

Truett graduates 10 years after: Verbatim

June 1, 2007

Posted: 6/01/07

Truett graduates 10 years after: Verbatim

Truett Theological Seminary's first students graduated in 1997. These are their full replies to [a survey reflecting on their decade](#) out of seminary.

The students who responded are [Brian Brewer](#), [James Gardner](#), [C.V. Hartline III](#), [Kirk Hatcher](#), [Chris Nagel](#), [Andy Pittman](#), [Chad Prevost](#), [Bill Shiell](#), [Chris Spinks](#) and [Steve Wells](#). Click on the name to go directly to that person's response.

Brian Brewer

Senior pastor, Northminster Baptist Church, Jackson, Miss.; joining Truett Seminary as assistant professor of Christian theology in June

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

The local church is the place where a pastor might see people at their worst, with all their warts and foibles, and yet it is the very same place where he or she would see people at their absolute best, with great selflessness and sacrifice. It is this polarity that has shown me the church to be both human and divine.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

I wish I had learned more conflict management skills, for both group and personal management; more about the calling and pastor-search committee process; and opportunity to rehearse the practical mechanics of baptisms and communion.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

The substance of ministry is leading a congregation to a good theology and subsequent theological appropriation of the gospel in its own community. The value of theology is inextricably linked to the practical ministry of the church.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Remember that some of the greatest hardships of ministry will yield some of the greatest rewards. Fight then the good fight.

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

A pastor's desk is in a "study," not an "office." He or she needs time then to do just that, to study. Often what is the most valuable part of the pastor's work week is the time he spends alone in prayer and study. Please learn to respect this.

[Back to the Top](#)

James Gardner

Associate pastor, McClendon Baptist Church, West Monroe, La.

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

Those things that should be most important are sometimes pushed aside for the sake of being right or a specific agenda.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

More about working with people. I really don't know if it could have been taught, but people are a challenge to work with at times! The best thing about ministry is working with people. The worst thing (if you can really say that in ministry) or maybe the most challenging thing about ministry is working with people.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

Relationships. It doesn't matter how great you can preach or how well-educated you are, if people inside and outside the church don't know that you care about and love them, nothing else matters.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Regardless of what position you serve or where you serve, two things to remember—maintaining a personal study/devotional time amidst a busy and hectic schedule is vital to your spiritual health and to the health of your church/ministry, and people are important! Sometimes people will be ugly

and nasty and downright mean, but regardless of that, treat them as Christ would—love. It's easy to get so busy doing the “stuff” of ministry that you forget what we are sent here for—to reach and tell people of the love of Jesus Christ. One more thing: Remember it was God that called you. He is bigger than any problem or situation you might encounter. His grace is sufficient. He is sovereign.

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

Ministry can be a lonely place. It shouldn't be, but it is. Their words of encouragement mean more than they know.

[Back to the Top](#)

C.V. Hartline III

Pastor/planter, Vibrant Covenant Church, Portland, Ore.

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

Post-modernity is deeply rooted in our culture, and people are becoming less interested in evangelical christianity.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

The education I received from Truett was a building block for growth in faith and praxis.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

“Remember who you are” (Bill Treadwell) and be a life-long learner.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Give up on competency and embrace faith.

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

Following Jesus is simple, but not easy. Jesus is not a product “the church” is “selling.” The act of discipleship is a deliberate, intentional, conscious decision to allow Christ to transform us.

[Back to the Top](#)

Kirk Hatcher

Minister to youth, South Main Baptist Church, Houston

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

I'm never finished. Something else is always waiting.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

More about dealing with different personalities and how that applies to working in a ministry setting. Things like how to deal with the overpowering person, the meek, the attention-getter, the refuser, etc.

would have been great. Some of the more practical aspects of ministerial life would've been great—how to be a minister and a parent at the same time, how to balance a checkbook when there's nothing to balance, and signs that your ego has taken over.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

Never stop learning.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

You don't know everything. People you are going to be ministering to and with can help you know more. Let them teach you!

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

All ministers do not have leather skin. We have families we need to spend time with. Constructive criticism is much more productive than anger-driven criticism. We love them, regardless.

[Back to the Top](#)

Chris Nagel

Chaplain, Giddings State School, Giddings

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

I always thought I'd be a pastor, but my path was in chaplaincy outside the church.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

I could have used some courses in world religions. As a chaplain, I am responsible for meeting the spiritual needs of a diverse population.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

I learned how much I don't know about theology and the Scriptures.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Do a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. It will help you integrate your personal issues and your seminary education in a real-world setting.

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

Their pastors need a Sabbath beyond Sunday for self-care.

[Back to the Top](#)

Andy Pittman

Pastor, First Baptist Church, Lufkin

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

I did not think I would become a pastor. I started out in youth ministry and moved into university ministry. I did not feel called to serve as a pastor until I graduated from seminary in 1997.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

I am proud of my seminary education and think Truett does the best job of preparing ministers to serve in local churches. I had formal training in Bible, theology, biblical languages and ministry. I did not have classes on all of the daily responsibilities of ministry, but I had to fulfill “mentoring” requirements with an experienced pastor. That is where I learned how to perform the “behind the scenes” responsibilities of ministry.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

Truett placed a priority on spiritual formation. I did not fully appreciate the importance of spiritual formation while I was a student. Once I was out of seminary I started serving as a pastor and giving myself away to others. That was when spiritual formation became most important to me. I recognized I had to have a growing spiritual life in order to be effective as a minister. Truett gave me the foundation and the tools to grow spiritually—and to help others to grow.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Don't sell your books! You won't realize how good they are until you leave the seminary and re-read them a second and third time.

[Back to the Top](#)

Chad Prevost

Assistant professor of creative writing and rhetoric, Lee University, Cleveland, Tenn.

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

People's need to believe in something.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

I wish we had placed much more emphasis on "calling." I would have loved to have had some kind of seminar or "lifelong learning credits" or something that authentically explored this concept. In line with that, we can serve young seminarians well by assisting them in seeing ministry in a far more open-ended way. I came into Truett ready to apply myself to serious studies and to explore my call to minister—also to thoroughly debunk the myth of biblical inerrancy. That's about all I knew. I also knew I always wanted to be a writer and was more inclined to mission work of one kind or another than being a pastor—though my faith had never expressed itself in an evangelical way (and never did). It took two years out of seminary to get back on a more "true" path for me and the ways that I could serve and "follow my bliss." I'm not sure what Truett does now along these lines. We were on the front lines from 1994-97—"guinea pigs" we were often called.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

No single lesson. Of course, I saw the "dark" side of human behavior, even in the church, and how the church is often (always?) run as a business. But this is a rather small lesson, really. I'm not sure I can boil it down to a single lesson. I learned you don't need seminary to be a good minister: How academic and intellectual does it need to be vs. the pragmatics. The solution has been to continually hybridize both models, and the next thing you find is a three year master's degree. Seems unnecessary.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

We have enough status quo in the ministry. To some extent, at least, this plays into why the church continues to fade in significance to the culture. Be innovative. I have to agree with the prophetic voice of Tony Campolo: If the church doesn't find ways to become socially engaged, it will continue to lose relevance. The church needs to be seen as fighting for more than some right-wing political bumper sticker motto. Bono's leadership is a powerful example of this on a global scale.

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

Ministers are people too. But (1) that's really impossible; it's similar to asking a child to see his/her parent as a "person" or any authority figure, and (2) part of the professional ministerial concept is that the people want the figurehead "set apart." They want to believe in his/her belief and leadership. But I always had trouble with that.

[Back to the Top](#)

Bill Shiell

Senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tenn.

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

How little help there is for ministers. When we graduated, I thought we would be greeted with open arms by other ministers and the seminary. Instead, we had to fend ourselves to find a church job, network and resources. The greatest help came from non-pastor/church staff ministers

and mentors and retired ministers and professors who encouraged me and met with me over the phone or in person as needed.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

Personnel and staff recruitment, training, and accountability. Writing; I was not fully prepared for the writing load at the doctoral level.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

Conflict resolution. Baptist history roots, heritage, principles.

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Know yourself and know how you're wired.

- Churches are like people, because they are people. Every church has a DNA, just as every minister does too. In your first church and/or staff experience, pay attention to how you live out your theology, how you lead and how you work.
- Then, as you talk to search committees, ask questions based on what you know about yourself and what you know about their DNA. Accept who they are, and minister from that position.
- As you interview staff and pastors, communicate about each other's DNA and discuss openly the written and unwritten expectations the church has. For instance, every church has a different definition of pastor and staff leadership. We were trained in seminary to lead one way but not trained how to adjust leadership needs based on the DNA of the congregation and/or staff. Churches could identify what they want and clarify that. You could substitute any issue here, but leadership is one example.

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

Ministers do not naturally make friends. They are nomads. So, the search committees need to know that the work is not over when they hire the minister. They need to think holistically about:

- Setting up social networks
- Being there during personal and family crises. Many churches assume that “someone else is handling ____” but have no effective system to ensure the minister is cared for.
- Providing ongoing mentoring in the first few years of ministry. Most of us need a coach or assistance outside the personnel committee to bounce ideas around and provide an outlet for stress.

[Back to the Top](#)

Chris Spinks

Assistant to the dean and adjunct assistant professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary; joining Wipf & Stock Publishing in Eugene, Ore., as acquisitions editor in June

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

I have not been in church ministry since 1998, just one year after graduating from Truett.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

There is more to the Body of Christ than Baptists.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

Greek is fun!

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Even the “heady” stuff matters. It makes you a deeper, more thoughtful person, which in turn makes you a better minister. A course need not have explicit or immediate “practical” application to be practical.

What do you wish laypeople knew that they don't seem to know?

The Bible was written and is read within particular contexts. We ought to be keenly aware of both.

[Back to the Top](#)

Steve Wells

Pastor, South Main Baptist Church, Houston

What has surprised you most about ministry in the past 10 years?

How much time I need to spend in solitude in order to be effective. I am an extrovert by nature, yet I need 20 to 30 study hours every week for preparation and study. Administration, busy work and pastoral needs make getting that kind of time very difficult—and I am in a nearly ideal situation, with a full compliment of very competent and committed colleagues and a brilliant and committed congregation.

What do you wish you had learned in seminary that you didn't learn?

How to read a balance sheet.

What was the most valuable lesson you learned in seminary?

To think theologically

What piece of advice would you give to the 2007 graduates?

Be mystical about church call. Go where you feel led. Work like you will be there the rest of your life. Stay until you have a clear sense of call to another place. If you wish you were in another place; know that God knows where you are and when and where you will go next.

[Back to the Top](#)

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.