

Leaders & Clergy Supporters

Have you been charged with the responsibility to support and nurture pastors? That charge may come from a denomination to a particular office or committee, such as a commission on ministry or a conference minister. Some congregations may also charge a lay committee with a similar responsibility, often called a personnel committee. If you are selected, what do you do? What support do pastors most need?

The following questions will prompt you to consider how to set up a system of support, based on the activities that research has shown make the most difference in nurturing pastoral excellence.

How do we assess the system of support for pastors in our care?

The work of a pastor is complex, and the nurture of a pastor's ongoing development is multifaceted. Important elements include the following:

- **The practice of the disciplines of the faith**, including worship, Scripture study and prayer
- **Experiences that spark imagination**, including meeting interesting people, visiting new places and reading widely
- **Opportunities for individual and group reflection** on what is learned

Seasons of life and other transitions create opportunities to assess and adjust development plans to match the challenges that pastors, congregations and communities face.

The discipline of creating and monitoring a plan that attends to the many elements of development is easy to understand in theory but challenging to practice, because of the limits of time and attention. For those responsible for supporting several pastors, it is important to consider how the development of the entire group might contribute to each individual. One of the primary lessons learned in the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence movement is that treating pastors as isolated professionals exacerbates the challenges of ministry.

The following sets of questions suggest the range of issues to be considered in developing a system of support for pastors.

Assessing the congregation and the pastor's ministry

Consider the state of the congregation:

- What are the most exciting things that have happened in the life of the congregation in the last year?
- What are the most discouraging things that have happened in the life of the congregation in the last year?
- What opportunities and challenges face the congregation in the next few years?

Consider the ministry of each pastor:

- What do you appreciate about the pastor's ministry?
- What concerns you about the pastor's ministry?
- What do you hope for the pastor's ministry?

Drawing from responses to these two sets of questions, ***inquire about how they interrelate:***

- What are the connections and disconnections between the state of the congregation and the ministry of the pastor(s)?
- What does this assessment suggest about opportunities for development that the pastor should consider?
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Finally, ***create goals for the pastor's development*** that take into account responses to these questions.

Defining the activities that support pastoral excellence

The next step in a straightforward planning process is to define the activities in which the pastor will participate to meet these goals. The heart of a strategy to support pastors is to invite and encourage pastors to engage in activities that hold the promise of sustaining ministry over time. During each season of a pastor's ministry, different clusters of activities will be more or less important.

Activities to consider:

- Reading widely across topics and disciplines
- Participating in a structured peer learning experience
- Worshipping in community and individually
- Traveling
- Studying Scripture
- Reflecting through journals, coaching and spiritual direction

Questions to ask the pastor:

- When and with whom do you regularly worship, study Scripture, pray and reflect?
- With whom do you talk when ministry becomes challenging? How often do you rest, and what do you do that is restful?

Developing a strategy of support

One of the key findings in [Sustaining Pastoral Excellence](#) is that pastors need to have a high level of personal initiative in ministry and in their own support. Those who [support](#) clergy are responsible for creating the conditions that encourage and hold pastors accountable. How they encourage and support pastors depends on the nature of their role.

Examples of strategies:

- A lay personnel committee frequently is responsible for establishing and monitoring personnel policies. Those policies should be reviewed to determine how they encourage and hold accountable pastors in the core activities of [pastoral excellence](#).
- A denominational executive is sometimes responsible for the supervision of numerous pastors in various congregations. A strategy of support would include an evaluation process that asks the questions [reflected above](#) and offers feedback on the pastor's performance. Plans for improvement would include a system to monitor the results.
- A seminary or retreat center's mission is to provide continuing education. The design of the educational program could include all the activities of pastoral excellence. Current programs could be evaluated in light of these activities.

How do we evaluate the services we provide pastors?

If you are responsible for nurturing one or more pastors, consider the web of services that you encourage. Often, you or your denomination provides services, such as continuing education events. The experience of [60 projects in Sustaining Pastoral Excellence](#) shows that pastors need support through intersecting networks that engage the social, vocational and personal spheres of their lives.

Denominational leaders who supervise pastors must discern when the denomination should provide services and when they should refer pastors to outside resources. Sustaining Pastoral Excellence project leaders learned that pastors benefit from building relationships with pastors from other denominations. Those who supervise clergy should encourage such networking through word and action.

Regulation is a frequent byproduct of assessment. When “holes” show up in a system, a natural response is to create a “rule” that forces participation in whatever is missing. Because the initiative of the pastor is critical to cultivating pastoral excellence, those who supervise clergy need to explore ways to encourage and incentivize missing elements rather than regulate.

Questions to ask about the services you provide:

- What learning events or groups are offered or supported? What are the goals for each?
- How is regular reading encouraged? (periodicals, books, websites, etc.)
- How is travel supported?
- How are the disciplines of worship, Scripture study and prayer supported?
- What relationships for reflection are supported? With peers? Coaches? Spiritual directors?

What role should pastors play in their own development?

Learning and growth deepen when commitment to and participation in a peer group is the pastor’s decision. When participation is forced or required, frequently the peer group becomes just another task for the pastor, and commitment to the group becomes a matter of survival, not development.

When establishing a system of nurture for pastors, the initiative of pastors is critical. This is significant both in joining a group and in deciding how a group will function.

Denominations, seminaries, counseling centers and other institutions that are in a position to sponsor a group need to provide a respected and trustworthy person to facilitate the group and an inviting place for the meeting. The agenda for the group needs to belong to the group. The sponsoring group should clearly state its reasons for creating the group. This transparency will aid in building trust in the group and with the leader.

Those who are responsible for supervising pastors are not in the best position to lead a peer group. Supervisors and policy makers can be most helpful by providing the time and financial resources needed for the pastor to participate in a group.

What's different about the pastoral excellence approach?

Communities cultivate excellence.

The conviction that communities -- not just individuals -- nurture pastors to excellence distinguishes pastoral excellence from other approaches to supporting ministry.

Common approaches to nurturing pastors consider the needs of each individual and how to nurture each person separately. With such approaches, a pastor -- who is likely to feel isolated in work -- now feels isolated in nurture as well.

Pastoral excellence begins with the realization that pastors thrive in community within and beyond congregations. A strategy for developing and nurturing pastors should consider participation in a community of peers fundamental to sustaining excellence in pastoral ministry.