

Summer Internships That Last All Year

"The Next Generation" - March, April, 1997
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I can still remember Lee from the summer of my eighth grade year. He was a seminary student at Duke Divinity School who had come to our church to serve as a summer youth ministry intern. He was young, he was our very own full-time youth worker and he seemed to want to build relationships with the kids in the youth group. We called him "Gomer" because he was a dead ringer for *Gomer Pyle*, and, for about one month, from the middle of July to the middle of August that summer of 1965, he really gave our youth program a shot in the arm.

Unfortunately, sometime during the third week of August, Lee finished his internship, went back to seminary and faster than you can say, "Shazaam!", the youth group returned to the familiar flat-line sameness of low attendance and weak vital signs. The shot in the arm turned out to be little more than a flash in the pan, and like stargazers watching for Halley's comet, our youth program limped along until the next summer's intern paid a visit.

Getting A Better Return From Your Intern

Sad to say, the pattern described in the previous paragraphs tells a story familiar to a great many congregations who utilize summer youth ministry interns. It's a story of high investment and low return, heightened expectations and inevitable disappointment; it's a story of youth groups getting a summer shot in the arm that may eventually immunize them from developing an infectious youth program for the other nine months of the year. What's the problem?

The problem is that we are using internships *to run a summer program* rather than using internships *to raise up a youth ministry*.

A Modest Proposal: A Youth Ministry Trainer-in-Residence

First of all, there are *two basic types of summer interns*. One type is the novice youth worker who is seeking some hands-on training in youth ministry - the rookie who has himself perhaps never been overseer of a youth program, but hopes to gain some first-hand experience by working with youth group for the summer. A congregation can give and receive a wonderful summer of ministry with this type of intern by providing the intern an experienced youth ministry mentor who will train, teach, guide, and give feedback. But, this person has no business being given sole responsibility for a youth program, for three months or for even one week.

The second type of intern is the upper classmen youth ministry student/seminarian who has had some initial youth ministry experience, who may also have some classroom training in youth ministry. The best contribution to the youth program will be to come in for the summer - not as the main youth worker, but as a youth ministry trainer-in-residence.

While many congregations with full-time youth workers on staff will want to be involved in the very valid and valuable ministry of the first type of internship, I would strongly recommend that smaller congregations with no full-time youth pastor consider the second paradigm of the youth ministry trainer-in-residence.

Rationale: Why Some Congregations Should Consider a Trainer-in-Residence

- The best kind of youth ministry is relational youth ministry - youth ministry built around long-term relationships between adults and kids. The traditional paradigm of summer internships short-circuits relationships and may even breed disillusionment among kids who watch the revolving door swing open and close every summer.
- When we build our summer youth program around a trained intern who comes in for three months and then leaves, we're potentially making it more difficult for those adult volunteers who work with the kids during the other nine months of the year. After all, this intern has the advantage of youth, novelty, full-time focus and special training. If the intern has any ability at all, he or she is going to set a pace and establish expectations that almost no year round volunteer can hope to sustain. So, the end result of the summer, rather than being a step forward for the program, is a step backward.
- A youth ministry intern who has some practical experience and some formal training would have three months to teach youth ministry to the year-round volunteers by training, modeling and sharing in effective ministry.
- A wise intern will realize that the key to successful youth ministry is learning how to work with and train volunteers. This ministry trainer-in-residence approach will provide a great opportunity for an intern to focus on this task.

How Would It Work?

March-April: A local congregation makes sure that it has in place a team of adult volunteers who are ready and willing to be trained for youth ministry.

March-April: Congregation confirms arrangements with an upper classmen summer intern who has *both some practical experience and some formal youth ministry training.*

April-May: Intern and volunteers meet for an initial weekend training and planning retreat. Work through some basic philosophy of youth ministry principles, and plan for the summer calendar.

June: The main thrust of training for this first month is intern modeling. Give the volunteers a chance to watch some youth ministry skills up close: "I do it - you watch."

July: Main thrust of training for second month is sharing the ministry. " Let's do it together."

August: Main thrust for third month is transferring the ministry to the adult volunteers: "You do it - I watch."

September: Main thrust for September is transition of full responsibility to the volunteers: "You do it - I will go back to school."