

How to Have an Effective Intern Program

The Intern Partnership Plan is now in its fourth year. To date we have had 17 interns serve in local churches in partnership with the association. Many of those interns have gone on to serve in full-time or bivocational ministry following their internships. For some, the intern experience revealed areas of growth or maturity that had to be addressed before further ministry could be pursued. All of these experiences are valuable in terms of helping the interns learn about themselves, their sense of calling and the next steps in living out that calling.

I want to give a shout out to those church leaders who have taken on the responsibility of supervising these interns. You have done exemplary work! You have taught me much about how to mentor an emerging leader effectively. Based on your example, here are some of my takeaways for having an effective intern program in the local church.

1) *Keep the primary focus on the intern's development.* Yes, your church should benefit from having an intern on your staff for a period of time, but that's a side benefit. The main thing is helping the emerging leader develop in their calling. That's the win for an intern program.

2) *Be specific about the learning objectives of the internship.* What knowledge and skills do you want the intern to gain through the internship? Be clear about these things and make sure the responsibilities and activities of the internship are geared toward those objectives.

3) *Be specific about the timeframe of the internship.* Internships, or ministry residencies as they are sometimes called, should be for specific periods of time. There's a start date and an end date. That will help keep the learning objectives in focus and promote an appropriate urgency in accomplishing them. It will also help avoid misunderstandings since no party to the internship is obligated to anything after the end date.

4) *Give the intern real ministry responsibilities.* Make sure the intern gets to do actual local church ministry on a weekly basis. Give them opportunities to lead, interact with other leaders, meet deadlines and manage their time. Be specific about what they're responsible for and then hold them accountable for it.

5) *Debrief regularly with the intern regarding what they are learning and experiencing.* It's vital that the intern has a supervisor who will spend time with them, listen to them, coach them and help them solve problems. Ideally this is a scheduled appointment every 1-2 weeks with informal check-ins at other times. Supervision is itself a valuable ministry and supervisors play a crucial role in the success of an internship.

6) *Protect the intern.* Supervisors also serve as protectors of emerging leaders. Protection in this sense means supporting appropriate ministry decisions made by the intern, helping the intern navigate conflicts and pushback that may arise and acting as the intern's visible sponsor in the church. When interns make mistakes, they should be able to learn from them without being thrown to the wolves. Supervisors help create this "fail forward" climate for their interns.

7) *Make learning experiences outside of your church part of the internship.* Help your emerging leaders network outside of your church in the areas of ministry to which they are called. Send them on interviews with other church leaders and on learning assignments at other churches. Help them attend key conferences and interact with other ministry organizations. Use the internship to help them see the bigger picture and build their peer and mentor networks.

8) *Whatever the intern's next step, send them with your blessing.* This goes back to point 1 above. Celebrate how the emerging leader has developed in their calling through the internship. Help the church understand what an important kingdom investment they've made in the intern. When the internship comes to an end, conclude it with a bang. In that way you'll both bless the intern and cast vision for future internships in your church. Amen to that!