

PASTORAL INTERNSHIP – WHAT IS IT FOR AND WHAT WILL IT BE LIKE

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Rationale for Pastoral Internships

There was a day when becoming a pastor meant simply starting in a district and hoping all went well. After graduation from college, and having been extended a call to serve in a local conference, this young pastor would most often find themselves leading out in a district. Sometimes everything worked out well, but unfortunately, there were too many times it did not. Many young pastors decided to simply walk away because they didn't understand all that was necessary to function effectively in this role called "pastor." Others learned lifetime lessons due to personal missteps or congregational challenges that caused them to learn to proceed extremely carefully and endeavor to not make any waves. Yet in order to learn to become truly effective pastors, young pastors need to begin their ministry in a way that helps them learn the nuances of pastoral ministry from those who have successfully travelled this journey. This is why each conference needs some system for pastoral internship.

Importance of Effective Pastoral Mentors

Before ever starting any sort of internship process with beginning pastors, there must be mentor pastors in the conference who can help with this process. These mentor pastors must be people of wide experience, but also people who have the heart of a teacher and a willingness to listen and encourage. They must be willing to make themselves available, vulnerable, and be sensitive to how different church life is today than when the mentor began in ministry. Because each conference will have many different factors to consider, finding the right mentor is crucial. In larger conferences, there should be a much bigger pool of pastors to draw from, but the aptitude of the mentor is most crucial. How this mentoring relationship will happen will vary from conference to conference. Where a young pastor can be paired with an experienced pastor is the most ideal scenario. Yet in many of our conferences this is not a possibility. Therefore, when an intern is placed in a district with little or no previous pastoral experience, even more careful attention must be given to finding an experienced pastor to connect them with.

What Interns Could/Should Expect

It is important to learn from those who have gone before us. To help with this, every conference needs to have an Interns Manual that covers all the various aspects of pastoral ministry. (For a sample of this, the Upper Columbia Conference has one with about 120 topics of conversation organized around the seven Core Values being emphasized by the NAD. This is available to any Ministerial Director upon request.) During those first years of ministry, a manual provides key talking points to help the intern better understand the practices of ministry. For these conversations to be beneficial there must be regular meetings between the intern and the mentor. Weekly is best if there is a Senior pastor the intern is working with. Monthly should be the aim if the intern is in a district on their own.

Another helpful approach is to bring all of the interns together for retreats where significant topics can be addressed. And this is where a larger conference can make a huge impact by helping the smaller conferences. In the North Pacific Union, two smaller conferences have sent their interns to join the two-day retreats that our conference regularly plans. This has been well received by all the participants.

The goal of any pastoral internship is two-fold – skill development and ordination preparation. The sooner an intern becomes proficient with the various aspects of pastoral ministry, the more effect the pastor will be and the more the churches where the pastor serves will be blessed.