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Clergy Groups: Are They Worth the Investment?

A pastor new to parish ministry sought advice from another pastor about continuing education opportunities in their community. "It's hard to explain, but this pastor group I'm part of is just different from anything else I do," his friend began. "Yes, I attend one or two conferences or seminars a year and I go to the denomination's meetings. But each time that we meet I learn something from the other pastors that helps me in my ministry. I encourage you to find a group of pastors that will help you become a better pastor." Is this good advice? Will the pastor's participation in a peer group make a difference in the congregation's effectiveness?

New research concludes that the answer to both questions is a resounding yes. If clergy attend groups appropriate for their ministry and those groups use best practices, they are beneficial. However, not all pastor groups are created equal. The following information about peer groups offers tips on how to get the most out of the experience.

What is the purpose of clergy groups? Pastoral peer groups give clergy the opportunity to share ideas and resources, focus on biblical study and theological reflection, and develop friendships and support among their peers.

How many pastors participate? At least three out of four pastors report meeting regularly with other ministers in a small group for continuing education and support. Mainline Protestant pastors are somewhat more likely to participate in a clergy group than Catholic priests or conservative Protestant pastors.¹ Typically these groups meet monthly for about two hours. However, some meet for weekend retreats several times a year and others convene weekly. Further, many pastors simultaneously take part in more than one form of clergy peer learning, such as a weekly lectionary group.

Who forms clergy groups? Sometimes a set of friends or seminary classmates self-organize based on their common goals or experiences. But more often, institutions devoted to supporting pastoral ministry organize groups. For example, judicatories

or national denominational efforts to revitalize congregations include clergy education and support in the form of peer groups. A seminary, university, pastoral counseling center, or other clergy development organization may also start groups to foster excellence in ministry.²

Fundamentals of the Best Clergy Groups

Authors of a comprehensive review of clergy peer groups claim that any group experience is better than none. What draws a pastor into a particular group is different from what makes a pastor stay in the group. Certain peer learning experiences separate pastors who merely survive from those who thrive.³ What distinguishes the *best* clergy learning groups from others?

A group that fits the pastor. The best group experience fits the competency needs of the pastor for where they are in their ministry. A first-time pastor needs different information and support than the seasoned pastor.

• **Groups for early-career pastors.** Pastors in their first five years of local church ministry benefit from a group led by a skilled facilitator, especially



I WISH OUR CLERGY GROUP WAS A BIT MORE DIVERSE... FIVE OF US ARE PASTORS AT THE SAME CHURCH.

if this person also acts as a peer mentor. The group works well if it is not highly structured and gives new pastors spiritual energy, time for biblical and theological reflection, and a safe place to share perplexing problems that are bound to arise in the early years. The best groups also intentionally involve spouses and families in some of their activities.

- *Groups for midcareer pastors.* These pastors join a clergy group because they believe their ministry is going well and they feel a great sense of satisfaction with ministry. However, they know that something more is possible for their ministry and for their congregation's ministries. Because their seminary education can be decades in the past, these pastors search for ways to keep up-to-date with scholarship and strategies. The group can provide an intellectual challenge as well as practical ideas to improve ministry. Midcareer pastors benefit from groups that are more diverse—participants could be pastors from different denominations, racial or ethnic groups, culture or nationality, or even ministry setting (such as urban vs. rural).

- *Groups for clergywomen.* Female pastors join peer groups more frequently than their male colleagues do. Women can feel isolated as ministers because they are more likely to serve in small or rural congregations and to have long commutes. As a result, clergywomen seek out groups that are more likely to be all women or diverse denominationally. Female pastors favor the focus on spiritual practices and experiences that incorporate the arts that these groups provide.

A group that uses best practices. The longitudinal review of clergy groups revealed that key elements were part of every successful peer group: an effective group facilitator, a formal group covenant or contract, regular attendance by all participants at group meetings, a climate of trust and accountability, innovative group worship and spiritual practice, and diverse members, especially pastors representing different denominations. Geographic proximity was not a factor for success but affinity in ministry was essential.⁴

The Rewards of Clergy Groups

Both pastors and congregations find that the investment of time and resources in peer groups pay big dividends.

For pastors: Clergy participating in groups say it renews their call and commitment to ministry. Research shows that these clergy are more engaged in their own development and self-care and they more

successfully balance their family and private life with the ongoing demands of ministry. Solo pastors and clergy serving in small churches especially benefit from a community of peers. For some pastors, group support keeps them from leaving ministry. One estimate places clergy departures from parish ministry at more than 1,700 a month, with half of all beginning pastors leaving before completing their fifth year.⁵

For congregations: Congregations led by pastors who participate in peer groups differ from those churches led by clergy who do not participate in some type of clergy group. Pastors in peer groups lead in highly participatory congregations—higher proportions of worshipers are involved and take on church leadership roles. Because peer group pastors are empowering leaders, new members and youth in these congregations also serve on church committees and boards more frequently. Their congregations emphasize community service and seek to mobilize members as change agents. Finally, peer group pastors tend to serve in numerically growing churches. The longer a pastor has participated in a group, the greater the impact on congregational effectiveness.

What is the Power of Pastoral Peer Learning?

The seasoned pastor's counsel about finding a clergy group reflects a wisdom that is now documented by the experiences of thousands of pastors and their congregations. Clergy peer groups sustain pastors in ministry and push them to grow as church leaders. Congregations gain when their leaders are able to spiritually renew and enhance their skills. When churches encourage their pastor to participate in a clergy group and budget funds for continuing education, the congregation realizes significant returns from their investment.

1. Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Leadership That Fits Your Church* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012), 57.

2. Penny Long Marler, et al., *So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive*; The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Peer Learning Project (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013).

3. See the appendix of *So Much Better* for a listing of Peer Group Resources, 179-86.

4. *So Much Better*, 10.

5. Pastoral Care Inc. (www.pastoralcareinc.com).