

THE PASTORAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Adapted from "Guidelines for the Pastoral Relations Committee" 2008, DHM

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Congratulations! You've decided to form a Pastoral Relations Committee. This will help your pastor and entire congregation build up the Body of Christ:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and up-builds itself in love. –Ephesians 4:15-16

The next step is making sure everyone in the congregation, including the Committee and the Pastor(s) has a clear understanding of what this committee is---and is not!

The first thing to grasp is that this committee is a bit different from program or administrative committees, which tend to be task-oriented, i.e. they have an area of focus and definite jobs for which they are responsible. These meetings tend to be structured around a specific agenda for getting these things done. The PRC does not really fall into this category. Its main focus is actually **relational**. Rather than a long list of to-do items, the PRC agenda sets an open time for checking in and sharing. This means that the PRC does not wait to meet until there is a specific problem to address, but meets regularly, at least 9 times per year for consistency and healthy, regular communication. Because the PRC is different from standing or program committees, it is important that the board and congregation understand what a PRC is—and is not.

WHAT THE PRC IS...Healing balm, Confetti, Safety Net, Advocate

- A place of **comfort, clarification and constructive criticism**: The PRC is constantly listening deeply to both the pastor *and* the congregation not only to content, but to the manner in which things are shared and paying attention to non-verbal signals and body language.
- They ask questions and integrate information to develop a holistic picture of the system. They discern the relevant from the gossip, and work together, with the pastor, to determine the best course of action.
- They serve to give honest feedback to both the pastor and the congregation that will move them towards resolution and building upon possibilities. "Speak the truth in love." They can also help the pastor prioritize and develop goals and checkpoints along the year.
- A place where the pastor can feel God's grace and love. Part of what this means is the willingness to let a person be who she or he is and to guarantee privacy.
- A "safety net" made of confidentiality, sacred trust and respect where sensitive or controversial issues can be explored together. However, in our congregational system, it is important to remember the unevenness of this relationship, as members "employ" the pastor, and must be able to be genuinely objective and not abuse the confidence and information that is shared in any way.
- An advocate for the pastor, making sure the congregation is aware of special anniversaries or other things that should be celebrated (like special achievements, family occasions and recognition, Month of the Ministry in October). They should also help in

making suggestions for sabbatical, vacation and study leave, and suggestions for raises based on standard of living increase and denominational standards. They should also ensure that the pastor is taking adequate time for spiritual growth and nurture.

WHAT THE PRC IS NOT...

- A complaint department. Too often congregants want the PRC to anonymously represent their beefs to the pastor and insist something be done about it. This is called triangling in communications, and it usually leads to more problems rather than solving any. It is true that PRC members are available to hear complaints and concerns, but they should make sure that they are talking to the offended person directly, not “Well, some have said...” or “I heard that Paula was upset...” or “tell Pastor Paula that we don’t like...” It is important to create direct lines of communication by establishing that the person with the problem needs to talk directly to a PRC member, or set up a meeting between the pastor and the unhappy person with a PRC member present. Communication works best when there is a congregational ethic of “no anonymous complaints” because issues without representation cannot be resolved.
- A conflict resolution or crisis management department. Again, congregants, and sometimes pastors, expect the PRC to mediate between offended parties to resolve problems. This strains the relationship with both the pastor and the congregation, and often results in members of the PRC committee taking sides. The job of the PRC in conflict is to create a **process** for the conflict to be resolved, which starts with encouraging the two parties to meet directly first, then bringing in an outside mediator or educator (like regional staff or consultant) if necessary. **The best thing a PRC committee can do is be a “safety valve” by proactively creating a process for handling complaints and grievances that is communicated to the congregation, and then ensures it is followed when issues arise.**
- A personnel committee. Many congregations assume the PRC should also serve as the personnel committee and evaluator for the pastor. This creates a conflict of ethics, in that the pastor is encouraged to share his or her struggles and concerns to a body that can then use this information against him or her. I wish it were safe to ensure “we wouldn’t do that,” but it too often happens unconsciously or deliberately. The PRC should simply serve as advisory to the body of personnel accountability, *with the permission of the pastor*, to share any areas of concern that need to be addressed, and to advocate for fair contract issues. The PRC may also recommend evaluation tools and processes for the pastor and congregation, but then ask the board to create a different team to implement them.
- An opportunity to cover sensitive issues without the pastor present. The PRC committee should NEVER meet without the pastor present. To do so violates trust and direct communication and makes people believe they can manipulate the PRC or pastor by triangling issues indirectly.
- A group to be used to pressure the minister into behaving a certain way. PRC members need to be objective and supportive. They should listen attentively to what people have to say, but must also make judgments about the relative significance of the input and whether or not to inform the pastor and put it on the PRC meeting agenda.

The PRC Guidelines Handbook suggests the following flow for a meeting agenda for a 90-minute meeting (recommended meeting length):

- 1) Opening Prayer and/or Brief Meditation
- 2) Sharing of Affirmations from the committee members to the pastor (this should include making sure anniversaries, birthdays, and other special occasions are celebrated)

- 3) Pastor's sharing: "Five S's"
 - Successes: What has been good and fulfilling
 - Surprises: Good or bad—whatever was unexpected or confusing
 - Satisfactions: What felt nurturing or fulfilling or gave the pastor energy, even if it was not "successful."
 - Solutions: What are the challenges the pastor is facing? Does the pastor wish help in discovering solutions? Have there been theological or faith challenges that need to be worked out?
 - Sadness: Are there losses, hurts, disappointments, etc., either in the pastor's personal life, or in the congregational life, that need to be shared and/or addressed? (*Note: the pastor cannot disclose any information that has been shared in counseling or other confidential meetings.*)
- 4) PRC Sharing: The committee shares feedback and concerns as reflections on the pastor's sharing
- 5) Special Focus: Occasionally specific areas need to be addressed, such as contract issues, sabbatical, continuing education, etc. Preferably only 3-4 meetings per year will have a special focus. Otherwise this committee can begin to function like a task-oriented committee, and lose the importance of relational sharing

COMPOSITION AND ORGANIZATION OF THE PRC

- 1) The PRC should be selected by the pastor and board or elder chair, and approved by the board. The pastor should consider a cross-section of the congregation and people that he or she feels can be objective and supportive without enforcing their own agenda. It is best **not** to have the board chair on the PRC, and helpful to have at least one currently serving Elder, who can help keep the "pulse" of the congregation.
- 2) The PRC should be established within 6 months of a new pastor's arrival. The search and call committee may serve as the PRC during this time until the new pastor settles in a bit and establishes some relationships. Any existing PRC from the former pastorate should be dissolved, and a new one established by the new pastor. The PRC should name and discourage any complaints about the new pastor based on judgments and comparisons to the previous pastor.
- 3) The PRC should select its chair at the first meeting, and consider rotating this responsibility each year,
- 4) Length of term should be 3 to 5 years, with some overlap of those rotating out. If there is a large turnover in congregational needs and representation, a shorter term may be considered in order to bring in new perspectives regularly.
- 5) Size of the PRC should be about 4-5 members besides the pastor. This makes it relatively easy to convene and allows for greatest participation and confidentiality, while still being large enough to allow for congregational representation. When new members come on, they should receive a formal orientation and training. If the rotation is every two years (some stay on, some go off), this gives the opportunity for the entire PRC to receive biennial training and a review and refocus of the PRC.
- 6) Because this committee is relational rather than task or program-oriented, it should not be required to give status reports to the board, nor any minutes from the meeting. If needed, it may be asked to give process reports on special focus areas or issues it is helping the pastor and congregation work through. The board should not assign specific tasks to the PRC, such as pastor evaluation or complaint resolution, though the PRC can recommend to the board possible actions or appropriate groups to refer such issues to within the church. The PRC can help educate the congregation by posting clarifications and process updates in the church newsletter, if appropriate.

- 7) Congregations with multiple clergy staff are highly encouraged to create a separate PRC for each clergy staff person. There may be periodic joint meetings of these various PRCs in order to establish cross communication and holistic relationships.
- 8) If possible, the PRC should be considered in the budget so that it will have resources to provide gifts and celebrations, books, training, and outside consulting, if needed.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE:

Various resources are available to help a PRC look at covenants for volunteers, congregational ethics, creating safe churches and “holy manners” on the Congregational Care Page at www.ccncn.org

The region has a scholarship fund to help cover the cost of continuing education which can be applied for during the summer. (A letter usually goes out from the regional office in June.)

Resources for continuing education scholarships and grants can be found through the general DOC website at: <http://www.discipleshomemissions.org/pages/CV-ContEd>

Fair Compensation and Performance Reviews:

Guidelines for sabbatical leave: <http://www.discipleshomemissions.org/pages/CV-Sabbatical>

General guidelines for a sabbatical are a three-month paid leave after 3-5 years of service. This applies to both full-time and “part-time” ministers, as we all know there really is no such thing as “part time” ministry, and burn-out can be just as bad—or worse, since they often have 2-3 “part-time” jobs. Strongly encourage the pastor to take it in one chunk. If it must be divided up, do not call anything less than a 6-week period off a “sabbatical.” The PRC can help ensure sabbatical leave is written into the pastor’s contract and honored.

Clergy Compensation Guidelines:

<http://isite9492.web03.intellisite.com/files/PDF%20Documents/Compensation%20Planning%202009.pdf>

Helpful form for annual update of Call benefits and package:

http://www.discipleshomemissions.org/files/Update_of_Call2011.pdf

McMahill, David R., *Completing the Circle: Reviewing Ministries in the Congregation*. The Alban Institute, 2003.

I highly recommend this book and process, as it most accurately reviews a system that claims “the priesthood of all believers” where both pastor AND congregational bodies and systems need to be reviewed as a whole. Too often there is an “employee/employer” culture between the congregation and the pastor, which sets up an uneven power dynamic and allows for scapegoating and skirting real systemic issues.

One detailed sample of leadership evaluation used by the UCC:

<http://www.ucc.org/about-us/human-resources/Employee-Relations/Performance-Review-Forms/Officer-of-the-Church-Evaluation-template-2.pdf>

Self-Care, Spiritual Growth and Nurture:

The Disciples have an abundance of resource links available at <http://www.wellfedspirit.org/>

Jones, Kirk Byron, *Rest in the Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers*. Judson Press, 2001. This book is recommended by the Pension Fund of the DOC.