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Reflection: [Pastoral Excellence](#)

## The 5-percent principle

*Motivated by the desire to help others and continue learning, graduates of a retreat-mentoring program are willing to be paid for just 5 percent of their time to mentor others. The cost savings allows the program to continue even after its Sustaining Pastoral Excellence grant has ended.*

by [Matthew Lewis](#)



Illustration by Jessamyn Rubio

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Over the eight years we have run the pastoral retreat program at Ashland Theological Seminary, I have seen many lives changed. One of our recent graduates wrote: “*It is difficult to express the mountain of emotions I feel. This one thing I know: I was headed for a premature resignation and leaving the ministry with my head hung low in despair. Now, I have a spring in my step, a passion in my heart and a desire to finish the race God has set before me with excellence.*”

Unfortunately, we faced two dilemmas: How could we fund our highly successful retreat program once the original grant ended? And how could we help participants retain the healthy perspectives and behaviors they embraced in our program after the retreats concluded?

In short, how could we sustain our success? Our answer was the “5-percent principle.” (Credit to Ben Mott, from the Green Lake Conference Center, who came up with the name for their similar strategy.)

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Ashland's Pastors of Excellence (PoE) program is a year-and-a-half transformational journey. Eighty pastors per round attend a series of three-day retreats focused on their spiritual and personal well-being. More than 300 pastors have graduated from our programs. While content is disseminated through lecture, the heart of this journey involves private and small-group time. Post-lecture, participants engage in individual spiritual exercises relative to the lecture followed by small-group discussions facilitated by trained mentors. In these mentored peer-group interactions, Jesus regularly shows up.

The 5-percent principle leverages the passion and expertise generated as pastors complete our program and allows us to continue functioning without grant funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program. This principle could be used successfully in many programs where there is a lot of passion but little funding.

As pastors graduate, many want to help others share the experience. They agree to staff our retreats. We pay for 5 percent of their time but get passionate and competent leaders who give much more. Not only are the peer groups mentored by graduates, but most lectures are now delivered by second- and third-generation graduates.

We started PoE eight years ago and now have more graduates who want to mentor in future rounds than we can use. This is 2 Corinthians 1:4 working as Christ intended: "[The God of all comfort] comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (ESV).

This approach provides both quality control and significant cost savings. Because we serve pastors, many of them come to us already partially trained and experienced in the skills required to both lecture and mentor. All of our staff must first complete the PoE experience as a participant. This kind of paradigm training is invaluable and creates no additional cost. Our curriculum intentionally migrates from pedagogy to andragogy. Mentors move from a directive to a nondirective role, allowing leadership from within the group to emerge. Participants slowly assume the spiritual director role for one another under the guidance of their assigned mentors.

We like to tell our new mentor apprentices that going through the PoE process not only oriented them but actually provided much of the training they need to mentor their own groups, supplemented by just-in-time training within the framework of the next year's round of retreats. Again, this is a very cost-effective training method and also serves as a refresher for our established mentors.

Choosing our mentors from graduates provides an excellent screening process. Only those nominated by their mentors are invited to return as future mentors. This ensures that we invite pastors who not only are passionate about the program but have demonstrated a capacity to excel. We have transitioned to second-, third- and, in some cases, fourth-generation mentors and presenters without any discernable drift in program quality. In fact, participant evaluations have improved. Simultaneously, our costs have decreased.

Hiring our graduates as staff also addresses our other concern: sustaining their transformation.

Our real goal is changed perspective and behavior that is so integrated that we can discern it years later. We want "fruit that remains."

To this end, we employ a series of strategies, including a participant-written self-care plan, ongoing access to video recordings for all of our lectures, regional gatherings of alumni, space for alumni to re-experience a retreat at significantly reduced cost, and the option for established peer groups to continue. However, none of these strategies is as effective as the 5-percent principle.

Participants who return as mentors or lecturers have an ongoing opportunity to renew and integrate learning. Many of our staff who continue to serve with nominal remuneration say they do so to keep their own souls fresh.

In the last three years we have launched a number of new initiatives with our graduates not only to expand kingdom impact but also to facilitate sustained health in our graduates. These graduates have used our material with parachurch leaders, seminary seniors in field education, Asian youth leaders and business leaders. Adapting the material and mentoring others reinforces transformation, because we integrate best what we use over time.

The 5-percent principle saves money and reinforces learning. It is a simple idea that leverages passion and expertise to both sustain our program post-grant and sustain our graduates post-program.

Faith &  
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