



## A two-way street

How my seminary internship became the single most important experience in shaping me as a pastor

My internship year was the single most meaningful experience of my life. From June 2012 to May 2013, I worked as an intern at Imago Dei Church in Peoria, Illinois, as part of a church-planting program offered by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in partnership with Presbyterian Centers for New Church Innovation. My first day, the church leadership gave me a \$20,000 budget and said, “Do something cool with it.” They made clear that they expected mistakes and had no intention of preventing them. They wanted me to experiment—to wade into the difficulty of ministry—and reflect with them on mistakes and next steps as they walked alongside me in support.

I met regularly with the pastor and two others from the congregation to discuss my questions about the ministry, my spiritual life, and my new marriage. They gave me insights that helped me become a better Christian and a better husband. The church invested in me as a person and as a future leader.

Before this internship, seminary often felt like an academic rat race. My late nights studying felt fruitless; my hours of toil were for what—an A instead of a B? But with my internship, that drive took on new purpose: to foster long-term relationships between the affluent and the poor.

When people felt love and belonging because of my toil, that work had meaning. It wasn't for a grade; it was changing lives, mine included.

The benefits went both ways. In the classroom, difficult theological concepts can appear trivial and discussions of Christology often seem esoteric. But my internship changed all that.

Once, a man named James came to me the day after his wife, Catherine, had died. He felt guilty, believing that if he had checked on her sooner, she might not have died. No pastoral-care class or book could have adequately prepared me for that conversation. I affirmed his emotions, assured him there was nothing he could have done, and spoke about her being in a better place. I felt completely unprepared for that conversation and was relieved to go back to my seminary professors and ask what I should have done. If I had gone directly from seminary to senior pastor, that support would not have been there.



Eric Vinsel, a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, drove school buses for income while interning at Imago Dei Church in Peoria, Illinois.

Those conversations about Christology don't seem esoteric anymore. I'm ready for a class on pastoral care because I now have relevant questions. I want to take the class not for a grade but to figure out what to tell James in the wake of Catherine's death—or what to tell the family of Adam, who died at age 23, one day after we baptized him.

I recommend an intern year because its challenges, struggles, and satisfactions are real. After a year working full-time in ministry—baptizing babies, burying the dead, and praying for the sick—you will be ready to go back to seminary and ask questions you didn't know you had, eager to tap your professors for field-tested wisdom you didn't know you needed.

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To get involved with the movement to create 1,001 worshiping communities: [onethousandone.org](http://onethousandone.org)

To learn more about seminary opportunities: [pcusa.org/seminaries](http://pcusa.org/seminaries)