing the Salt and Light

In its broadest sense, the culture of call at Wilshire provides opportunities for congregants of all ages to consider how God might be calling them to Christian service, whether in their specific line of work, in volunteer positions, or in vocational ministry. Yet Wilshire is also committed to the very particular work of engaging young people in vocational

discernment, introducing ministry as a viable vocation. And it trains young ministers who have recently completed their theological education in the context of a supportive and healthy congregation.

Every baptismal candidate who enters the pool during Sunday worship at Wilshire emerges from the waters with salt on the lips and a lighted candle in hand. Wilshire shares the salt and light not only by adorning the newly-baptized, but also by encouraging its members to engage in Christian service, by nurturing a sense of vocation in its young people, and by equipping its apprentices for a life of ministry. Wilshire shares the salt and light with everyone who enters its doors and sends its members forth—workers, parents, aspiring and practicing ministers—to season the Church and light the world. Most will keep the flavor and the fire alive at Wilshire, contributing to the ever-evolving culture of call at home. But others will graduate from high school, college, seminary or the residency program and move on to other communities of faith in various parts of the globe. Whether they go as active members whose ministry is their profession or as pastors or other vocational ministers, they will carry something of Wilshire’s culture with them. Perhaps they will speak these words to another people, with Wilshire whispering in their ear: “You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.”

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