

# Effective Internships in Your Missions Program

by *Ellen Livingood*

Churches use missions interns in a host of different ways. These revolve around the vision/needs of the church, the life/ministry stage of the intern, and the priorities and gifting of the supervisor. In this article, we have overviewed a number of approaches. Each model is enlightening; apply what fits your setting.

The majority of internship programs develop in churches which have a missions/outreach pastor. However, profitable missions internships are possible with guidance from a senior pastor and/or lay leaders willing to invest themselves in the process.

The range of church-based internship purposes is summarized below; many programs include several aspects. Due to space limitations, we have not included agency-based or field-based internships.



### Academic

Churches near Christian universities or seminaries often have students who want to complete a course requirement by serving in a church's missions department. The goals revolve around the expectations of the program.

### Discipleship

Some internships primarily focus on the personal development of the intern. Emphasis is laid on individual mentoring. Ongoing dialog addresses the interns' personal questions.

### Church ministry experience

Some churches structure internships for future missionaries around an immersion in the larger work of the church in order to enrich their understanding of church ministry and/or expand skills—preaching, teaching, children's or youth min-

istry, recovery programs, etc. This type of internship may be primarily designed for future pastors but prospective missionaries can also benefit, particularly if they have not had extensive church ministry. These internships can also provide lots of exposure of the intern to members of the congregation to build a broad support base.

### Missions program exposure

Some church internships are designed primarily to expose participants to what missions looks like from the church's perspective. Interns may attend missions leadership team meetings, learn how short-term teams are recruited and briefed, or serve on the missions conference team—all to understand the church's perspective on missions sending and mobilization. Often these interns spend significant time shadowing the missions pastor or other missions leaders.

### Missions program assistance

More in-depth internships usually require participants to assume significant responsibility for one or more major missions activities or projects. They might organize the planning of a youth missions event, lead a short-term team overseas, or coordinate meetings of those in the church who are pursuing future missions service.

These internships are usually longer in duration and designed for more mature interns—those already appointed for missions service and in the support-raising phase, or at least strongly committed to cross-cultural service.

◆ interns ◆

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### Hands-on, cross-cultural experience

Other churches structure their internships around local ministry opportunities requiring crossing of cultural boundaries—joining an effort to establish an ethnic church in their city, running a community center for an immigrant population, teaching ESL, or reaching out to international students. Some of these programs require the intern to take significant personal initiative; ethnographic research may also be a component.

## How We've Done It Internships from Church & Intern Perspectives



**Ed Grudier, missions pastor at Cherrydale Baptist Church in suburban Washington, DC**

*Ed was one of the first interns of The Chapel in Akron, OH. He then went on to be a field missionary before assuming his current position as a missions pastor, so his experience includes both sides of the missions internship experience.*

My internship at The Chapel helped me know what a healthy church looked like and exposed me to a positive example of connecting to the local community. While the American forms didn't transfer overseas, principles of ministry did. For example, I learned to keep asking how people were perceiving our ministry or understanding our message—and the same kinds of questions were strategic when I got to the field.

For me, personally, the most beneficial aspect of my internship was seeing firsthand the issues that a church staff wrestles with—how to develop leaders, what makes worship services relevant, how to handle church discipline issues, etc. I learned so much as I watched how The Chapel operated. I really felt like I was on staff; I was given a voice and asked my opinion.

My internship provided active involvement, not passive observation. Practical, pre-field ministry experience helps fill in the gaps—things like leading small group discipleship, planning funerals, doing hospital visitation—whatever is missing from the intern's background.

Good internships demand leaders' time. When I was at The Chapel, the interns met every week with the senior pastor. It was just a half hour or so, but he took the time to explain why things were done a certain way or why the church was grappling with certain issues. We also had personal time with Missions Pastor Bob Schneider. Again, it was so valuable to process with him our "why" questions.

Our Cherrydale internship has a double focus: local outreach and global missions program tasks. One of the experiential aspects we strive to include is cross-cultural ministry. We have a wonderful environment here in the greater DC area in which to train interns to interface with people of other

cultures. They begin to grapple with real-life challenges, such as how to adjust to cultures which view time and relationships differently.

For the internal side of the process, I meet with my intern two to three times a week for an hour to process what he is doing at the church but also how his deputation is going. Sometimes we discuss missiological issues he will face on the field. We often talk through the rationale behind some of our church strategies. He also attends debriefings of field missionaries to get an honest overview of the challenges and blessings of field ministry.

Currently, Cherrydale's internships are part-time, modestly salaried positions. In this economy, even that may stretch the budget. Churches may need to make a financial sacrifice to optimize internships. While it may be hard to justify the expense on a purely output basis, it is a crucial investment in training up future leaders.

◆ interns ◆

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**Bob Schneider, missions pastor at The Chapel, Akron, OH**

Our early experience with internships was so positive that now we encourage all of our future missionaries to do an internship with us before they go to the field. Usually this internship is scheduled for the year just before they leave for their missions assignment. During the first six months, interns typically spend 80-90% of their time on responsibilities at the church and the rest in deputation preparation. Slowly the percentage reverses. Since we have a vested interest in their getting to the field, we are happy to include deputation

work as a major part of their internship assignment, especially in those last months when they are in the big push to raise the remainder of support and get off to the field.

Our internship job description is not pre-defined but customized for

each person. If they are headed for children's work, much of their assignment may be with The Chapel's kids ministry, although still with some missions focus—for example, one aspect of what they might do is seek to integrate more missions focus into children's classes. Two who were headed to East Asia worked with The Chapel's Chinese church and

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with our international students ministry. Many assist with our Perspectives-like program and work on our missions conference. Then there is the “and all other duties as assigned” category where they fill in as needed. Interns take responsibility in areas of giftedness: One created a brochure to help educate the congregation about missions; another developed some material on our website about faith promise. High value comes from just seeing what we do on a day-to-day basis with missions promotion and recruiting. They come to missions committee meetings and see me dealing with missions budgets and decisions. Another benefit is that they get exposed to a lot of mission agencies. Understanding missions from the church perspective is more caught than taught. Internships are the ideal setting in which that can happen.



**Steve Aldrich, missions pastor at Pulpit Rock Church in Colorado Springs, CO**

Our interns are generally younger people who want to get some experience before they commit to missions and apply to an agency. Sometimes they are also fulfilling a requirement for their academic program. Our internships are often six-nine weeks during the summer or a three-month period during the year. They can be part or full time, but they are not paid. We purposely don't recruit interns because we are looking for them to take the initiative.

Our missions interns walk alongside me—attend missions task force meetings and see how I work with our missionaries. We do some life coaching. It's very tailor-made to them. Our church is a relationship-based community, so it makes perfect sense.

We also develop internships for those who have already joined an agency, and we interface on it with their agency supervisor. My philosophy is that the church is responsible for their spiritual life; the agency, for the technical, cross-cultural part. Everyone benefits as we work together during this period of preparation.



**Steve Beirn (missions pastor) and JM (missions intern) of Calvary Church, Lancaster, PA**

**Steve:** Calvary's internships are full time, paid staff positions and typically run one to two years.

They are designed to fulfill goals of both the church and the intern. On the church's part, we want in-depth exposure to an individual or couple we anticipate sending to the field. This extended internship allows for evaluation and personal development in a host of settings. For their part, interns are usually confirming their ministry skills and future direction. In some cases, they may also be working on ordination or an advanced degree while in the program. Some are choosing their agency and finalizing field ministry plans.

◆ interns ◆

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We customize the job to fit the interests and passions of the intern. At the beginning of the process, we sit down and work on a job description. One of the things we have to guard against is slipping into the

habit of using them to fill gaps in office functions. Their purpose here is not to be an administrative assistant.

**JM:** One of the great advantages for me has been gaining a perspective of what missions is from the church side. For example, one of the projects I've been working on is refining our short-term teams strategy to better align with our over-all missions vision. It's been great to be a part of this process.

Also, just being a part of the department day in and day out has helped me learn much more than I anticipated. I had no idea how much went on in coordinating a church's missions program!

Two years sounds like a long time, but it took me longer than I expected to learn how everything works. Now as I reach the half-way point, I feel like I have a whole year to have an influence.

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**JM**

◆ interns ◆

I am really grateful that the job has been customized to my gift mix. The intern before me developed an ESL program. I've been serving as a missions liaison with our youth department, which is especially appropriate because I'm very relational and my wife is on the youth staff. I also prepared and led a short-term trip.

I've really appreciated being invited into so many aspects of the missions program, even in situations where I didn't have much to contribute. Just being exposed was valuable for me.

I would recommend that churches rethink their choice of the title “intern.” To many people, that title connotes a part time position with little responsibility. Maybe “temporary mission associate” might better convey the level of this type of internship.

**Joey Shaw, missions pastor,  
Austin Stone Community Church, Austin, TX**

Austin Stone is very highly committed to an extensive program for what we define as interns and residents. *Internships* are for those still in the process of discovering the exact ministry involvement God has for them. They aren't sure if vocational ministry is a fit. Most are college students or recent graduates. *Residents* are those who know their ministry direction and want specific mentorship and heavy-duty training in a specific field.

Both interns and residents raise their own support. Residents are considered part of the staff and receive employee benefits, but they must raise the funds to cover these costs.

The interns and residents form a cohort that moves through a series of weekly classes but also develops into a community that gets together regularly. They often meet at the home of different pastors to get to know them as people. And they spend time together for fun—like going to baseball games.

Assimilation into the church staff is a priority for both interns and residents. They don't just make coffee; they have significant responsibility. They attend leadership meetings and are asked for input, even when the senior pastors and elders are struggling with serious issues. What comes with that level of trust is the responsibility for personal holiness. We hold them to high expectations. At the same time, sitting with higher level staff empowers them. It builds their confidence and boldness.

Our global internships have had three or four times as many applicants as other departments in the church because they are so hands on. They involve radical living, sacrifice, and

passion for souls. We walk them through the process of deciding where God is leading them and hope that most of them will go overseas afterward.

We have multiple types of global outreach interns:

Our refugee ministry intern leads that ministry. I provide coaching and supervision, but he is the one out there with people. He is training volunteers and coaching community groups. He's learning in huge steps!

◆ interns ◆

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would do—identify a people group in our city, find a person of peace, saturate individuals with the gospel, gather them into house churches. We limit their in-office time to eight hours per week, while they spend 20-30 hours each week out with “their” people.

Our administrative interns plug into aspects of running our missions program.

Our college mobilization interns primarily recruit and prepare collegians for the approximately 30 college trips we offer each year.

Our current resident in the global outreach department has the job of being our story teller. His primary responsibility is to interview people on mission and present their stories online.

◆ interns ◆

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Running an intensive internship program is extremely time consuming. You can't do it unless you put a huge value on leadership development and reproducing yourself and sending out quality leaders. I devote one day every week to interns. That morning I spend preparing and in the afternoon I have a one-hour meeting with each one. I go into each of those sessions with an extensive plan and logs of what we did before. They aren't going to grow if I just throw things off the cuff. In these

sessions, we build rapport, connect relationally, do some skill building, and provide accountability. I open up to them and bring them in on the vulnerable parts of my life. Each session includes a serious, focused time in prayer where I pray for them. They leave with an assignment for the week. Afterward, I log extensive notes so that I don't have to think about it the rest of the week.

Our making and multiplying disciples internship is actually church planting. We have four interns in this category this year, and each one is assigned to do what any church planter

We use ***Raising Leaders for the Harvest*** by Neil Cole and Robert Logan, a manual on how to develop a leadership farm system with dozens of helpful mentoring worksheets. We don't assign a lot of reading because we want interns to grow by doing. We feel their greatest need is for models and experience.

One of our values is to speak highly of our interns and elevate them in the eyes of the church. They are young, but we want people to respect them. Ministry can be cutthroat, so via recommendations and informal personal conversations, we work at commending them.

## Discussion Starters & More Resources

### For Churches

1. ***If you already have an internship program***, what practical ideas in this article could you implement to increase its impact? How will you prioritize these steps?
2. Do you think your current internship goals and outcomes are too ambitious or too small? How should they be adjusted?
3. Have you surveyed your former interns once they have gained some field experience to determine what was most helpful to them and what changes they would recommend to your internship program?
4. ***If you don't yet offer internships***, what type of program would best fit your church? What would be the benefits? The challenges?
5. Should you survey your current missionaries to see if they think an internship would have benefitted them? What recommendations would they have as you consider adding such an opportunity? Do you have a missionary coming on home assignment who could help you develop an internship program?
6. Who in your congregation is currently a prospective intern? Should you talk to them about their interest in such an opportunity? What would make it valuable and workable for them?

### For Agencies

1. Do you currently encourage the sending churches of your appointees to set up an internship for them in order to accomplish some of the purposes outlined here? What would be the logical point at which to dialog with them about this possibility?
2. How could you assist churches to expand the mutual benefits of an internship program?
3. Can you identify missionaries who have benefitted from an internship program at their church? Could you interview them and their church and then tell their story on your website or in your print publication to help other congregations?
4. Should the topic of internships be included in a future program you sponsor for church missions leaders?

5. Could you work out an agreement with nearby churches to "second" their interns to work in your agency's home office for several weeks of their internship? How could you make this beneficial to the intern? The church? Your agency?
6. Could these types of missions internships be implemented in churches your workers are planting around the world? How could you encourage your missionaries and national partners to consider culturally relevant versions of these models?

### More Resources

College Church of Wheaton, IL, and Austin (TX) Stone Community Church have generously shared samples of their internship program summaries and job descriptions. [Access these documents.](#)



*Ellen Livingood launched Catalyst Services in 2005 to further church/agency collaboration. She is available to help your church or organization work through these questions, and to hone your missions strategy and practice.*

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