Supervising Interns

Churches occasionally hire a college or seminary student to join the staff as an intern for a limited time. For the student, an internship can be an excellent way to test ministry skills. For a congregation, an internship provides an opportunity to participate in a student’s development in the work of the church. For the staff, an intern usually brings a fresh perspective to ministry.

The Demands

Though intern programs can bring many benefits to a church, such programs also can make demands on a congregation and its staff member. Therefore, a congregation needs to ask itself- at the beginning- what it hopes an internship program will do, not only for the congregation and staff, but also for the student. Making expectations clear will go a long way toward making the internship experience positive for everyone. Specifically, the congregation needs to recognize three key facts regarding the demands of internships:

- **Interns bring hidden costs.** Having an intern is not simply an economical way to cover unstaffed areas of ministry. Interns may indeed help congregations who are not yet financially able to call another full-time staff member, but they come with hidden costs (not always financial), and those costs need to be acknowledged up front. For example, interns require a high level of commitment from both staff and congregation. Staff members must be willing to invest large amounts of time in training and supervising an intern, and the actual return on investment may not be visible for some time. When staff members work with interns, therefore, it is wise for them to see their investment of time as a gift to the future ministry of the church.

- **Interns need intense supervision.** Every intern will require a well-defined job description and clear lines of accountability. Changes in either can obviously be negotiated during the internship, but interns need to know exactly what is expected of them and who they can turn to for help. Churches known for their successes with interns often assign a staff member as supervisor. This person isn’t necessarily the senior pastor, but he or she is particularly adept at working with seminarians. In some cases, board members have handled the task well. The point is, supervision is required, and the supervisor needs to be equipped to handle the responsibility.

  In many cases, seminaries and even colleges provide opportunities for off-site reflection about the internship experience. Generally speaking, congregations should take advantage of the resources provided by the educational institution and encourage the student to do so as well. Developing a close working relationship with the educational institution is an important way to
clarify expectations, set minimum salaries, receive occasional guidance, and avoid common mistakes.

- **Interns require patient understanding as their skills develop.** Congregations must view their involvement with interns as a gift to the future ministry of the church. This may frequently call for a spirit of self-sacrifice. Many congregations who have had successful relationships with interns over the years actually list the salary for the intern on the mission side of the budget rather than on the personnel side! That’s unorthodox bookkeeping, maybe, but a clear statement about the purpose of the internship program- and the possible return on the investment.

  Yet churches with successful internship programs find something to celebrate in the contributions of every intern, no matter how rocky the time together may have been. Such celebrations acknowledge not only an intern’s on-the-job growth and the congregation’s role in shaping a life for future ministry, but also the intern’s contribution to the life of the congregation.