

Alumni Spotlight: Jason McConnell (M.Div '05, Th.M '07)



Current Title: Senior Pastor of the Franklin United Church and East Franklin Union Church

Family: Jennifer (Wife); Children – Sarah (15), Marcus (14), Duncan (11), Matthias (9)

Favorite Professors: Ken Swetland and Gary Parrot

Favorite Class: Pastoral Ministry

Favorite Memory: I remember being mesmerized by Haddon Robinson's first-person narrative sermon based on Barbara Robinson's children's novel *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, which he delivered at a special Christmas service in the chapel. His storytelling was so compelling that I didn't believe my wife when she told me that it wasn't fact, but rather an adaptation of a famous fiction story. Unfortunately for me, as usual, she was right!

What have you been doing since you left Gordon-Conwell and where are you serving now?

I became the pastor of the East Franklin Union Church and Franklin United Church in Franklin, VT in 2004, a year before I completed my Master of Divinity degree. Over the next several years, I made the four-hour drive from the Canadian border to Gordon-Conwell dozens of times to finish my M.Div. and Th.M. degrees. After this, I completed a Doctor of Ministry Degree at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama while pastoring two rural churches in Vermont and having four children along the way. Over the past 18 years, the ministry in Vermont has been fulfilling and fruitful.

More recently, I've also had the opportunity to co-direct the Ockenga Fellows Program and serve as a mentor in the Doctor of Ministry and Thriving in Ministry Programs at Gordon-Conwell. When I'm not pastoring or teaching, I can usually be found enjoying the Vermont outdoors skiing, hiking, cycling, kayaking, or fishing. My family and I have a blessed life.

What do you love about your work? What are the particular joys and challenges of serving a rural church?

I love being a pastor of a rural parish because I can develop robust relationships and live life with all my parishioners and fellow community members wholistically. I don't just see them at church on Sundays, but also spent time with them in every aspect of life: work, recreation, meals, holidays, celebrations, community service, and a host of other forums. Contrary to the typical sentiment, I actually love living in a fishbowl because I really get to know people and they really get to



know me; I deeply love them, and I am deeply loved by them. It seems to me that this lifestyle is more civil and sustainable and perhaps more conducive to the care of souls.

The pace of life is a little slower in a rural community and I have more time to think and pray and be involved in activities outside the church. I relish the traditional roles of preaching, teaching, and counseling, but over the years, I have also enjoyed serving as a ski instructor for the local elementary school, an Emergency Medical Technician and Ambulance Driver, a counselor at the Restorative Justice Center, and chairman of a local and regional school board. These opportunities have made my life richer and have shaped my pastoral leadership profoundly. It has also guarded against burnout.

Some challenges of pastoring a rural church include operating with limited resources and a lack of commitment to excellence. For instance, since there are so few Christian counseling services available in my region, I end up doing far more counseling than I would prefer, and many of the issues I encounter are beyond my training and expertise.

Likewise, since rural churches (and communities) value personality over professionalism, there is often an “it’s good enough” attitude. Unfortunately, these values conflict with my own personal values, which sometimes leaves me feeling frustrated. But I know the grass is seldom greener on the other side, and I have concluded that the benefits of rural ministry far outweigh the liabilities.

How has God woven together your Gordon-Conwell education with other life events to bring you to where you are now?

I was born and raised in a rural community in Western Pennsylvania and was converted and discipled in a rural church. This helped me value rural people and gave me the vision for rural ministry long before I came to seminary. Gordon-Conwell gave me the theological knowledge and ministry skills I needed to be an effective pastor, but I had to integrate both experiences to maximize the impact in my current context. I am deeply grateful for how God’s providence orchestrated all these events and to lead me to where I am today.

How has your Gordon-Conwell education served you in your past and current work?

My Gordon-Conwell education has served me well in every imaginable way. It gave me the biblical breadth and theological depth I needed to perform the priestly and prophetic roles of pastoral ministry. The church history classes helped me understand doctrinal development over the ages and lessons the church can learn from the past. The ethics classes provided a paradigm for making moral decisions in life and ministry. The counseling and pastoral ministry classes increased my compassion and capacity to shepherd souls. And the homiletics classes challenged me to become a versatile preacher rather than a one-trick pony in the pulpit. I will be forever grateful for the professors, curriculum, and community that formed my pastoral theology and ministry.

What piece of advice would you give to young alumni who are just entering pastoral ministry?

In seminary hermeneutics class, there is a common cliché, “Context is king!”, which means the context determines the meaning of a particular biblical text. My advice to young alumni entering pastoral ministry is: “Contextualization is king!” Whether a pastor is serving an urban church in downtown Boston, a country church in rural Vermont, or an international church in suburban China, gospel ministry needs to be contextualized to fit the culture.

In my experience, many young pastors assume that ministry is performed in a cultural vacuum, and they try to reduplicate ministry methods that worked in their home church or the church they attended in seminary. But every church and community has its own culture. Therefore, pastoral practices such as evangelism, discipleship, preaching, and leadership must be contoured to match the cultural context.

Publications:

I have two books coming out in 2022:

1. *Beholding Beauty: Worshiping God through the Arts*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022.
2. *Return to the Parish: The Pastor in the Public Square*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022. (Co-authored with David Horn)