

## Ministry traineeships: Home and Away

“Should I stay or should I go?” sang The Clash in 1982 and it’s a serious question if you’re weighing up where to do a ministry traineeship. Should I stay and do a ministry apprenticeship where I am? Or should I go to another church and join their ministry trainee scheme. Here are four things to look for in any scheme, four reasons to stay and four reasons to go.

Four things to look for:

**1) Healthy ministry culture.** Key to a ministry apprenticeship is that you are immersed in a particular church context, soaking in that culture of gospel ministry – so it’s important that it’s a good model. This is not about perfection but about whether the leadership is seeking to be what a church leader (and a Christian) is called to be and seeking to lead the church to be what the New Testament calls a church to be. Does the leadership look like 1 Timothy 3? Are they preaching through the Bible, exalting Christ crucified, feeding the flock with good theology, equipping the whole church for the work of ministry? Is there a mission-mindedness and a strong evangelistic edge? Does the church prioritise dependence on God through personal and corporate prayer? Is there a healthy culture of gentleness with people and firmness on doctrine? Crucially, is there a training mindset – is the church keen to invest in the raising up of the next generation of gospel workers? Which leads us onto...

**2) Training.** If it is a ‘trainee’ position, check that you will actually be trained and what exactly that will involve. Training would normally include structured teaching sessions and workshops and also individualised feedback and input relating to your specific ministry. Is this training going to be theologically sound and equip you for gospel ministry? Will it stretch you sufficiently?

**3) Opportunities to serve.** A vital ingredient of an apprenticeship is actually doing gospel ministry. It’s important to have opportunities to put what you’re learning into practice, to try things and get feedback and try them again. And most important of all: you need opportunities to cultivate a humbled servant heart – a heart which is less concerned with ‘how can I be trained?’ and more with ‘how can I serve?’ So it is worth looking at whether there is actually work to do. Is there a gospel need? Will they use you and push you outside my comfort zones? Will you have plenty of gospel ministry and practical ministry to do?

**4) Coaching and mentoring.** This is about access to the leadership. The leadership may be excellent but will they have time to spend with you? The amount of contact time you have will make an enormous difference to how much you grow and your whole state of mind. So it’s worth clarifying expectations of how often you would be able to meet up with a leader for a structured time and how much unstructured/informal time you might be in contact during the week. Related to this, how much supervision will you get of your ministry and will there be someone looking out for you pastorally?

Four reasons to stay in your current church and do a traineeship there:

**1) The leaders know you well.** If you’ve grown up in a church or at least been there for a few years, the leaders will probably know you very well and be in a good position to discern whether it is wise for you to pursue further training in gospel ministry. They will have had the time to observe your character – the good and the bad (1 Tim. 5:24-25), your service, your passion. So they will be well placed to suggest an apprenticeship. And because they know you well and you probably have a good relationship with them already, when the apprenticeship starts, the shift to a mentoring relationship might be rather easier and more organic than it would be at a new church. The leadership already know some of the things you’ll need to work on and they already know some of the things they can trust you to do.

**2) You know the church well.** You're probably already serving in some capacity. You know lots of people. If you shift into traineeship gear you are not having to learn a completely new church culture and surrounding culture, you are just expanding the amount of gospel ministry you can be involved in, building on what you are already doing, hitting the ground running (to mix metaphors). And the church know you well too – which is hopefully a good thing! There are good relationships, you are not an 'outsider' but already one of the family.

**3) You are embedded in the place.** You have a place to live (for now) and you understand the local area. You may have family within reach or you may be married, with or without children. You may have elderly parents locally. You hopefully have good friends to encourage you and keep you accountable. Admittedly, as Christians, we are not ultimately rooted in any particular place – we should see ourselves as sojourners with no 'forever home' in this world. But at the same time we shouldn't take too lightly the importance of place, community, support structure and our embeddedness in a network of relationships and responsibilities. We need to think through the impact of leaving.

**4) You are part of a church family.** Not a club. Not a class. A family where older men are to be treated as fathers, older women as mothers, our peers as brothers and sisters, the weak as particularly precious and indispensable. A family with one Father, loving one another and taking responsibility for one another's discipleship – encouraging and exhorting one another daily and weekly to keep going till Christ returns. As Sydney Pastor Simon Flinders writes, "leaving your church is no small thing. It's not like changing gym membership or changing job... it's more like changing families. It's huge. It's never something that ought to be done lightly, thoughtlessly or prayer-lessly. In fact, it will be a rare situation in which it's the best or the right thing to do."

Four reasons to leave to do a traineeship in another church:

**1) Gospel need.** A good argument can be made for gospel need in every part of the UK and beyond. And we need to be careful that we don't overestimate the good we can individually do in a year or two. But spiritual and financial resources are not evenly spread. Neither are gospel workers. There is a 'Macedonian call' from rural areas and small towns, from the north east and south west of England, from council estates and church plants, for more workers to 'come over and help us.' As Simon Flinders says, a special opportunity for service is one of those few good reasons to leave a local church – sent out on mission. Timothy was much loved by his home church in Lystra but Paul took him away for his apprenticeship and he spent the rest of his life serving in other parts of the harvest field (Acts 16). Healthy churches have always had that generous centrifugal kingdom-minded dynamic of sending out workers to be trained and serve elsewhere (e.g. Acts 12:25-13:5).

**2) Gospel partnership.** What is particularly beautiful and healthy is when someone is not only sent out from a church with the blessing of the church to serve in another part of the harvest field, but when there is also a two-way partnership between the sending and receiving churches. Epaphroditus in Philippians 2 is example of this. He wasn't someone that the Philippian church sent out without much idea where he was going. His sending was an expression of a rich partnership. And they didn't forget Epaphroditus once they sent him. They were concerned about him. I was talking to a pastor last year about how their church, which has a good number of students and a fairly middle class profile, is building a relationship with a council estate church in another town. The plan is that this will be a two-way relationship of mutual learning and encouragement, a corridor for the giving and receiving workers and apprentices. This sort of long term partnership means the apprentice can have confidence in where they're going and how they'll be received, the receiving church are confident they are not being sent someone the sending church is keen to get rid of (!) and the apprenticeship becomes an expression and cementing of the church-to-church relationship.

**3) Going can be very good for your soul.** Some of us have commitment issues and need to learn the value of being settled. Others of us can get too comfortable and need to learn the value of being unsettled. To leave a place you know and understand and where you have a degree of respect

and go to a place you don't know and don't understand and where no-one knows who you are or what you can do – that can be a helpfully unsettling and humbling experience. You have to face questions of identity and security. In the stress of transition, sins and fears and prejudices surface. Going can be a great time to understand ourselves better, see eternal realities more clearly, see the extent of the Lord's harvest field, and to draw near to the Lord. All this is heightened if the receiving church and the surrounding community have a very [different culture](#) from ours / our home church.

**4) Going could be great for training.** For one thing, simply being in a different environment often makes you more open to learning. Things you've heard before somehow strike the heart in a fresh way. Another thing is that every gospel worker benefits from a range of influences and teachers – different people pouring into their life. Even someone who has grown up through excellent churches, when apprenticed elsewhere in a very different context will almost certainly find things that the host church and mentor does and says which are very helpful and true and show up a deficiency in their home church. It may be in hospitality or a concern for the weak or [a perceptive reading of the Scriptures](#) or boldness in evangelism or carefulness in planning or reverence for the Word. Perhaps most significantly of all, going to another church – particularly if it is a smaller church – may well mean you have a much broader and more stretching training experience. In a [small town church](#) or a [fledgling church plant](#) you will be in no danger of twiddling your thumbs or being restricted to one ministry niche. You'll have loads of hands on work in a whole range of ministries, be tested with significant responsibilities, see the leadership close up and get a good understanding of what church ministry involves.

So what's the answer? The Clash might say that if you go there will be trouble and if you stay it will be double. But that's not true here. So long as your motivations are right and you've talked it through with your family and your church leaders, both staying and going can be very good options. It's worth looking seriously at both options.

Andy Harker