

The Ingredients of a Meaningful and Successful Intern Program

by Nathan Trice

It has become my fervently held conviction that—with few exceptions—a pastoral internship is indispensable to a man’s preparation for the ministry. I hold this strong opinion as one who has recently completed the first year of his first pastorate, and who can attest to the immeasurable benefit received from a well-placed internship in a local church. If my experience gained as an intern could be likened to a well, then I would say that the bucket over it has rarely been still, as I’ve dipped innumerable times into it for assistance in adjusting to new pastoral responsibilities.

As every minister will attest, the first year of ministry is filled with unique challenges, perhaps chief among them simply being the number of routine responsibilities assumed for the first time. These many “first timers” include: administering the Lord’s Supper, teaching a membership class, moderating a congregational meeting, and so on. They all require extra thought and effort, and when they come in quick succession, they can be somewhat overwhelming to a new pastor. An internship effectively reduces the harrying number of first timers that a pastor encounters in his first pastorate.

However, an internship provides much more than this. Although I support the traditional structure of seminary education, in which men undergo rigorous academic training for the ministry, I would still insist that no formal educational program should be considered the sole means by which men are prepared for the ministry. An academic program is invaluable for the equipping of men with many tools needed for the ministry, but it should not be assumed (or even expected) to prepare men fully for the pastorate. The oversight and instruction needed by a candidate for the ministry can best be provided by the local church in an internship program. Only through an internship that specializes in the day-to-day applications of the tools and methods learned in seminary can a man be fully prepared for the day-to-day responsibilities of the ministry.

So what are the ingredients of a meaningful, successful internship? It has been my observation that not every church program bearing the name “ministerial internship” proves to be either meaningful or successful. Based on the happy experience I myself have had in a solid internship program and the further insight I’ve gained in my first year as a pastor, I’d like to offer what I consider to be eight essential ingredients for an internship program.

1. Concerted time and attention from a mentoring pastor. In order to provide meaningful preparation for the ministry, an internship must be more than just a staff position. The greatest need of a candidate for the ministry is to be “taken under the wing” of the minister himself, or one of the teaching elders, who can provide him with the instruction and feedback that is vital to the assessment and improvement of his gifts. The

ministerial candidate needs a mentor! For this reason, though in many ways the addition of an intern to the staff of the church can lessen the minister's workload, in other ways it should be expected to increase it. A mentoring minister or elder should schedule weekly blocks of time with the intern to, among other things, (a) review the sermons preached, and provide encouragement and critique, (b) consider the sermons being prepared, and provide direction, (c) review and discuss other designated responsibilities, and—what I found highly profitable for myself—(d) conduct a course of study and discussion on a topic relating to the ministry (for example, a study of *The Christian Ministry*, by Charles Bridges). An alert and inquisitive intern will be brimming with questions, and this would provide an opportunity for the mentor to “download” invaluable experience to his disciple. Such opportunities to converse on the responsibilities of the pastorate will prove invaluable to the intern.

2. Consistent preaching and teaching responsibilities. This is at the heart of the gospel ministry, and for many new pastors it is also his most daunting responsibility. Even the best practical theology department in seminary cannot provide the consistency of preaching experience necessary for the steady improvement of a man's gifts. Preaching at least once a week should be the goal, for that provides an opportunity for weekly assessment and progress. It is vital for the intern to receive straightforward critique of the clarity and exegetical integrity of his sermons, as well as practical pointers concerning delivery and pulpit demeanor. Strengths should be warmly reinforced and weaknesses gently corrected. If preaching is to be central to the ministry, it should also be central to an internship, and the greatest energy of the mentor should be focused on the development of the intern's preaching gifts.

3. Frequent opportunities to lead worship. Since a certain ease and presence of mind before people is necessary for most any form of leadership in the church, an intern will benefit from any responsibilities that put him “on the platform.” It is especially important for an intern to cultivate an effective manner of leading in worship. As much as possible, the intern should be given responsibility for leading the congregation in worship, including the so-called pastoral prayer. (If one is licensed to preach, presumably that includes the license to lead the pastoral prayer!) The principles of Samuel Miller's *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, as well as Spurgeon's remarks on the subject in *Lectures to My Students*, should be underscored at this point.

4. Regular participation in the session's business. Some may be concerned about allowing an intern to be privy to all the deliberations of a session, but there is no better way to prepare a man to be a member and moderator of a session than to expose him to the inner workings of one. When I was an intern, I was granted the privilege of the floor, presented monthly reports, and entered fully into the discussions (and occasional debates) of the elders. Such a setting provides the intern with invaluable insight into the elements of parliamentary procedure, as well as giving him a feel for the leadership role of the

moderator. On numerous occasions during my internship, it was in the session meetings that I learned many of “the things that they never teach you in seminary.”

5. Regular exposure to the work of the deacons. I do not say “participation” in the deacon’s business, since a pastoral intern “aspires to the office of an overseer,” not that of a deacon. However, an intern will benefit greatly from being exposed on a regular basis to the work of the deacons. Attendance at their stated meetings should be a minimal goal. But direct exposure to diaconal ministries themselves, along with the accompanying deliberations and decision making, will stand the future minister in good stead, especially as he begins to interact with a diaconal board in his own congregation.

6. Assistance in counseling and pastoral oversight. This is a sensitive area, but one from which the intern should not be entirely excluded. While there are some counseling situations in which it would be inadvisable to include an intern, there are others in which his presence would be welcomed by all involved. In such situations, the intern will learn a great deal about how to address pastoral issues in a more personal setting, as he observes—and perhaps even participates in—a minister’s or ruling elder’s work. A particularly good opportunity for this kind of experience is provided by the pastoral visits of the elders. I would suggest that the overseeing elders, when scheduling visits, ask if it would be all right to bring the intern along. Including the intern in such pastoral situations will, if nothing else, give him more of a “pastor’s heart.”

7. Responsibility for administrative duties. If an intern has preaching and teaching gifts, but is weak in administration, he might as well be confronted with this, and begin to account for it in an internship program! Otherwise, he will be ill equipped for the pastorate. An excellent way to develop the organizational and administrative gifts of an intern is to build into his job description a particular project or task. My internship included the organization and supervision of a new vacation Bible school program. That project tested and strengthened my ability to supervise and motivate other people in a working relationship. Other useful projects would be the development of an evangelistic program or a small-group ministry. However, such projects can become all-consuming, and should not be allowed to distract the intern from the more central duties of the ministry, such as preaching and prayer.

8. Attendance at presbytery meetings. The intern will benefit greatly from being exposed to the work of the presbytery, and even of the General Assembly. It should be a priority of the mentoring session to provide for his attendance at all such meetings, if possible. He will hopefully thereby get a valuable head start as a presbyter.

These are what I would propose as the main ingredients of a meaningful internship. But there is one further element needed to make an internship truly successful. At times, it may prove to be the most difficult aspect of being a mentoring minister or session, for it will require serious deliberation and sometimes very sensitive dealing with an intern. I’m

referring to the honest assessment of an intern's character and gifts that ought to come at some point during the internship. Whether an internship is pursued before, during, and/or after the completion of a man's seminary education, the church and its leaders who provide such oversight and assistance ought to have this question as their fundamental concern: "Can we see in this man, by virtue of his character and the gifts manifested among us, evidence of God's call upon him to the gospel ministry?" In a day in which the call to the ministry is all too often seen as a merely private matter between God and a man's heart, churches which provide internship programs should accept the responsibility of either confirming or expressing doubt as to his fitness for the ministry. In the latter case, the session, after careful deliberation, and informed by the judgment of the church as a whole, will need to submit its serious reservations as to the intern's call to the ministry. In the former case, the session will be able to affirm his sense of calling. But in either case, it is here, in the context of a local church that has gotten to know the man's character and gifts, that his internal sense of calling can be given its needed external confirmation: the recognition and affirmation of the church. It is particularly for this reason that I remain convinced that an internship is indispensable in one's preparation for the ministry.

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