

Ministry Internship Training – *An Exploration of its Usefulness for Brethren churches*

Dr Ian Payne
Pathways College of Bible and Mission
June 2005

Introduction

Ministry internship training is one form of distance education. It exists alongside (and perhaps in combination with) a variety of distance educational methods such as correspondence lessons, CD, block courses, synchronous and asynchronous internet.

Traditionally in modern times theological education has been residential, communal and used face-to-face classroom interaction as its principal mode of delivery. A number of pressures in the last few decades have resulted in increasing demand for distance education and in particular internship training. This paper explores the usefulness of internship training for Brethren churches, with particular reference to Western contexts such as New Zealand.

Definitions

‘Ministry internship training’ is educating people for ministry and mission through theological studies and supervised practical work. It is the apprenticeship aspect that is definitive. An intern learns from a supervisor, who provides a model and helps the intern critically reflect on ministry while doing it. Ministry internship training is also called field theological training.

I will use a wide definition of ‘ministry.’ I intend to include the service to the Lord and to his people done by those active in paid and voluntary work in churches, pastoral care, youth work, eldership, leadership, preaching, education, evangelism and mission. While ministry can be distinguished from mission, and my focus will be on the former, internship training is certainly useful for training for mission too.

Historical overview

‘Theological field education is a refinement of one of the oldest kinds of education. In its first forms, those who knew how to do things taught others to do them by demonstration and example. Students learned by observing the “master teacher” and by then “practicing” what was to be learned.’¹ One thinks of Plato and Aristotle in the classical world, of the rabbis in the Israelite world. Jesus was the master teacher, whom his disciples followed. Paul had similar mentoring relationships with co-workers. He urged Timothy to adopt the pattern (2 Tim 2:2).

In medieval times monasteries developed. Here is the origin of the tradition of residential community being at the heart of theological education. Originally, the monastery was a place of both scholarship and mission. Universities grew out of the monasteries. ‘After dominating early learning, contextual education lost ground as universities developed. ... Theoretical learning was soon believed to be superior to practical learning.’² The dominance of classroom university methods led in modern times to the disjunction of theory and practice. To begin with theory was valued more highly than practice. In theological education, the practical theology department was always the least funded.

Early reaction to the classroom monopoly came with the use of case study method (in law and medicine) and, in the 1920s, Clinical Pastoral Education. Gradually through growing interest in supervision and field work, a new discipline of field education achieved recognition by mid-twentieth century.

In the post-modern period, the pendulum has swung further. In the eyes of the young at least, practical knowledge is now more valued than theoretical. David Wells was provoked to write his book, *No Place for Truth*, by a student's struggle with justifying the expense of taking a theology course that was so “irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church.”³

It is my belief that relevance and truth are not alternative goals for theological education. Both are important. What we need is a grasp of revealed truth and its relevance to God's mission.

¹ Pyle and Seals, p. 2.

² Ibid, p. 3.

³ Wells, p. 4.

Our situation in New Zealand

There are about 200 Brethren churches in New Zealand. Arriving with the likes of J.G. Deck (1807-1884), the Brethren assemblies were vigorously championed and nurtured by itinerant evangelists and leaders like Gordon Forlong (1819-1908), Charles H. Hinman (1859-1922) and James Chrystall (1847-1933). The Brethren movement in New Zealand has made a contribution to the wider church far greater than its numbers would indicate. The part played by NZ Brethren missionaries in the last 150 years has outshone other groups especially on a per capita basis.

Involvement in parachurch ministries by Brethren members has been huge.

Known for their Bible knowledge and teaching, but not for their flexibility, Brethren have also ended up contributing significant numbers of leaders to other denominations.

The arrival of the charismatic movement in the 1960s was not handled well by Brethren churches generally. Controversy and schism unsettled the movement, and many capable and energetic leaders left. Most churches retreated and became inward looking and isolationist. Camps and conventions, which were opportunities for networking of leaders, declined in popularity during the seventies and eighties. Local church autonomy was emphasised almost by default.

Two Training Institutions and Their Decline

The Brethren movement had two training institutions by this stage. New Zealand Assembly Bible School was founded in 1958 by Abe Compton and flourished under the Principalship of Neville Taylor during the 1980s, often having 40 or more students to its two 6 month long courses. Gospel Literature Outreach was founded by Colin Tilsley. As well as stimulating missionary teams to various continents, under the energetic leadership of Rowland Forman, Russell Embling and Brian Goodwin, GLO established a Missionary Training College in Te Awamutu. More practically orientated than NZABS, GLO also did well during the 1980s, attracting 30-40 students annually.

However the picture changes during the 1990s. Declining numbers of students began to affect both NZABS and GLO TC. By 1998 both institutions had only about a dozen students each.

A change in the tertiary education environment was to have significant impact too. With the creation of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority in the early 1990s, the government began to require accreditation of tertiary institutions and approve and monitor the quality of courses. A next step was to introduce funding of approved courses by government, and the theological sector was eventually included. This meant both institutions and students were funded. There was no government attempt to control the content of teaching. The price, however, was the considerable effort necessary to obtain approvals, and to provide sufficient ongoing reporting to keep the funding.

Amalgamation

In the light of these two factors, it made sense to the governing boards of both NZABS and GLO TC to amalgamate. This they did in 1999. Pathways College of Bible and Mission was the name of the new entity. In the first year of amalgamation, no teaching programme was run and the faculty under the new Principal Noel McKernon prepared for and obtained the course approvals needed for the new NZQA era. A Certificate of Christian Ministry and a Diploma in Christian Studies, both Bible knowledge type courses, were launched. Whether because of the gap year or because of patchy acceptance of the amalgamation by Brethren, student numbers recovered to some degree but not as much as the Board hoped. Critically, it did not attract very many European New Zealanders from typical Brethren churches. While full-time student numbers rose and stayed on 23, residential student numbers declined and non-residential numbers increased.

In the tertiary education scene, by 2003 the government found itself with a proliferation of private training establishments and took steps to reduce funding by choosing to target funding more discriminately. The result is likely to be a removal in 2006 of direct funding for some or even all of the private theological education providers.

Trends in the Marketplace

Far more significant than this threat to the fledgling college were five trends in the demand for theological education. It seems to me that potential students increasingly want -

1. Academic Excellence –

They want university degrees, accreditation with international credibility. If they are going to spend significant time studying, it needs to be to the best level possible.

2. Practical Knowledge –

Students want useful knowledge, ministry, adventure, integrated learning experiences. Application is the goal. To be valued, something doesn't just have to be true. It has to be *relevant*. For instance, all of Carey Baptist College's new degrees are in 'applied theology.' Operation Mobilisation and Capernwray run adventure discipleship courses. This is result of shift from modernism to post-modernism. Practical knowledge is valued and theoretical knowledge is almost

despised.

3. Flexibility in Delivery –

Students want convenience. Increasingly students want to study part-time, evenings, blocks, when they're free. They want to study where they are. This means a variety of delivery modes: distance learning, part-time studies, short courses, the use of synchronous or asynchronous internet, CD ROMs, DVDs, email, chat rooms and other information technology. They want to avoid disruption of family or of lifestyle or of career. Also they value short courses that connect with other courses. Students value exit options in courses.

4. Freedom from Institution –

There is increasing resistance to residential community/compulsion/ cross-cultural experience. This is evident by the decreasing number of *residential* students at residential colleges. A new college in Auckland is basically non-residential. The traditional idea of students living in community is seen as too restrictive. People don't want to be institutionalised. Loyalty is only given to particular people, not to institutions.

An NZQA research report on student support services sums it up, 'students don't expect to fit their life to the institution, they expect the institution to fit their lives.'

This is especially true of European students. A friend who has worked for more than 15 years at a nearby college remarked that European students seemed to prefer to be day-students, presumably, she said, to avoid living in cross-cultural community.⁴

5. Church Based Training

Students want learning integrated into their local church situation. Having been disciplined and motivated to grow in their local church, they do not quickly want to have to leave where they are already finding fulfilment and challenge. Church based training is also the ideal sought by an increasing number of church leaders.⁵ This trend means more churches develop leaders where they are and where they are showing promise. One great benefit churches see is that they do not lose the input of potential leaders. This contrasts with the case where students go away to residential colleges.

This is a more positive trend and can counteract some of the negative ones. There is not just a pragmatic benefit in this trend, but it brings a theological benefit. Brethren churches would agree, surely, that there is something defective in ecclesiastical practice which makes parachurch organisations central. The focus of Christ's legacy is the church (Matthew 16:16) and not peripheral organisations such as Bible Colleges. An educational programme that more clearly develops partnerships with and is a handmaiden to local churches is to be welcomed. The challenge is for local churches to be increasingly taking responsibility for developing the leadership within them.

Pathways College Response

How has Pathways responded to these threats and trends?

Consultation

The first response was to listen. During 2002 a dozen consultation meetings were arranged for leaders of a wide range of Christian Brethren churches. In all 38 churches were consulted. As the incoming Principal, I was able to participate in some of these meetings.

A wide variety of feedback came to light. Some helpful criticism was aired. We have to walk a narrow path between some conservative churches that are suspicious of us and some progressive churches that don't value what we offer. The key things we learned were:

- We should make our Board membership more representative
- We should increase communication to stakeholders, developing a greater visibility to the partnership with them
- We should increase the practical learning component of our programmes
- We need to develop more flexible learning options to cater to their diverse needs.

⁴ Living in community is one of the ways of learning considerateness, humility, self-discipline, fellowship. This trend is worrying. Is it a measure of how self-absorbed and racist European NZers are becoming? If our leaders do not learn relational skills in community, what sort of self-absorbed egotistical nincompoops are we going to be getting into leadership in future?

Of course, residential community living is not the only place where these relational skills can be learned. But if colleges are not going to be teaching them, it becomes the responsibility of the local church to do so.

⁵ *The Leadership Baton*, Rowland Forman, Jeff Jones and Bruce Miller, Zondervan, 2004.

Vision Focussed

Another important step was to clarify our vision. What was it that we wanted to become? Pathways vision is to be the natural resource for leadership development for those wanting to work in the ministry and mission of Brethren and like-minded churches.

Development and Refinement of Courses

We have refined two existing courses and developed an entirely new one. We introduced a church involvement outreach week in the existing Certificate and Diploma courses. We also are now adapting the Orientation for Mission course by distance learning (CD/Internet/ interview). The third and most significant initiative was the development of Diploma in Christian Ministry (Internship).

Ministry Internship Diploma

This course is a combination of theological study and learning on the job under an experienced mentor, delivered in a way which is more flexible for both student and church. Our internship course is not the only one in New Zealand. Four other providers offer similar programmes. We had to develop some unique aspects. The two major alternatives were three year courses. We decided to provide a one-year version. Secondly, rather than weekly lectures, we chose to deliver through block courses.

So Pathways College internship diploma is a one-year course comprised of 50% supervised ministry in church or organisation and 50% study based on lectures delivered by block courses. Its level is the same as the first year of university. Students must have the confidence of the church or organisation they will work for. The placement church must be willing to provide a genuine ministry opportunity (this is not a diploma in photocopying) and be willing to supervise the intern for two hours per fortnight. Interns may work on focussed ministry areas for the year, including youth work, home group leadership and pastoral care, evangelism, encouragement of prayer, technical support to audio/visual communication, leadership of drama or music teams, preaching and ministry to the aged among a host of other areas. Subjects taught at the block courses are mainly drawn from Biblical studies for ministry and theology for ministry. In addition students choose one of several electives in the Christian service area. These include teaching/preaching, music/worship, youth ministry, evangelism/mission, technology/media and Christian camping.

Launched with a pilot course in Matamata, two hours drive south of Auckland, in 2004, we had five students. Students were accommodated at Totara Springs Christian Centre for block courses. We discovered the blocks, while intensive, built good camaraderie. Importantly, they were mostly from typical Brethren churches from whom we had not had students for several years. Vital reconnections were being made.

During that first year, we worked on our application for recognition of the course by NZQA. We obtained letters of support from thirty-three Brethren churches and organisations. Our application was approved in early 2005, meaning students could apply for loans and living allowances from the government.

NZQA approval was an important measure of the value of the course. Another important step was obtaining staircasing agreements with the two major alternative providers of three-year internship qualifications. This meant we could assure applicants that they could graduate with our diploma and progress into the second year of these three-year alternatives.

During the pilot year, we were approached by a large Brethren church in Wellington that was interested in internships for their leadership development. In 2005, with interns from that church, we were able to establish a second block course base in Wellington at another Christian camp site. This meant we can offer the programme for any church in the North Island.

It is a little early to talk of trends, but the internship diploma programme seems to be taking off. In the second year we had eleven students at Matamata, and five students at Wellington. At last count, thirty churches and organisations have indicated they are willing to have an intern. Some are advertising for them, or are willing for us to advertise their situation. One church that had one intern the first year has three this year. Three churches are planning to use the programme as a central core of their own leadership development strategy.

Evaluation of Usefulness of Internship Training for Brethren Churches

1a. Advantages for the Student

- There is a balance between practical ministry and biblical knowledge. This is appealing to many students.
- They are learning on the job with an experienced supervisor. I would have crawled across broken glass to work alongside some leaders. Internship positions in go-ahead churches or with significant leaders have great appeal.

- Regular supervision means regular encouragement, and that leads to higher academic achievement.
- Total costs are lower. Accommodation fees cost far less, because only accommodation at block courses applies. Students do however have to be accommodated somewhere at other times. Tuition fees cost less too (63%). This is because of the lower face-to-face contact hours needed.
- Students can stay with and contribute to the local church situation in which they are engaged. They don't have to leave.
- Students only have to make a one-year commitment. They can find out if they are gifted for and enjoy ministry. The one-year length course avoids high drop out factor for which the three-year alternative courses have a reputation.
- It offers pathways to ongoing studies for career development. The cross-crediting agreements we have with two other providers encourages students in the knowledge that, if they want to continue on, they have not wasted a year. They can enter the second year of the alternative courses.
- Many students enjoy the block course delivery mode. The intensive periods of lectures leaves other time more free. Institutional experience is minimised. Less travel time is wasted. Concentrated relevant teaching is motivational. There is more time to get to know the lecturers and other students.
- The block courses foster networking among other future Brethren leaders. What begin as friendships often in later life can be seen as God-given and valuable links for the kingdom.

1b. Disadvantages for the Student

- Not all students like the practical learning style. More mature students coming from some years of church involvement may prefer to concentrate on academic learning, having sorted out for them what questions need answers. Newcomers to the faith may also prefer the Biblical and theological content of bible knowledge programmes.
- The particular circumstances of some students may not suit block course attendance, tilting them in favour of the weekly delivery format.
- The one-year length may be too short for optimum learning. Having developed good mentoring relationships and found one's feet in ministry, the year is soon over. [We can offer to continue the internship placement and our supervisor coordination role as the intern moves into further years of study with the other providers.]

2a. Advantages for Brethren Churches

- It is enormously valuable to encourage the transmission of the ministry experience and passion of existing Brethren leaders. The role of supervisors is critical and their partnership with the College vital in optimising what the intern learns from ministry. The internship programme effectively multiplies the role models available for a new generation.
- This is a local church leadership development strategy. It is a way a church can develop its potential leaders, without losing their input or losing them to the cities or another denomination. If Brethren churches don't assume the responsibility for this, no one else will and our movement will dissipate like a stream flowing into the sand.
- The local church benefits from two days per week ministry by the student – and government funding assists! (The church may have to pay the intern something, but may do so only for work done beyond the 15 hrs study-related ministry).
- The internship programme invites people to consider development towards a career in serving Brethren churches. From the point of view of the Brethren movement, a ministry internship course like this clearly identifies to young people a life-skills development track or pathway to vocational opportunities among Brethren churches. To people asking the question 'what should I do with my life?' we ought to have clear and challenging pathways.
- A ministry internship course like this also serves the wider Christian church in New Zealand and that is the larger goal. By growing stronger ourselves, we will be able to contribute more to others.
- It fosters the unity of the movement by encouraging friendships at a formative stage in people's lives.

2b. Disadvantages for Brethren Churches

- It could be seen as a substitute for academic excellence, but with clear pathways to higher study this seems unlikely.
- It could encourage overemphasis on practical learning at the expense of theoretical thinking. One often hears the cry for 'real practitioners rather than ivory-tower academics.' Certainly we need thinking that is brought to bear on real issues, but the contrast is unfair. This sort of overemphasis is hardly caused by one education programme; rather it is part of a mega-shift in culture.
- The opportunity could be abused by immature people who treat the ministry opportunities carelessly. However, the risks are limited by the screening process of both College and church. The student has to obtain the confidence of the church.

- It could permit avoidance of cross-cultural and residential community. But this is not inherent in the programme. The ministry internship supervision will very likely identify and help a student with relationship problems.

3a. Advantages for Pathways College

- Increased student numbers.
- Better quality of student. The requirement of ministry with a church or organisation necessarily means only students with good potential apply.
- Increased presence and visibility among Brethren churches (especially in the North Island).
- Better achievement of our mandate to be a leadership training resource for Brethren churches.
- More fulfilment for staff and consequent benefits for retention and attraction of staff.
- Fewer problems related to accommodation provision.

3b. Disadvantages for Pathways College

- Dispersed student body and reduced contact time for interaction with teaching faculty.
- Lower financial profitability. Two interns are needed for every residential student to generate the same income. There are however lower costs in serving interns.

Conclusion

The ministry internship diploma responds positively to four of the five marketplace trends identified earlier. It emphasises practical knowledge, is very flexible in delivery, avoids institutionalisation and perhaps most importantly is a tool for church-based training. These factors, and finding a unique niche in the marketplace, are the reasons it is experiencing strong growth at the moment.

Because of the strong link between student, College and church, Brethren churches that proactively use a ministry internship programme get

- quality students that churches already trust and see as potential leaders.
- highly motivated students that are regularly encouraged while actively contributing in significant ministry.
- better academic achievement because the student is more internally motivated towards long-term ministry goals.
- a leadership development tool that local churches can use to proactively train their potential leaders.
- churches that feel better able through partnership to tackle the task of intentional leadership development.
- better transmission of valuable leadership experience and passion.
- more leaders for the Brethren movement with a higher sense of loyalty too.

With this ministry internship course we have an exciting and unparalleled opportunity to help train a new generation of leaders for Brethren churches in New Zealand, and given the same trends, perhaps the benefits may prove just as useful elsewhere.

Bibliography

- Banks, Robert, *Reenvisioning Theological Education, Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Forman, Rowland, Jeff Jones and Bruce Miller, *The Leadership Baton, An Intentional Strategy for Developing Leaders in your Church*, Zondervan, 2004.
- Lineham, Peter J., *There We Found Brethren, A History of Assemblies of Brethren in New Zealand*, Palmerston North: G.P.H Society, 1977.
- Palmer, Parker J., *To Know as We are Known, Education as a Spiritual Journey*, New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Pyle, William T., and Mary Alice Seals, eds., *Experiencing Ministry Supervision*, Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995.
- Wells, David F., *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.