

Congregational Pastors

Pastoral excellence begins with the conviction that leading a community of faith requires being shaped by one. Peer learning communities provide opportunities to engage in spiritual and theological practices and reflections, to discover resources and strategies for honing pastoral leadership skills, and to form holy friendships and receive mutual support.

The composition of the peer group is important, but not according to the typical measures. Research on peer learning groups [shows](#) that groups of all different shapes and sizes can be successful, but effective groups usually have a form of intentional commitment between participants, a strong and prepared facilitator, and a structure that offers enough space for play and creativity.

Pastors hold a unique place within church communities. Parishioners look to them as exemplars of stability and strength and often entrust to them confidential information. This vital part of ministry can exact a personal toll. Pastors can feel as if they are isolated in a crowd, with little space to reflect about their ministries, few resources to explore their vocations, and limited opportunities to foster meaningful, life-giving friendships.

Peer learning groups give pastors a unique space to attend to these essential parts of their lives and are the single most powerful way to support pastoral excellence.

The following questions are designed to help you think about those characteristics as you start and organize a peer learning community.

What commitments do group members make?

Peer group participants often experience personal and vocational renewal when groups have a *culture of closeness* -- a "family feel." When participants feel close to each other, they draw on the collective wisdom and experience of the group to discuss ministry challenges and opportunities, provide personal support and accountability, and offer pastoral feedback. The group becomes a safe space to share worries, untested ideas and hopes for the future.

Covenant making can strengthen the life of a group and help shape a culture of closeness. Each learning community establishes norms by which it conducts itself.

Commitments members make might include the following:

- **Come to this group with 100% of yourself.** This means two things: to be as present to this group as you can be, and to bring all of what you are -- fears and failings, as well as joys and successes.
- **Presume welcome and extend welcome.** We all learn most effectively in spaces that welcome us. Know that you are welcome, that you belong, and extend this welcome to others.
- **No fixing.** Offer advice or reflection when invited to do so, but otherwise avoid the temptation to set a colleague straight.
- **Share the air.** Pay attention to how much of the group time you take. Every voice is important, and no single voice ought to dominate.
- **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.** When you find yourself disagreeing with another, becoming judgmental, wanting to set the other straight or becoming defensive, ask a question.
- **Speak for yourself.** A helpful practice is to use “I” statements.
- **Listen to silence.** Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. Allow silence to be another member of the group.
- **Observe confidentiality.** This is especially important since you are here with colleagues and friends.
- **Believe that it is possible to emerge from this group refreshed, surprised and less burdened than when you came.** Expect that our time together can provide renewal, refreshment and helpful perspectives for the work at hand.
- **Stay in touch.** Keep the dialogue and relationships going between meetings.

What commitments do group leaders make?

Peer groups report having a “family feel” when their facilitators are engaged, but not controlling, when they engender trust and accountability without force or condescension, inspire confidence without arrogance, and convey firmness in a context of nurture.

Commitments group leaders make might include the following:

- **Lead and encourage spiritual disciplines.** Engage the group in worship, prayer and Scripture study.
- **Cultivate the commitments of the group members.** Ritualize remembering the commitments and name when the commitments are breaking down.
- **Facilitate the learning process of the group.** Provide sufficient discipline and space for work and play, preparation and spontaneity.
- **Keep the end in mind.** Articulate the group's purpose and provide observations about progress and challenges.
- **Challenge and encourage the hearts and minds of group members.**
- **Request and respond to feedback.** Invite constructive dialogue about both your leadership and the group's life.
- **Create a hospitable space.** Arrange furniture, lighting, and decorations and provide nourishing food and drink to help group participants feel comfortable and welcomed.

What might a first group meeting include?

A group's first meeting should include all the elements the peer learning community understands to be significant in its life. The balance of these elements will shift, but the community can adjust based on what is important for its life.

The first meeting might include the following:

- State the purpose of the gathering and any decisions to be made by the group.
- Introduce each person.
- Worship.
- Share the vision of those who organized the meeting.
- Invite each person to share why he or she accepted the invitation and his or her hopes for the group.
- Discuss an article, book or presentation. For the first session, this might be material on the work of peer learning groups.
- Share stories about the impact of other peer learning groups that those present have experienced.
- Determine next steps for the group.

What is the flow of a typical group meeting?

- **Connecting.** Connect with each other by sharing stories. Provide an opportunity in every meeting for each person to share with others. All need a chance to hear and be heard.
- **Worshipping.** Worship in a manner that reflects the identity of the group, including all of its traditions over time.
- **Remembering.** Remember what was learned in the last meeting, and ask how that has made a difference.
- **Learning.** Engage in the discipline of learning together through case studies, book reflections, topic discussions and more.
- **Supporting.** Ask what is happening in the ministry of group members, and consider how the group can be supportive and provide accountability.
- **Reflecting (evaluation).** Reflect on what the group is learning and experiencing. Determine what the group should do next.
- **Sending.** Bless each group member for the work ahead of him or her.

How might we enrich the group's life by "interrupting" typical meetings?

Routines need interruptions

Groups that meet regularly thrive with a routine that creates a feeling of safety. But never deviating from the routine can make it stale, stalling a group's learning and development. Routines need interruptions -- new experiences that refresh the normal rhythm of a group's life.

What do interruptions look like?

Interruptions can be as simple as inviting a guest to share with the group, traveling together, extending the meeting from a few hours to an overnight retreat or inviting families to attend. The group might take on an **interesting** task or project together. Members might read a book, visit a museum or see a movie.

Almost any interruption can be helpful when thoughtfully prepared and executed. Previous peer group participants report vocational renewal and a fresh sense of creativity sparked through a stimulating mix of practices, resources and conversations that blend the practical, the

intellectual and the spiritual. Interrupting meetings with interdisciplinary activities, events and experiences can help participants cross imaginative borders and make new, creative connections with their ministries.

Timing an interruption

Timing interruptions is an art. Groups that meet annually are themselves a form of interruption to the routines of life. Groups that meet monthly might consider an annual or semiannual interruption.

Facilitators and members should gauge the energy and attendance of the group. If either begins to wane, one can ask about the need for an interruption. The group can determine what would be beneficial.

How do we assess the life and work of a group?

Dimensions of assessment

Assessing the life and work of a group entails three dimensions:

- **Appreciation**
- **Regret**
- **Hope**

Reviewing these dimensions regularly throughout the life of the group will build into the peer community a culture of learning, mutuality and growth.

When -- and what -- should we evaluate?

- **At each meeting.** Near the end of each gathering, develop the discipline of asking each group member to share one learning from the meeting. Help integrate the ensuing conversation and create a sense of forward movement.
 - **Quarterly.** At least quarterly, devote additional time to group conversation about the following questions:
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- What do I appreciate about this group?
- What do I regret about how this group functions?
- What do I hope can be different in the next season?

- **Annually.** Discuss how members' ministries are different from a year before. Ask how those differences connect to the experience of the peer learning group. Review the group's covenant and affirm or amend the promises made to each other and to God. Larger groups can circulate questionnaires and gather the results or facilitators can interview members. Groups benefit, however, from doing assessment as a community rather than assigning the task to one person.

- **When the membership of the group changes.** The entry or departure of a group member is an occasion to assess the impact of that person on the group and the group on that person. Such assessment will include affirmations, regrets and hopes.

How do we close the life of a group?

As the lives of members change, peer learning communities adjust. Pastors leave and new pastors arrive. Communities change. Children are born. Marriages become strained. Tuitions come due. When a critical mass of its members experience transition, a peer learning community may lose momentum. The more often a community meets, the more likely it is to be affected by transitions.

At least annually, a peer learning group assesses the life of the group and determines what needs to remain the same and what needs to change. The group will decide to close at some point. Ending the group does not mean the end of relationships, but it does acknowledge that regular gatherings and structured learning will end.

Closing a group is an opportunity to bless the members and send one another forth in the power of God's spirit. A prayer of blessing and a symbol that serves as a touchstone of encouragement can be powerful elements in the closure.

Closing a group should include a time of remembrance:

- Sharing memories of the group's life, both times of joy and times of sorrow.

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- Expressing hopes that each member has for the others. This might include writing notes to each other on cards, as well as lifting prayers for each other.
- Worshipping together, perhaps with communion.