

Do students enter seminary with the desire to become pastors? If what I know about myself is true of others, many young men enter seminary desiring to become the next great preacher. Too often we want to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, but we do not want to become servants to get there; we have a wealth of self-importance and we lack humility; we want to be heard as preachers, but we do not want to serve as pastors.

I would suggest that pre-seminary internships are the best way to prepare men to be pastors. This past year I served as a pastoral intern at University Reformed Church (URC) in East Lansing, Michigan. URC's internship is designed for untrained men who are seriously considering pastoral ministry. The goal is that men can begin counting the cost of pastoral ministry before seminary, so that they might be more effective pastors after seminary.

Through the internship, God repeatedly challenged me and taught me about a pastor's heart, and by His grace I hope the internship will continue to produce fruit in my life, and in the life of The Church for years to come. I am thankful for this opportunity and I hope that more churches might provide similar opportunities for men discerning a call to ministry.

I want to share three things in this article: what I did as an intern at URC, what benefits I received from the internship program, and why your church should consider developing an internship program like that of URC.

What I did

After being accepted as an intern, I attended a weekend training seminar on support-raising. I raised support over the summer, meeting benchmarks set in place by URC (e.g. 50% of support pledged by July 1). By August, I had a financial and prayer support team, to whom I sent regular updates.

I moved to Lansing and began my internship on August 15. The internship had three main components to it: Reading, Meeting, and Leading.

Reading—I read all or parts of 26 different books for the internship on topics ranging from holiness, the atonement, and the Trinity to Presbyterian polity, the role of an elder, and leadership. I was assigned eight papers and two rewrites of papers during the year related to different readings.

Meeting—I attended various trainings and meetings. I attended weekly prayer meetings, monthly gatherings of local pastors, session and diaconate meetings, staff meetings and events, as well as presbytery and General Assembly. I received training at weekly intern seminars, pastoral staff meetings, leadership training class, and new members class. Pastor Jason Helopoulos brought me with him on hospital and home visits. I was required to meet with every elder on the session (one of the best parts of the internship).

Leading—As the year progressed, I received more leadership tasks in the church. I began discipling a young man halfway through the year. Every month, the Pastoral Fellow and I alternated preaching at the Lansing City Rescue Mission. During the winter we co-led pastor Jason's small group, as well as a six-week adult Sunday school class. I taught young people too, the five and six year-olds as well as the youth group. I led the congregational prayer twice and I preached three times during the evening service.

What I Gained

When people ask me what the best part of the internship was, I like to say, "sitting and watching". Although the internship involved a fair amount of "doing", the opportunity to see how ministry in the local church happens has impacted me most.

Last year, I watched URC go through transition as one senior pastor prayerfully left and the search committee and congregation prayerfully chose another. I witnessed Pastor Jason's faithfulness during a stressful time as he and his

family waited on the committee's decision. I sat in on every elder meeting and watched them pray, laugh, and handle difficult pastoral cases. Every Sunday I saw how many people help a worship service run smoothly. I sat in on the assistant pastoral search committee meetings. I watched over my own heart, prayed over my calling to ministry, mourned over my sin, and saw my inadequacy contrast sharply with Christ's sufficiency.

One of the most helpful aspects of this internship was the fact that it was a pre-seminary internship. I was able to concentrate on the internship without the concurrent burden of studies. The internship showed some of my strengths and weaknesses, and how I want to address them in seminary. I know what ministry at a church looks like, which will help me contextualize the material I learn in seminary. I have an experiential knowledge of pastoral ministry, the end-goal of my theological education. This internship will help me keep the care of Christ's flock in mind when I'm studying Greek and Hebrew.

Most of all, I'm glad I had this internship because I have a concrete idea of what it takes to be a pastor. Pastor Jason has exhibited the different skills and disciplines that I will need to develop and hone. The elders at URC have shown me what faithfulness to Christ, love for His flock, patient endurance, and warm-hearted Presbyterianism should look like. I have good role models, good experiences, and good books to give me a good start, under God's faithful guidance in ministry.

What Your Church Can Do

This experience has so benefited me and past interns that I would recommend other churches develop a similar program. I'm not encouraging only *big* churches to develop an internship program; I'm encouraging churches *who are faithful to Christ and His Word, who are carrying out the great commission, and who are interested in developing the future leaders in Christ's Church*—I'm encouraging those churches, regardless of their size, to consider developing a pre-seminary internship at their church.

What qualifies my Church to provide internships to pre-seminary men?

Surely URC is qualified to provide an internship program. URC has over six-hundred members, multiple ministry staff, an exciting location by a university, and both the former and the current senior pastor are published authors and are well-respected by godly men and women across the country. But many of our churches don't stack up if these are the standards by which we measure ourselves.

What happens when we change the qualification to something completely different? Answer this question: do your elders have a deep, abiding love for Christ, His people, and His word? If you can answer this question with a yes, then your church should seriously consider creating a pre-seminary pastoral internship.

Ask me or my friends who have been through this internship in the past three years. We will tell you that the best thing for us has been attending Session meetings, because there we witnessed men praying together, governing wisely, and shepherding tenderly in the context of brotherly love and unity. We saw them love the church.

Now I am aware, even that is a high standard, but nowhere does this qualification —*a deep, abiding love for Christ, His people, and His word*— preclude a church with seventy-five members from having an internship program.

How would this work financially?

At URC, the internship program is fully fundraised by the interns. This frees the church up financially. It also teaches a valuable skill. I had to fundraise \$25,000 from friends and family, Christians and non-Christians. I learned to trust God to provide money for me. Every potential pastor should learn that God will provide for His servants.

Why should my church do this?

It serves the local church. A church can't hide itself from its interns. An intern gets to see the best and worst of a church. Having an intern provides a church with an opportunity to examine itself. Is your session unified? Does your pastoral ministry set an example that you want a young man to pursue or avoid? Receiving honest feedback from the intern also helps a pastor learn where the church needs to grow. More than anything, the church learns the value of training up and sending out men into ministry.

It serves The Church. The goal is for interns to enter seminary and the pastorate with better knowledge of and love for pastoral ministry. Interns can come away knowing what the life of a pastor actually looks like, what joys and trials it entails. The goal is to sow seed now that will bear more fruit in Christ's Church for decades to come.

What do small churches have to offer?

In college, I attended a small ARP church. On a good Sunday, the church had seventy members attending. The congregation was elderly. Reverend Ben Dowling conducted at least five funerals per year. There was nothing thrilling about ministry at that church. But Ben served that church faithfully, for the sake of the Good Shepherd.

I joined that church because Pastor Ben befriended me, and for three years I informally shadowed him. He gave me rides to the airport and had me over for dinner and for football games. Every time we were together, he dropped pastoral advice for me. He invited me on hospital visits. He shared his struggles with me, his study habits, the joys and dangers of pastoral ministry. I received advice on book-collecting, seminary-choosing, counseling, discipling, dating, and marriage.

Which experience was more beneficial to me? The years with my college pastor or the year at URC? That isn't the right question to ask. What matters is that both churches prepared me for ministry because God placed faithful elders with a deep, abiding love for Christ, His people, and His Word in both places. They opened their own lives and the lives of their churches to me. They showed me pastoral ministry, without apology and without guile.

Who needs to catch this vision?

If we're convinced this is a good idea, how do we get young men interested in pre-seminary internships? How are young men going to know that there are internships open in small towns in Georgia or West Virginia? Why are young men going to want to go to those churches when churches like URC exist?

Potential interns need to catch the vision for pre-seminary internship programs. We need a culture that encourages men to take a year before seminary to spend time sitting under pastors in a local church. One way to develop this culture is for local churches to encourage local candidates to apply. Churches also might "advertise" their internship on the PCA's website, their own website, in their church bulletins, or at presbytery meetings.

Seminaries should also catch the vision for pre-seminary internships. If a man goes to any reformed seminary, that seminary has a list of churches in the area that the seminarian could get plugged into during his seminary years. But if we want to develop a system where churches build into men and then send them off to seminary to *continue* instead of *begin* the building process, seminaries might encourage men to consider spending a year at a church, and provide a list of churches they know that have pre-seminary internships. Seminaries may even develop partnerships with churches that encourage such internships.

Lastly, Pastors and sessions need to catch this vision. As elders, it is your responsibility to shepherd Christ's Church. If you're doing it faithfully, let young men witness your work.

If you have a deep, abiding love for Christ, His People, and His Word, please consider developing a pre-seminary pastoral internship. Christ's Church will benefit from you multiplying yourselves in the next generation of elders.