

Streams . . .

. . . a "how to" applications program by C.E.N.T.E.R.

Internships

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In the UUA Manual on Internships it says that in a pastoral internship “a teacher and a learner covenant together to reflect critically on their ministry as a way to grow in self-awareness, professional competence, theological understanding, and religious commitment.” It’s a way for a candidate for the UU ministry to “experience practical ministry in a supportive environment.”

For internships to be able to provide such an experience not only must the congregations involved be able to conceive of themselves as “teaching churches,” the supervising ministers must be willing to invest themselves in the learning of the interns with whom they work. The UUA Manual says that supervising interns takes “time, energy, self-reflection and intentionally.” It compels supervisors to think about their own “work, goals, ethical principles, theology, what you have learned in this demanding profession, who you have become, and where you want to go.” It raises questions about what and how to share and how to empower someone else.

To be a supervisor one must be willing to:

- **Give time to interns.** They need to be able to reflect on what they are doing and help in developing ways of ministering in a UU context that work. Conferences, journals, reflective papers and exercises can all be used. Supervisors must be both collegial and honest, sharing the ministerial perspective only they have to offer.
- **Be sure the church has an Intern Committee** willing to spend time and give feedback to the intern from a lay perspective and advocate for the needs of the interns, per se.
- **Provide interns with a full range of ministerial experience,** including preaching, working with committees, presenting programs, counseling, making pastoral calls, understanding and supporting religious education, working on social issues, and understanding how a church works. Internships should not be “make work” experience, nor should interns be treated as “cheap labor.”
- **Welcome interns as colleagues,** as “for real ministers,” even if they don’t, yet, have a lot of experience. The best way to learn ministry is to do it. Internships provide interns with the chance to experience themselves as ministers in the wide variety of situations in which ministers find themselves and then to reflect on what they’ve done.
- **Work with church leaders and staff** to be sure that they will welcome interns and be available to them. There is a lot to learn from folks besides supervisors and intern committees.

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- Provide the Ministerial Fellowship Committee with a full and accurate evaluation. Dishonest, superficial, half-true or overly “kind” evaluations are of no help either to interns or the MFC.

There are many resources available to ministers who wish to supervise interns. The most important tool is: *Ministerial Internships—An Informational Manual for Students, Supervisors, Intern Committees, Congregations and Institutions*, by M. Elizabeth Anastos and Ellen Brandenburg, which is available from the Department of Ministry at the UUA. Beyond this, those who have not yet been internship supervisors should talk with colleagues who supervised interns in settings comparable to their own. If help is needed finding such colleagues, contact the person responsible for internship placements at the Department of the Ministry in Boston.

Interns have had good experiences in churches of all sizes, but what is required in varied kinds of congregations may be different. Multiple staff situations are different from those in which there is only one called minister. Suburban and urban situations are different. Start-up and fellowship style churches are different from those with long histories and conventional styles. It’s important to be sure that a particular intern will benefit from the situation you can offer. An internship should be challenging. It should provide an opportunity to learn. So, sometimes it is not the “best” candidate who will have the best internship in a church. It is often the person who will be most stretched by the experience or who is most open to working with the supervisor involved. Sometimes it is the person who is unsure of the parish ministry and needs to see what it’s like working in a church where the parish ministry is really valued. Sometimes it’s the person without enough experience to know what the parish ministry or church life is about.

And . . . sometimes what people learn in internships is that the parish ministry, perhaps even the ministry itself, is not the profession they can or want to pursue. This may be as successful for those involved as finding they have all it takes to be a good parish minister. Supervisors have to be honest enough to help interns understand this and secure enough to feel they haven’t failed if it happens.

Finally, internships are one of the best ways for those of us in the ministry to help provide for the future of our profession. It allows us to be “educators” in the best sense of the term.