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[Home](#) > Agents of Grit and Grace

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## Agents of Grit and Grace



[1]

## Agents of Grit and Grace

by [Bob Smietana](#) [2] | [September-October 2014](#) [1]

A unique faith-based training program in Memphis gives new teachers the skills and community they need to survive and thrive.



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THE 67 PEOPLE gathered in the basement of Union Baptist Church in Memphis have come from all over: Appalachian State University and Asbury College, Louisiana State and Liberty University, Wright State and Wheaton College. The youngest is 21; the oldest, 48. They've come to teach in some of the lowest performing schools in the state of Tennessee.



[6]

For the next 12 months, they'll live, learn, and pray together, becoming a family as they also learn to become teachers and colleagues. All were drawn by faith and a dream that God is doing unexpected things in the city schools of Memphis.

Welcome to the Memphis Teacher Residency (MTR), a faith-based nonprofit that's become one of the most effective teacher training programs in Tennessee.

At the front of the room, Rev. Tom Fuerst, an associate pastor at Christ United Methodist Church, gives the morning devotional. His message: The world is broken and so are Memphis schools. But God wants to fix them both. Fuerst describes the idea of "prior grace"—that God is at work in the world long before we are aware of it—and invites the new trainees to become agents of that grace by becoming great teachers.

But Fuerst, like everyone at MTR, is quick to warn the aspiring teachers—known as residents—against proselytizing. The residents, as public school teachers, don't preach faith in the classroom, hold Bible studies, or actively discuss their faith. That would make the classroom unsafe for non-Christian students, warned Fuerst.

That doesn't mean that MTR hides its Christian identity. Organizers believe that every student in Memphis is a child of God and deserves a great education. They believe that providing great public education is part of the gospel. The gospel motivates everything they do. But preaching is not part of their educational strategy.

Instead, they believe Christians have a calling to help renew the world. "God is in the business of putting things back together," Fuerst said. "The education system is busted—but God is putting it back together."

TWO YEARS AGO, Amy Barger was sitting in the same basement room, listening to a similar message. A Memphis native and former *Sojourners* intern, Barger recently finished her first year of teaching freshman English at Kingsbury High School in Graham Heights, one of four neighborhoods that MTR focuses on. Most of her students came from poor families—about 85 percent of students in Memphis City Schools are economically disadvantaged, according to a 2012 report from the University of Memphis.

It was a hard year, Barger said. Many of her students had struggles at home that carried over into the classroom, and she wasn't always sure what to do. For support, she relied on several colleagues from MTR, who had classrooms nearby. They offered guidance on how to best help her students, as well as friendship and support. "For me it was a lifesaver," she said.

One of the strengths of the MTR program is that it focuses on a few schools in a few neighborhoods, rather than trying to spread residents across the Memphis school district. So when new MTR teachers such as Barger come in, they've got a ready-made support network. That's good for the new teacher and for the students.

As part of its strategy, MTR also tries to place residents and graduates in what they call "a feeder pattern" of related schools. For instance, there's a pair of MTR-trained English teachers at Kingsbury Middle School, which feeds into Kingsbury High School. So some of Barger's future students will have had MTR teachers before reaching her classroom. It's a way to provide students with consistency.

During their first year in Memphis, new residents serve an apprenticeship in a local school. They are paired with an experienced teacher who helps them learn the craft of teaching. At the same time, they take graduate courses through Union University, a Christian college based in Jackson, Tenn.

The program is demanding. In the fall, they spend Monday through Thursday in the classroom with their mentor. Friday and Saturday are taken up with graduate classwork. Residents get housing in the Georgian Woods apartment complex, not far from MTR's offices, along with a stipend of \$1,000 a month. They are not allowed to work outside of the program and only get two personal days off during the year.

After that first year, they'll have a master's degree and teacher certification. They are then obligated to teach for at least three years in Memphis schools. Most will likely end up staying longer.

That's in large part because of the friendships they've developed among fellow residents. For example, Merissa Ward and Stacey Purdy are 2011 MTR graduates who have taught for the past three years at Hanley Elementary in the Orange Mound section of Memphis. When they arrived, the school had some of the lowest test scores in the state.

That's not uncommon in Memphis, according to *Education Week*. There were 69 Memphis schools ranked in the bottom 5 percent of statewide test scores for 2012-13, including Hanley. (It's since been re-opened as a charter school, Aspire Hanley Elementary.)

Starting out at a struggling inner-city school wasn't easy. "This is not for the faint of heart," said Purdy. "I don't know if I would have made it through that first year if Merissa hadn't been on my team."

"You fail a lot, that's the biggest thing," said Ward. There's a lot of trial and error as a new teacher figures out her identity. With the help of her coach and fellow teacher, Ward found she was able to work through her shortcomings as a rookie teacher. She's now a mentor to residents herself.

Teaching is challenging, and there aren't always a lot of immediate results. But their students have made progress, especially in reading. That's a good

first step, Purdy said.

SO FAR, THE MTR approach seems to be working. The nonprofit was recently named one of the most effective teacher training programs in the state by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

Barbara Stengel, a professor of education at Vanderbilt University, said that MTR benefits from what she calls “design synergies.” Its program addresses a number of challenges that urban teachers face, she said—including that the problems of inner city schools are too big for any one teacher to handle.

“Urban teaching is a team sport,” she said. “It is not possible, except in the most unusual case, for someone to succeed in a big way on their own. It’s too heartbreaking. It’s too hard—you need a posse.” By training its residents in a cohort and having them live, pray, and eat together, MTR is building the community that those teachers will need when they get into the classroom. That gives them a better chance to thrive as urban educators, said Stengel.

“It creates a better education for the kids in school. It creates community for people who are going into the teaching profession,” she said. “What they are doing is reimagining the career path of urban teachers.”

Stengel says the faith dimension of the program also will help the residents thrive. Many educators focus so much on test scores that they forget the bigger picture. “One of the things missing in public education is the articulated understanding that this is moral work,” she said. “You can call it a Kantian respect for persons or the idea that all people are God’s children. But this is moral work. We don’t talk about that in schools today. We talk about test scores. What I love about MTR is that it wears its purpose on its sleeves.”

Still, the program’s Christian emphasis could have a downside, said Stengel, leading to pride or a savior mentality, when what urban schools need are skilled teachers who are also humble. That concern also weighs heavily on the minds of MTR organizers and residents. It’s a delicate balance: In order to be successful, teachers need to have a great deal of self-confidence and professional competence and a commitment to doing the right thing, even when it is hard. But they also need to be humble and willing to adapt and learn from their mistakes.

Most of all they need to have grit.

Barger said she’s often inspired by the poem “To Be of Use,” by Marge Piercy. She paraphrases a line from the poem: “I want to be someone who stands in a line and passes my bucket along when there’s a fire to put out.”

Program organizers say they are looking for that kind of humble confidence and determination when selecting candidates. That’s in part because residents are not guaranteed a job when they finish their first year—although they usually get snapped up because principals are impressed by the program’s reputation. But once in the job, they’re subject to the same scrutiny as any other teacher. If their kids don’t do well on state tests, or their schools don’t show improvement, they can lose their jobs. “Their neck is on the line,” said Leslie Garrote, a former teacher who now coaches for

MTR.

To help them succeed, MTR provides coaching for residents both during the year of residency and in their first three years of teaching. Coaches visit residents in the classroom, film them at work, and then post the video with comments on a private website. Residents also write in an online journal each day and get feedback from their coach. The idea is to build a habit of constant, small improvements for residents as they become teachers. That feeds into MTR's larger goal, of helping to transform communities by creating a critical mass of highly trained, dedicated teachers in a small number of urban schools.

"We are not interested in silos of excellence," said MTR founder David Montague.

Montague, 48, doesn't come from a traditional teaching background. He spent 15 years as a stockbroker before becoming the director of Service Over Self, a Memphis-based Christian home-repair ministry. He later spent two years in East Asia with Campus Crusade for Christ. When he came back to Memphis, he was approached by a church friend who runs a local foundation. The foundation wanted to start a Christian version of "Teach for America" and asked Montague to run the program.

They ended up with something slightly different. Montague learned about the Boston Teacher Residency, one of the first programs of its kind in the country. He visited the program in Boston and eventually took some of the new staff there as well. They later joined Urban Teacher Residency United, a Chicago-based network of about two dozen similar programs.

All provide yearlong, in-classroom apprenticeships for teachers, said Tamara Azar, director of external relations for UTRU. "Through the course of being able to observe, practice, receive coaching, and then practice again, residents are really prepared to teach on day one," she said.

Memphis Teacher Residency is the only faith-based program in the network. "I look at it as a really innovative recruiting approach," Azar said.

The program took about a year to set up. At first most of the work was done by Montague; Robin Scott, a college professor who now serves as the program's director; and Leah Luttrell, a former Memphis teacher. The process wasn't easy. They had to find a college willing to partner with them to provide graduate classes—which turned out to be Union University—and convince school principals to provide mentors. They also had to figure out the hiring process, so they'd be able to help residents get jobs.

Most important, they had to find 20 or so residents who were willing to take a chance and join their new program, even though all the details hadn't been worked out. That first group deserves a great deal of credit for getting the program off of the ground. "Without them, David and I would just be a pair of nuts," said Scott, with a smile on her face.

Since many MTR residents come from outside Memphis, the first class they take is on the culture and history of the neighborhoods in which they'll teach. Part of the lesson is learning that those neighborhoods have great pride and many strengths. MTR residents are taught not to come in as do-gooders to save the day, but instead to be willing to serve in order to earn the respect of students and their families, said Scott.

“You have to understand that some of [the students’] grandparents might have marched with Dr. King,” she said. “You love them. You bless them. You serve them. But you have to understand that they will be skeptical.”

Residents also take part in a weekly spiritual development group. The idea is to help residents to mature as people, not just as teachers.

An ordained African Methodist Episcopal pastor, Scott is very clear about the role that faith plays in the program. But she also is clear about the limits teachers must respect when it comes to faith in the classroom. “We are not going in to evangelize,” she said. “The best way you can witness and serve is to teach Algebra 1 effectively.”

Of the 22 residents who completed the program that first year in 2010, 21 stayed to finish their three-year teaching commitment. Most—19—are still in teaching. And 16 of them are still teaching in Memphis.

Including this year’s class of 67, there have been a total of 192 residents. Montague credits the rigorous preparation and the sense of community that residents develop—as well as their shared faith—for the program’s success.

In the end, he wants the residents to be not just great teachers who love what they do, but great teachers who love teaching in Memphis and who call the city their home. “Our goal is not just to produce great teachers,” he said. “Our goal is something more than that. We want to do this in such a way that we can help restore and redeem communities so that people can live in them.”

Still, he admits, he and other leaders have a lot of work to do. And a lot to learn along the way. “We don’t think that we have all the right answers,” he said. “But we want to help.”

*Bob Smietana is senior writer for Facts and Trends magazine and a freelance religion writer based in Nashville.*

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[4] <http://sojo.net/letter-to-the-editor?post=Agents%20of%20Grit%20and%20Grace>

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