

What makes a clergy group work?

By [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#)

May 1, 2014

I'm meeting this week with The Well, my yearly cohort group. I laugh more during this week of "preacher camp" than I do any other week of the year. This year has been heavier than normal, with several concerns for friends, loved ones, and ourselves. This has made the mirth all the more necessary and sweet.

Many colleagues have wished for their own preacher camp. This prompted me to write "[Design Your Own Preacher Camp](#)," which has become one of my most [popular posts](#). I stand behind those instructions, although they're a few years old and some things have changed.

There are many different kinds of clergy groups out there. Some get together mainly to play, meeting in a beach house, say. That's great, and in a demanding job like ministry, it's not frivolous to do so. As for us, we've been called the "nerdy group," and we wear the badge proudly. We play a lot, but we also each bring two papers about the upcoming year's scripture texts that we share with one another and discuss. For me, it's easier to justify an entire week away from family if I can come back with something that is going to make my job tangibly easier. And this year I'm returning with a head start on 30 weeks' worth of preaching.

I know groups that have formed using our approach that are thriving. I know others that started out but didn't take. I wish I knew everything that makes for success in a group like this—I really want such groups to propagate, as does everyone in The Well. We think it's vital for the health of our congregations. So I asked our group for insight into why ours has worked for seven years now, and here are some things they cited.

1. **Deep prior relationships.** We started out with two circles of friends that were connected to one another through a couple of key relationships. What that means is that nobody in our group knew everyone. But everyone had a strong connection to at least one other person. We invited people we knew well, not people we knew only by reputation.

~

2. **The right amount of diversity.** We range in age from young 30s to almost 50; we serve small churches and very large churches and everything in between. But we are all Presbyterian. And we represent a relatively narrow theological spectrum. Yes, yes: it's very healthy to cross theological boundaries and be in dialogue with people who are more liberal or more conservative than you are. But this is not where we do that. That doesn't mean we always agree. We push each other all the time. But that's not the point of our group. The point of our group is support, accountability, and the scripture work.

~

3. **A shared focus.** Most of us are pastors. We do have a woman who works for a presbytery and another who directs a national network of churches, but all of us are passionate about congregational ministry, and that's the glue that holds us together. I'm not saying our group wouldn't succeed if we had chaplains or seminary professors among us. But our focus is on pastoral ministry.

~

4. **Accountability.** The papers we write are our price of admission. We all recognize that the minute we relax that expectation, we are sunk. Our group is so much more than the papers. But our group wouldn't be what it is without them. Even if you don't do papers, figure out what accountability you need. The group I mentioned above that gets together for recreation? Even they have an expectation: if you have two "unexcused absences" in a row, you are out.

~

5. **Interminable but important conversations.** We set aside time each year for good-of-the-whole conversation. This may be as simple as deciding where and when to meet the following year. Or it's a time to work through whatever group dynamics have come up. I'm contemplating a separate post on what happens when colleagues are in contention for the same ministry position—it has happened repeatedly in our group of 18. The point is, stick with those conversations, even when they are hard (or boring). Accept what you can't change, but name and change the things you can.

~

6. **Adding people the right way.** We've added people to the group twice, and each time we added them in a batch. Adding one person at a time doesn't change the dynamic enough; adding two or three at a time shakes things up, but also makes us more mindful of inside jokes and communal norms we take for granted.

~

7. **Inviting healthy people with healthy egos.** I don't want this to come out the wrong way. We are all wounded and broken in myriad ways, and we do not have all of our stuff together. But our group works because we all understand the value of self-care, and we do not rely on this group for therapy. Our group has a level of intimacy with one another—and we have been through some very tough stuff together—and there are years when one person leans on this group more than others. All I'm saying is, do not invite a colleague to join a group of this nature because "he is really hurting and needs something like this." Find other ways to support that person.

~

8. **Magic.** There is an X factor to these things. There are cohort groups that have great people and do everything right (assuming there is such a thing) and just don't gel. There's some luck or grace at work here for sure. So don't feel bad if your group doesn't come together. Just keep trying and searching for the right fit.

Originally posted at [The Blue Room](#)