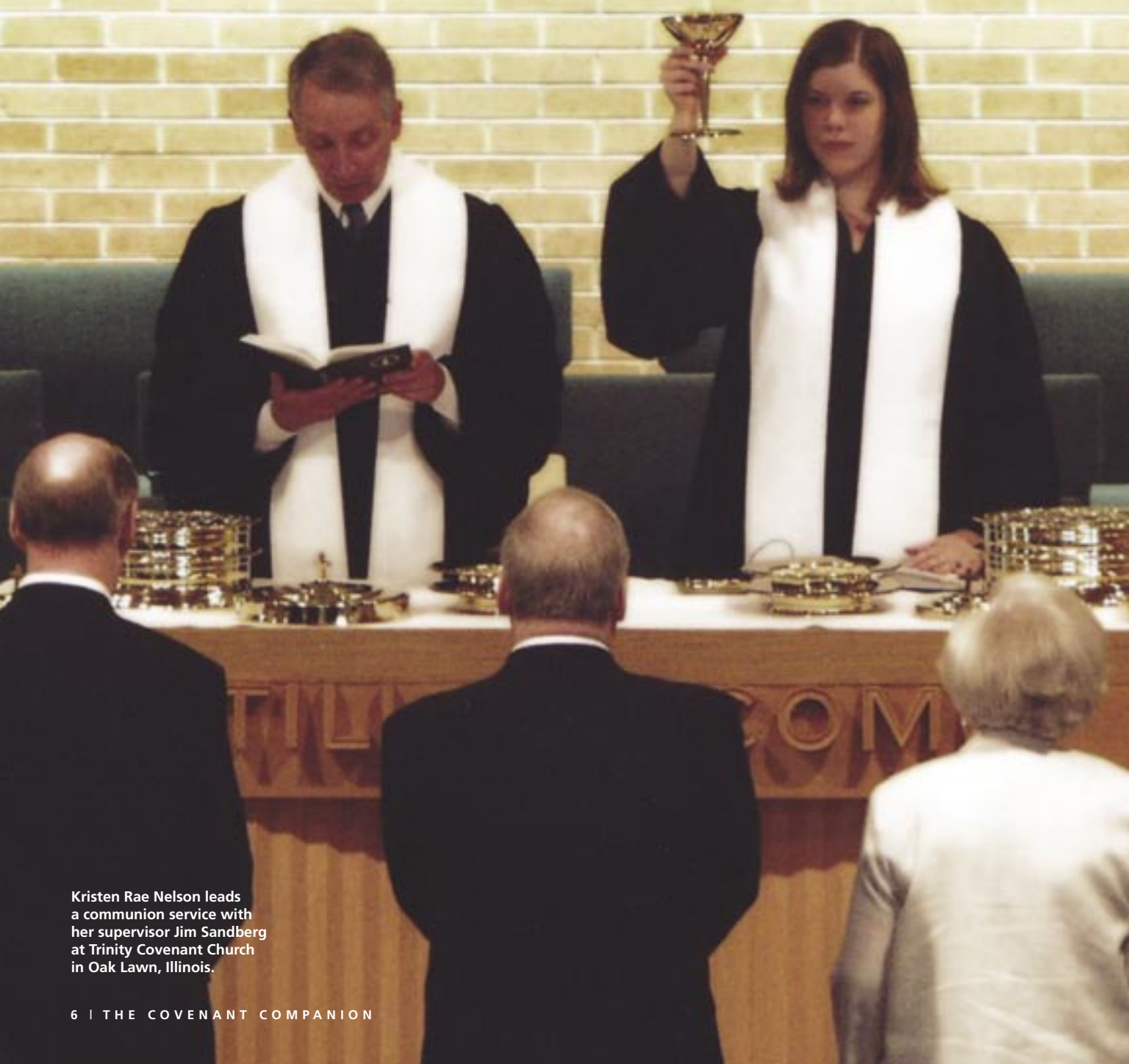

How a seminarian moved from student to pastor while on internship

GROWING into My Call

KRISTEN RAE NELSON



Kristen Rae Nelson leads a communion service with her supervisor Jim Sandberg at Trinity Covenant Church in Oak Lawn, Illinois.

Our planning meeting at church had barely begun when Jim Sandberg, my pastoral internship supervisor, gave me the news. A couple was coming to the church for premarital counseling the next day, and he wanted me to meet with them.

“They’re going to get married,” he said, “and you’re going to do the wedding.”

My eyes felt like they were going to jump out of my head. My heart started racing. For a moment I was speechless.

“What do you mean?” I finally said. “I’ve never done a wedding before. I have no idea what I’m doing—I’m just an intern!”

A look of amusement spread across Jim’s face.

“You’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ll walk you through it. And besides—that’s what internships are for.”

Not ready to be a pastor

A year earlier, I was partway through my second year at North Park Theological Seminary when I realized something was missing. God had called me to seminary—I was sure of that. But I wasn’t sure about becoming a pastor.

I was enjoying my classes in Greek, Hebrew, Christian history, and theology, but none of my classes prepared me for the daily realities of ministry. Despite all of the challenging and informative classes, I was nowhere near ready to serve a church.

I had heard about pastoral internships: in the past, students had taken a break from academic study and spent their third year of seminary in a church, working alongside a supervising pastor, who served as a mentor. But this type of internship, unfortunately, has become rare. Many students now fulfill their required internship credits before or after seminary.

I needed something more. I needed to step into the role of a pastor and to learn hands-on what it meant to follow God’s call to pastoral ministry.

Finding an internship site took some time. Few churches seemed able to supply the support, encouragement, learning experiences, and flexibility required to host an intern. My search involved months of sending out letters and emails, making phone calls, and doing interviews—with few results.

Then I heard that Trinity Covenant Church in Oak Lawn, Illinois—a south suburb of Chicago—was looking for an intern. I met with Pastor Jim Sandberg to talk about the opening. He described an internship as a place where you can grow into the call that God has placed on your life.

Jim’s seminary internship in the 1980s had transformed him from a student into a pastor. He wanted to share that experience with a new generation of pastors, and Trinity Covenant supported the idea. I had found my internship site.

Stepping into big shoes

As I stood behind the altar on my first communion Sunday as an intern, my knees knocked. My hands shook. Clothed in a black clerical robe and a green stole, I was serving communion for the first time.

The words of consecration had never seemed more powerful. As I lifted up the bread and proclaimed, hesitantly at first, “This is Christ’s body, broken for you,” as I lifted up the cup and proclaimed, “This is Christ’s blood shed for you,” I began to feel like a pastor. It was a calling that, like the robe hanging on my shoulders, was still a bit too large.

My internship year was all about growing into God’s call on my life. Every day as I entered the church for work, the nameplate on my door caught my eye: “Kristen Rae Nelson, Pastoral

Intern.” Often I couldn’t believe that the church trusted me with that title.

My days were filled with the duties of a pastor. Hospital visits, weddings, counseling sessions, funerals, prayer groups, tutoring, children’s choir, Prime Timer’s gatherings, copier fixing, piano playing, worship leading, banner making, sermon writing, Sunday-school teaching, floor mopping, labyrinth creating, newsletter submitting, email corresponding, and baptizing—all of these experiences worked to form me and change me.



Pastoral intern Kristen Rae Nelson poses next to the Trinity church sign.

But it wasn’t just the activities that formed me. Jim, as my internship supervisor, had the uncanny ability to turn every moment of the day into a teaching moment. Whether we were grabbing a bite to eat, driving to the hospital for a visitation, or reviewing an upcoming sermon together, he taught me how to be a pastor.

I was able to get to see the joys, frustrations, excitements, and sorrows that come with being a shepherd of God’s people. No question was too foolish, and no situation was below contemplation and examination.

Along with Jim, the people of Trinity Covenant played a crucial role in my pastoral development. The first time that someone called me “Pastor,” I nearly cried. It felt like such an im-

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portant title—one that they willingly and lovingly bestowed on me.

It's not easy for a church to hire an intern, to take in a fresh face with no experience and no concept of what it means to be a pastor. For the congregation at Trinity, it meant learning with me, struggling with me, and walking with me through the valleys and the peaks of ministry. It meant being patient with me, realizing that I could be both a pastor and a student, both a shepherd and a lost sheep.

It meant seeing not what I was but what I could become as a pastor. It meant paying me and supporting me not because of my skills and experience, but because they believed that by developing my skills and experience, they would be adding to not only the ministry of their local congregation, but to the ministry and mission of the entire Covenant Church.

The congregation was also honest enough to tell me what they really felt, and to help me begin to understand the intricacies of serving a church.

I heard things like:

"Pastor Kristen, talk louder!"

"I'm not sure those shoes are appropriate."

"We're so proud of you."

"I'm not sure I agree with how you're running things."

"Thank you for helping me."

"We're so glad you came to be with us."

Sometimes these comments warmed my heart, sometimes they stung. Each of them helped me learn what it means to be a pastor. There were many times when I doubted my own abilities. There were times when I wondered if this really was what I was called to do. But that's part of an internship. By being plunged into situations where I doubted my readiness or ability, I learned how to swim and not sink.

I found out what I was good at, and what I wasn't good at. There were places in my life and heart that were exposed, allowing me to work through deep-seated pain, fear, and doubt. I dealt with loneliness, frustration, confusion, anger, emotional pain, and feelings of inadequacy. But I also experienced joy,

strength, encouragement, satisfaction, and triumph as an intern.

And the wedding that Jim sprang on me? There were a couple bumps in the road during the preparation, but ultimately, it turned out great. By the time I returned to the classroom in the fall of 2005, I was ready to be a pastor.

Living into the call

In August 2006, I received another affirmation of that call, while sitting in the parsonage of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Port Allegany, Pennsylvania. I had finished my classes and had entered the pastoral call process. Now, after a series of interviews and a candidating visit, the congregation in Port Allegany wanted me as their pastor. This was the day when God's call on my life would finally come to fruition.

There are some things that can only be learned through experience. Whether it be counseling a parishioner, baptizing a child, preaching a sermon, performing a funeral, officiating at a board meeting, or leading a youth group, these experiences cannot be learned theoretically—they must be lived and breathed.

My internship wasn't simply a requirement, something I needed to fulfill in order to graduate. It was exactly what I needed in order to become the pastor God wanted me to be. I learned the practical aspects of the pastoral office. But I also learned so much more. I learned how to be a pastor, how to be a friend, and ultimately, how to grow in my walk with the Lord.

I entered my internship as a scared, unsure seminary student, doubting whether or not I was able to step into the call God had on my life. I exited my internship as a pastor. □

For More Information

Interested in hosting a pastoral intern at your church? Not sure where to start? Contact Tim Johnson, director of field education at North Park Theological Seminary: (773) 244-5251, tjohnson2@northpark.edu.