

GUIDELINES FOR PASTORAL SUPPORT GROUPS

CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN ILLINOIS AND WISCONSIN

The mission of the Christian Church in Illinois and Wisconsin is to grow Disciples congregations for healthy, vital ministry. In line with that mission, the Regional Staff offers this booklet to help equip, encourage, and empower congregational leaders in their support of their pastors' ministry and nurturing of a healthy pastor-parish relationship.

Foreword

Many Disciples congregations have a group called Pastoral Support Committee, Pastor-Parish Committee, or Pastoral Relations Committee. Some congregations also have a Personnel Committee and smaller numbers include personnel concerns in the work of an Administration Committee. In a much older model, some congregations make the elders responsible for relationships with the pastor. After observing the experience of many pastors and congregations, after receiving many requests for resources for the work of such committees and studying the matter extensively, the regional ministry staff of CCIW has come to advocate the existence of a Personnel Committee in every congregation, and a Pastoral Support Committee (Group, Team) in many, if not most congregations.

Thus the purpose of this brochure is twofold:

1. To summarize briefly the functions of a Personnel Committee and refer congregations to more extensive resources regarding its form and function.
2. To provide a more extensive resource regarding the form and functions of the Pastoral Support Group.

Why Two Committees?

The two committees—Personnel and Pastoral Support—address two related but different kinds of concerns. The following paragraphs will show the distinct form and function of each committee.

What is a Personnel Committee?

The Personnel Committee is an agency of the board, responsible for maintaining objective, predictable, fairly administered policies, performance expectations, evaluations, and terms of employment for the pastor(s) and all other members of the congregation's paid staff. It is mandated by the constitution, appointed by the board and answerable to the board. A congregation's choice to have such a committee is a sign of responsibility and concern for fairness and the well being of its staff, not a sign of distrust of its staff.

What Do Personnel Committees Do?

The Personnel Committee

- writes the personnel policy (for formal adoption by the board) and periodically reviews this policy in view of changing needs of the congregation and staff, as well to correct unforeseen weaknesses in the policy
- writes job descriptions or approves job descriptions proposed by other persons or entities in the congregation
- wires, or monitors/approves the hiring of staff, ensuring that established policies are followed

- supervises staff and/or establishes lines of supervision among staff, coming to agreement with each person about working goals
- evaluates each staff person's performance on the basis of job descriptions and previously agreed working goals in regularly scheduled reviews
- sets compensation for staff
- assures safe working environment
- handles grievances

The Personnel Committee ideally, will include people who have experience such as administration, human resources, win-win negotiations. They will be visionary, growth-oriented people of integrity, with respect and credibility in the congregation. They will have strong problem-solving skills and the ability to maintain confidentiality.

The CCIW staff highly recommends that congregations use The Alban Personnel Handbook for Congregations, by Edwin Berry (Alban Institute, 1999, ISBN 1-56699-214-1) as their guide and resource for the formation and functioning of their Personnel Committees.

What Is a Pastoral Support Group?

The Pastoral Support Group (also called “Pastoral Relations Committee” or “Pastoral Support Committee”) is in reality the pastor’s committee. It is a proactive, voluntary growth option for the pastor, chosen by the pastor in agreement with the board chair, with the knowledge and consent of the board. The committee reports to the board that it has met, but does not record or report the content of its meetings. A pastor's choice to have such a committee is a sign of health and desire for personal and professional growth, not a sign of weakness, defensiveness or dependency. This group's function is to provide the pastor (and pastor's family) with confidential emotional and spiritual support, prayer partnership, counsel and advice, honest communication about feelings and opinions in the congregation, advocacy for the pastor's needs and loving, informal accountability to the pastor's own stated values. In congregations with more than one minister, each minister should have a separate Pastoral Support Group.

How Large Should a Pastoral Support Group Be?

A PSG should be relatively small—five to seven persons, in addition to the minister and spouse. This is large enough to provide for good group interaction and small enough to allow for total participation and relative ease in scheduling meetings. It is important that committee members make attendance at meetings a high priority because too many absences in a small group will inhibit its effectiveness. A relatively small group is also more effective in maintaining the all-important high trust level and confidentiality.

Who Selects the Pastoral Support Group Members And How Are They Chosen?

Because of the special nature of the PSG, it is more appropriate to select its members by appointment rather than through a formal nominating and election process. Appointments should be made in mutual agreement between the pastor and board chair. The pastor's spouse may provide at least one name. In no case should any person be appointed to this committee over the pastor's objections. Then in confidential consultation between the minister and chairperson of the board, final selections should be made. Once the group members have been selected and secured, the board chairperson will announce the

appointments to the church board. The group may select its own chairperson (someone other than the minister). Because of the frequency of meetings, the group may want to rotate the chairperson on an annual basis.

What Type Persons Should Serve on the Pastoral Support Committee?

First and foremost, the PSG members are persons with whom the pastor has a good relationship. The kinds of characteristics that are important include persons who:

- are supportive of the minister with a sensitivity to the feelings and needs of both congregation and minister
- are good listeners
- have skills in human relations and communications
- have integrity with regard to maintaining confidentiality
- care for the health and well-being of the pastor and working relationships
- genuinely want the minister to succeed

The Committee should include both men and women.

Gifts and Graces

The Pastoral Support Group should consist of people with particular gifts, graces, and strengths. The following two scripture passages list some of them.

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the **utterance of wisdom**, and to another the **utterance of knowledge** according to the same Spirit, to another **faith** by the same Spirit, to another gifts of **healing** by the one Spirit, to another the **working of miracles**, to another **prophecy**, to another the **discernment of spirits**, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.” I Corinthians 12:7-10

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.” Gal 5:22, 23

1. The utterance of Wisdom . . . of knowledge. Members of the PSG must have the ability to speak truthfully with the pastor, providing information and insight that will enable the pastor to be a stronger leader.

2. Healing. Members of this group must have the gift of recognizing when the pastor is wounded and offering encouragement and healing rather than further discouragement.

3. Discernment of Spirits. Persons with this gift can help pastors sort out and understand the conflicted interior forces that influence congregations and individuals.

4. Love. A fundamental requirement for this committee is to love the pastor, the congregation, oneself, and God.

5. Joy. Members of this committee must have a joyful and positive approach to life. This is not a place for malcontents.

6. Patience. Members of this committee must understand human imperfection, anxiety, and the time, effort, and courage required to change the direction of one’s own life, or of a congregation. This is no place for anyone who expects quick fixes.

7. Kindness. Kindness seeks to help and not harm.

8. Generosity. A generous person is willing to give time, effort, emotional, and other resources to the purpose of supporting the ministry of the pastor.

9. Gentleness. A gentle person seeks the most positive, least intrusive, and least hurtful way to accomplish a purpose.

10. Faithfulness. A faithful person can be trusted with sensitive, confidential information, and will neither divulge it nor use it privately to manipulate or intimidate the one who gave it. Faithful persons will remain true to commitments and will not abandon one who depends on them. Faithful persons will not cooperate with conspiracies, gossip, or the withholding of crucial information from the pastor.

11. Self Control. A person with self-control does not react with flashes of emotion—either sympathy or antipathy—when confronted with sensitive or troubling information or issues of disagreement. Persons with self-control are able to recognize their own emotions and choose when to express them. They are able to acknowledge achievement without gushing and to identify failure without rancor or condemnation. They will be clear and honest in expression without having to win arguments.

It is not necessary or appropriate to include members of other committees or departments of the church simply because they represent those groups. Church officers usually change every year or two and may not fit with the chosen length of service for members of the PSG. If input is needed from other groups, the PSG may invite representatives to its meeting and excuse them after a particular agenda is fulfilled. One of the most important reasons for not going the representative route in the PSG make-up is that persons would come on the committee by virtue of their positions whether or not they fit the criteria outlined above.

What Should Be the Length of Term for the Pastoral Support Group Members?

Two main factors must be considered in answering this question. One has to do with maintaining long-term continuity and quality of group life. The other has to do with establishing some kind of check and balance so the group does not become ingrown and go on forever without a basis for termination.

The formation of a PSG should take place as soon as possible following the arrival of a new minister. The search committee may be asked to serve as the PSGRG following the call of a new minister until a new committee can be established. The presence of one or more members of the search committee will provide personal memory of the discussions and understandings upon which this call is based. This allows the minister time to get acquainted, to learn congregational culture and norms, and to identify those persons who fit the suggested profile for PSG members. Depending upon the size of the group, length of service may be set up on a three to five year basis. A rotation plan would be worked out for some old members going off each year and some new members being added. The length of term would depend on what works out mathematically with the rotation system. For example, with a five person committee and five year terms, one person would come on and one go off each year. With a six member committee and three year terms, two could go off and on each year, etc. At the time the group is established it would be necessary to determine the length of term for each member to start the rotation. When the minister leaves the congregation, that particular PSG would cease to function.

The group should meet on a regular basis in order to facilitate constructive communication between pastor(s) and congregation and to help avoid crisis situations. Once a month for the first six months will probably be useful. After that, bi-monthly or quarterly will

probably be sufficient. The pace should be one to allow for proactive work. Special meetings should be called anytime at the initiative of any member of the group in consultation with the chairperson. The pastor should be consulted on any meeting date and be present for all discussions and decisions. At least one meeting per year might be set aside to deal specifically with the concerns of the minister's spouse.

How Do You Integrate New Members?

Every new member needs the opportunity to be integrated into the group. Whenever a new member comes in, the dynamic of the group changes and the group has to adjust. Also, every new member needs to be thoroughly oriented to the PSG role. (We hope this booklet will be helpful in this regard.)

One excellent way to do this is an annual retreat. This extended time event (over-night, if possible, in a setting apart from the church) allows time not only for integration of new members and group building, but is a time for the entire group to grow in its ability to do its work. Retreat agenda may include one or several of the special foci listed below. It is also an excellent time for planning the agenda for the year ahead. One of the values of having a pre-planned agenda is to avoid the appearance of only responding to crisis. Consideration may be given to bringing in an outside resource person. In the event a retreat is not possible, time should be allocated in the PSG meeting for the purpose of integrating new members.

What Is the Relationship of the Pastoral Support Group to the Congregation?

Because of its relational character and the requirements of the trust, acceptance and confidentiality triangle, the PSG will not report the substance of its meetings to the board. It is appropriate to make only process reports to the board. Minutes of the PSG meetings are not required.

The PSG must avoid attempting to solve problems or perform tasks that appropriately belong to other groups. Its role of dealing with feelings can easily carry it into almost any arena of the church. While it is appropriate for the PSG to discuss virtually any subject, it must scrupulously avoid making decisions or assuming authority outside its intended purpose. On the other hand, it is appropriate for the PSG to recommend certain actions to appropriate groups within the church.

How Does A Pastoral Support Group Function With A Multiple Ministry?

The model that appears to have the most advantages and the fewest disadvantages is a PSG for each minister. This reflects the congregation's concern that each staff member is equally important. Each can be established according to the guidelines and kept relatively small. This model allows each group to focus on the particular feelings, needs, and portfolio of the individual staff member in relation to the total church. To achieve cross communication with ministerial colleagues, PSG's may hold periodic joint meetings. They must take care to avoid letting the two groups do not become competitive or at odds with one another if conflicts exist between the ministers.

What Is the Relationship of the Pastoral Support Group to Non-Clergy Church Staff?

The concept of Pastoral Support Group is explicitly for the unique position of pastor (or program staff who serve in pastor-like roles). In the two-committee concept presented here, the Personnel Committee is responsible for relationships between the congregation and all its staff persons.

What Should a Pastoral Support Group Meeting Include?

A general outline for a PSG meeting may include the following:

1. Opening prayer or meditation by an assigned member of the group
2. Active listening
 - a. sharing of feelings and concerns by the pastor/spouse /family members
 - b. listening to the congregation. i.e. successes, failures, joys, sorrows, climate, future events, conflicts, etc.
 - c. reporting on joys and struggles in work expectations and performance
 - d. sharing struggles and progress in one's spiritual life/spiritual journey
3. Special focus of the month
4. Theory study:
 - family systems
 - conflict management
 - stress management
 - time management
 - active listening
 - positive feedback
 - human relations skills, etc.
5. Conversation with the minister's spouse
6. Designing a continuing education program
7. Prayer and spiritual enrichment by the total group
8. Book study on a theme related to ministry or the church

How Should The Pastoral Support Group Deal With Complaints and Emotional Problems?

The Pastoral Support Group should not function as a "grievance" committee for either the pastor or members of the congregation. In the two-committee system (Personnel Committee and Pastoral Support Group) that we are advocating, grievance processing belongs to the Personnel Committee. Grievances should be handled on the model of Matthew 18:15-17, in which a private conversation between the complainant and the respondent is the first order of business. Only after that has failed should any committee get involved. **Never** should a pastor be confronted with anonymous complaints of a serious nature. Anonymous complaints prevent the pastor from doing the thing most needed—maintaining emotional contact and seeking reconciliation. Every congregation should develop a culture in which it is safe and expected that people express their concerns directly and personally in ways that address actions rather than motives, character or personality. No one in church leadership should agree to hold secret an accusation against anyone else in the congregation. Serious accusations should be written and signed. This is a fundamental issue of fair and just

process. The Pastoral Support Group's role in conflict situations is to assist the pastor in maintaining a non-anxious stance. That means members of the group must be willing and able to let the pastor and all others concerned be responsible for their own problems. The group should avoid becoming the "link" between the pastor and complaining congregants unless one or more people on the group is trained in mediation skills and everyone involved agrees to engage in mediation.¹ Instead, the group should encourage and support the pastor's efforts to stay in contact with critics, to move toward rather than away from the conflict, to encourage win-win solutions, and to actively listen and work out the issues rather than avoid the conflict. In doing this, the group may make a valuable contribution by helping the pastor clarify the ways and purposes of staying in emotional contact with critics. To facilitate this process, the group may appropriately alert the pastor to signs of discontent and collaborate with the pastor on potential resolutions and proactive steps, so the pastor may take the initiative to address those issues.

The Pastoral Support Group should never get into the position of being the pastor's therapist or seeking to direct the pastor's therapy. That is both beyond the capacity of the group, and a breach of relationship boundaries between pastor and congregants. On the other hand, the group can very appropriately support a pastor's decision to engage in therapy, to seek other outside assistance, or develop particular professional skills. It is always appropriate, sometimes preferable, and even essential, for a pastor to seek support and counsel from competent persons outside the congregation. No group should try to protect an addicted or otherwise troubled person from the consequences of his/her behavior.²

It is very important for the Pastoral Support Group to remember that their support of the pastor is just as important in good times as in times of frustration and conflict. No one is ever beyond the need for positive reinforcement and encouragement, as well as for reminders to stop and rest during busy, successful efforts. For that reason, the group should have regularly scheduled meetings rather than waiting until someone feels a need for a meeting.

Essential to doing a good job of listening to the congregation is the attitude of the minister, his/her willingness to entertain feedback, and to practice active listening. Sometimes it is sufficient to brainstorm feelings that have been expressed and to take note of them without response or spending an inordinate amount of time responding to them. Sometimes the minister will want to make appropriate responses and changes.

Finally, a PSG should not allow itself to be used as a pressure group to get the minister to behave in a certain way. Complaints expressed to a PSG member about the minister, may be a "cop out" on the part of the person who should express his/her concern directly. Effective PSG members will listen attentively to people and secure permission to share the information. They must also make judgments about the relative significance of the input, whether to advise the person in another direction, and whether or not to enter it in the PSG agenda.

¹ One denomination—the Mennonite church, promotes the idea of every congregation having a team of trained mediators to deal with disputes that emerge within congregational relationships—a good idea. Such training is available from the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center.

² Gary Harbaugh, *Caring for the Caregiver*, Alban Institute. Pg 47

Should Pastoral Support Groups Meet When There Seems To Be No “Need” For a Meeting?

Absolutely! The group should meet on a regularly scheduled basis. Meetings with no “problems” on the agenda are the times when the pastor and support group can work on sleeper issues and long-term spiritual/personal/professional growth issues without the anxiety of an immediate conflict. Besides that, at every meeting, “what’s going right” is an important agenda item. No person is beyond the need for positive feedback and recognition of accomplishments. That’s what keeps the good work going. Helpful positive feedback is not of the “you’re doing great,” or “folks think you’re wonderful” type. Rather, helpful positive feedback is more like, “I appreciate this thing and that thing that you are doing/saying” or “I see this kind of good result from those efforts.”

Resources for Pastoral Support Groups

Available from Alban Institute,
(800) 486-1318, www.alban.org

When Better Isn't Enough: Evaluation Tools for the 21st Century by Jill Hudson

Beyond the Boundary: Meeting the Challenge of the First Years of Ministry, by Gary L. Harbaugh, William C. Behrens, Jill M. Hudson, and Roy M. Oswald

Clergy Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Effective Ministry, by Roy M. Oswald

Crossing the Boundary between Seminary and Parish, by Roy M. Oswald

Getting a Fix on Your Ministry: A Practical Guide to Clergy Performance Appraisal, by Roy M. Oswald

Never Call Them Jerks, by Arthur Paul Boers

The Pastor as Newcomer, by Roy M. Oswald

Personality Type and Religious Leadership, by Roy M. Oswald and Otto Kroeger

Running through the Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship with a Parish, by Roy M. Oswald

Transforming Rituals: Daily Practices for Changing Lives, by Roy M. Oswald with Jean Morris Trumbauer

Behavioral Covenants for Congregations, by Gilbert Rendle

Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach, by Peter Steinke

Clergy Renewal: The Alban guide to Sabbatical Planning by Richard Bullock and Richard Bruesehoff

The Pastor's Survival Manual, Ten Perils in Parish Ministry and How to Handle Them, by
Kenneth Alan Moe

Caring For The Caregiver: Growth Models for Professional Leaders and Congregations, by
Gary Harbaugh

Why You Should Develop a Pastor-Parish Relations Committee (video), by Roy M. Oswald

Why You Should Give Your Pastor a Sabbatical (video), by Roy M. Oswald

Available from other sources:

The Stained Glass Fishbowl: Strengthening Clergy Marriages, ed. Harley Hunt, The
Ministers' Council, American Baptist Churches USA, Valley Forge, PA

Life in a Glass House: the Minister's family in its Unique Social Context, by Cameron Lee
and Jack Balswick, Zondervan

It Only Hurts on Monday, by Gary McIntosh and Robert Edmondson, 1998, Church Smart, St.
Charles, IL

The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make, by Hans Finzel, 2000, Victor

Some helpful websites -

www.alban.org

www.congregationalresources.org