

Peer power: The promise of clergy support groups

by [Christina Braudaway-Bauman](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue



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When I called a group of pastors to ask if they wanted to join a clergy peer group, they were understandably a bit skeptical at first. They didn't need one more meeting to attend. And they had already participated in other kinds of clergy groups—regional gatherings hosted by the denomination and meetings of the local clergy association—which, to be honest, were not all that satisfying.

At most clergy gatherings, when pastors report on their ministries, they only skim the surface and they tend to paint a rosy picture, especially if a denominational executive is present who has influence on pastoral placement. Some personal sharing might go on, but it usually revolves around complaints about workload, the stresses of ministry, the state of the church or the dysfunction of the denomination.

If some brave soul is vulnerable and speaks honestly about the challenges of ministry, the other pastors inevitably rush in to offer advice and recommend a solution. The minister who made himself vulnerable leaves feeling sorry to have

dropped his guard. Pastors come away from such gatherings feeling vaguely dissatisfied and cynical, disturbed by how oddly competitive and condescending the meetings are and disappointed that in one way or another they had again missed a chance to offer one another support in ministry.

Privately, the ministers still wonder if other pastors have an easier time in ministry than they do, and they wonder how others approach their tasks. And they realize that, in spite of all the meetings they attend, they sometimes feel lonely in ministry.

In my conversations with these pastors, I stressed my hope that this peer group would be different, designed to help them figure out what they themselves needed for them to be sustained and renewed in ministry and how they could engage in conversation with colleagues in more authentic and meaningful ways. The focus would be on "pastoral excellence." That phrase was intriguing to them. These pastors worked hard and cared about bringing their best efforts. Though they sometimes felt daunted by the difficulties of ministry, they were also proud of what they had accomplished with their congregations. *Excellence* was not a term they usually used in thinking about themselves, but they thought that excellence was something that the people in the pews deserved and something that God deserved. The idea of talking with others about excellence in ministry was energizing—this didn't sound like one more conversation about what is wrong with the church.

Something else would be different about these clergy meetings: they would be organized and led by a trained group facilitator who was herself a respected pastor. The agenda for the group would be open, decided by the members of the groups themselves, but the meetings would not simply be a series of random discussions.

So a peer group was started. The first meeting was devoted to letting participants share at length how they had come to ministry and where their journeys in ministry had taken them. They talked about their hopes for the group and what each of them needed for this group to be helpful to them.

They decided to meet on a monthly basis, and they agreed to make attendance a priority, recognizing that the group would be diminished if anyone missed a meeting. A time to check in with one another in each meeting, they decided, was essential. They also noted that the sharing needed to be honest and real—they needed a place where they could tell the whole story of their ministries and know that others would really listen.

Over the next few meetings the group developed a covenant. They agreed that they would hold one another accountable for sabbath keeping and for sticking to the commitments they made to themselves, their families and their congregations. They agreed not to tell stories about each other outside the group unless given permission. If any of them found themselves sinking into trouble, the group would not serve as a replacement for therapy. They also agreed that if a matter arose that the group thought warranted the attention of a denominational leader, the pastor involved would take responsibility to seek such assistance, and the group would hold the pastor to that promise.

As their conversations deepened, they recognized the importance of soaking their meetings in prayer. They decided to begin each meeting with a time of worship to invite the Holy Spirit to draw near, to place their concerns in God's hands and to bless one another along the way. They pledged to pray for one another between meetings and to pray for each other's churches.

The group members quickly understood that the support they were seeking was not merely for themselves but also for their ministries. "Sharing and caring," as one minister put it, was helpful, but it wasn't enough. As they reflected on the meaning of excellence, they began to articulate the ways they wanted to grow as pastors.

In their early meetings, the members of this fledgling group spent time telling about their congregations. They began to see that they didn't all do things the same way and that each pastor and each congregation had different strengths. They recognized that this diversity offered them an opportunity to learn from one another and to gain a richer repertoire of skills for their own ministry. The participants offered to share their own congregation's best ideas, practices and resources. They identified the topics they wanted to explore together, which included such subjects as adult faith formation, preaching during Lent, ministry to young families, staff supervision, membership development and the annual stewardship pledge drive. After generating a long list of topics they wanted to cover, they set priorities.

As the group's members grew excited about the program they had developed for themselves, they realized even more that what they most needed was colleagues with whom to discuss urgent problems and knotty challenges. "I need a safe place where I can admit what I don't know," one pastor declared. They agreed to take turns bringing a case study from their ministry so they could help one another confront the intractable questions, the scary conflicts—and the church members who

pushed their buttons.

In sharing their case studies, they tried to be clear with one another about the feedback they were requesting. Did they just need help in processing the event? Did they want to know if anyone else had experienced something similar and to hear what they had done? Did they want to explore with the group what wisdom about pastoral leadership might be gleaned from the case study?

The group covered a lot of ground in those first meetings largely because of the group facilitator. Her role was not to be just another member of the group but to set the tone and make sure the air was equally shared, with each person getting a chance to speak. She attended to the group's process, calling members back when they strayed off topic, noting places of agreement, restraining everyone from offering unwanted advice, and asking questions that took the conversation to deeper places. It was clear that having a facilitator was worth much more than the very modest amount each congregation pitched in to pay her stipend. She also kept the group's calendar, e-mailed meeting reminders, kept the agenda, remembered questions that lingered from the previous meeting and—not least of all—saw to it that the meeting space was prepared, the opening worship service planned, the coffee on and the lunch ordered.

To the pastors, being able to show up without having to think about the details of the meeting felt like receiving a gift. For some, these meetings served as the only place where they were able to worship fully, free of leadership responsibilities.

As they prayed for one another, they also felt deeply cared for. One pastor commented, "When I had a really difficult funeral to do, what a blessing it was to know that throughout that service I was being held in prayer by the members of my clergy group."

The members were surprised by how much they laughed when they were together. "We help each other hold things more lightly," one minister explained, "to relax a bit so we can see things from a fresh perspective and find our center again."

One participant, relatively new in ministry, said, "Everything in ministry can be so loud. The group helps me to turn down the volume so I can sort out what needs my attention most and what I can let go of." Said another pastor: "It's been so healing to hear that my struggles are shared struggles." And from another: "I'm amazed at the clarity and insight we draw out of each other. Sometimes it seems the wisdom has

been there all along. It just needed room and the right question to be able to rise to the surface. Other times, it feels like the Holy Spirit has intervened, descending on us as we pray with a new gift that makes a difference in our ministry."

One pastor in the group went through an intense season of conflict with his congregation. He said he found encouragement every time he looked at his calendar and saw that his peer group meeting was coming up. When the storm finally passed, he told his peers that without them he would not have been able to weather the situation with as much patience and emotional maturity as he had. Without the peer group, he might no longer even be in ministry.

Looking back after several years of meetings, a minister reflected, "All of us could have made bad choices or costly mistakes had we not been in this confidential conversation once a month. It has led me to be a better pastor and leader more than any other single connection I have ever known."

The account I've given here is an amalgam (using actual quotes) of the experiences of pastors in my region who have joined peer groups focused on pastoral excellence. Similar accounts have emerged from peer group projects in various denominations across the country. Thanks to grants from the Lilly Endowment as part of its program on Sustaining Pastoral Excellence, more than 15,000 clergy have been engaged in peer groups over the past nine years.

The lesson emerging from every peer group project is that when clergy meet regularly in a "community of practice" for intentional reflection on their ministry, they find that trust develops, anxieties diminish, and challenges turn into occasions for learning. (The term *community of practice* is borrowed from educational theorist Etienne Wenger, who defines a community of practice as a "group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.") Pastors are helping one another stay connected to the joy of ministry. As they gather together, prayer fills the air, laughter shakes the room, competition flies away, confidence takes deeper root. Conflicts are addressed before they escalate or become entrenched, a dynamic which at least in some quarters is changing the role of denominational executives who are spending less time putting out fires.

As clergy meet regularly to lean on one another and learn together, calmer and more generous pastoral spirits are growing in the rich soil of real community. Once

pastors experience the transforming power of this community, they can no longer imagine doing ministry without it. They practice with one another the kind of life they hope for the members of their congregations and they look for ways to take the experience home.

For many years, clergy have told stories about the isolation and loneliness of ministry. But a new story is beginning to be told about how clergy find affirmation and support, guidance and accountability, as they meet in peer groups. Is this a new narrative? Perhaps. Or perhaps pastors are simply living out something that the church has known but not always embodied among its leaders: excellence in a Christian context is expressed most fully in communal terms. At the center of Christian life, after all, is a commitment to community and a promise from Jesus that he will show up whenever two or three are gathered in his name.