

# A CONGREGATIONAL PLAN OF CARE FOR PROFESSIONAL CHURCH WORKERS

The Southeastern District encourages each congregation to develop a professional worker support team which provides a safe and nurturing environment for the sharing of joys, needs, and concerns of the professional church worker. The Care Committee's purpose is to serve as an advocate for the worker in addressing personal and professional needs and challenges. This care and concern will also be extended to the spouse and children of the worker. Our concern is meant to encompass the ministry of the whole congregation. We believe that a congregation is best served when "those called to care" are cared for and healthy.

## WHY ARE CARE COMMITTEES NEEDED FOR PROFESSIONAL CHURCH WORKERS?

In most congregations there is no place where the staff and congregation can engage in caring and honest dialogue concerning issues and concerns within the congregation.

Often there is no venue for building strong, healthy relationships which can provide a kind of "immune system" during times of conflict.

The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod congregations are experiencing a number of factors which may be addressed by the development of Care Committees at the local level:

1. The Board for Higher Education found that during the ten years of 1988-1997, there was a net loss of 1,305 clergy (1,500 retired and 1,775 resigned before normal retirement age).
2. In 1999 there were 900 vacancies in the LCMS.
3. The Department of Planning and Research discovered that the number of pastors reaching normal retirement age was going to increase over the coming 20 years.
4. If these trends continue, by 2017 38% of LCMS congregations will be vacant.
5. A recent study reveals that 20% of pastors are severely depressed, highly distressed, and experiencing advanced stages of burnout. An additional 20% are moderately distressed and are approaching burnout. Issues of wives and families were frequently mentioned as reasons for entering and leaving ministry.
6. This study also revealed the following issues that negatively impact pastor's wives:
  - Feelings of loneliness, isolation, superficial friendships (wives and couples).
  - Difficulties of moving, particularly on children of middle school age and older.
  - Always being on display; living in a glass house.
  - Unrealistic expectations of congregations (on both pastors and wives).
  - Conflicted congregations, criticism of husband's ministry.
  - Husband's long hours, high stress, exhaustion, burn out.
  - Most clergy wives have learned to seek support systems outside the church.
  - Most expressed feelings that pastors and their families are "pretty much on their own."
  - When asked, "What is it like being a parish pastor these days?" 60% of the replies were negative.
7. This study shows that there is reason to be concerned about treatment of each other in the church on all levels.

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## ***CHURCH STAFF SUPPORT: CULTIVATING AND MAINTAINING STAFF RELATIONSHIPS***

### **Purpose and Objectives**

Probably the primary problem in developing a support group in a local congregation has been lack of clarity concerning its purpose and function. In too many situations support groups have been used as problems-solvers or crisis committees. The focus has been on negatives and work has begun at the point of tensions. In these instances the committees started too late.

Ideally, within six months after the arrival of a new staff person, a new support group should be organized or a prior group reorganized to promote good will and good relationships among the staff and between the staff and the congregation.

A support committee should think of itself as a “people-building” group. The purpose of a church staff support group, then, is to maximize the effectiveness of the staff ministry through building relationships.

This purpose includes:

1. Enhancing communication among staff and between staff and congregation through mutual counsel, support, and feedback information.
2. Reflecting on the ministry of this unique combination of church staff and people.
3. Clarifying expectations and images that staff people and members of the congregation have of each other.
4. Advocating staff support to congregational leaders through adequate housing, working conditions, study leaves, salaries, vacations, health maintenance, and more.

This support group must be established with care because its effectiveness is directly related to the level of trust that exists among the staff, between the staff and the committee, and among the staff, committee, and congregation. The persons appointed should be approved by all the parties and final recommendations for membership be made by the president with consultation from the church council.

### **Functions of a Support Group**

- A support group provides a channel for giving the church staff feedback about ministry in the congregation so they can always be in touch with how their ministry is being perceived. The staff can then take steps to correct any misunderstandings or inadequacies before they become too difficult to deal with or erupt into major problems. This support group can help prevent crises, conflicts, and misunderstandings between the staff and congregation and enhance an atmosphere of mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation.

- It offers the staff an opportunity to reflect on ministry as they see it. They can share both joys and frustrations, accomplishments and disappointments. This committee can serve as a “sounding board” when a staff member is faced with difficult situations and decisions.
- Members of the support group serve as the staff’s advocates before official boards and committees of the congregation.
- Members of this committee can dream and brainstorm with the staff to surface new and creative ways of carrying out ministry in the congregation.
- It provides members of the congregation an avenue through which they can communicate specific needs and concerns as well as satisfaction to the staff whenever those persons feel reluctant to do so directly.
- This support group can help interpret mutual ministry to the congregation.

### **Objectives of the Support Group**

Objectives of the support group can be divided into five areas.

#### **1. To Care**

This committee is to be a support group for the staff. Major emphasis should be given to supporting, listening, conferring, and counseling the staff so they can build an effective relationship among themselves and with the congregation.

To function as a support group, the committee will have to develop (both within its meetings and within the congregation) a climate of openness, trust, and honesty that will permit effective communication. Many of the problems that develop in the relationships between staff and congregation are the result of breakdowns in communication. Attention should be given by the committee to identify the barriers to effective communication and then taking action to remove those barriers.

Often a pastor or staff member is lonely and grows weary, and therefore needs support and encouragement. The committee can supply the needed undergirding which comes from sincere concern, understanding, and warmth. These servants of the congregation are human like everyone else and need a trustworthy team to whom to look for support without being pampered.

Of special concern for the support group are those commitments made to the staff person through the official call of the congregation or other contracts extended to workers. This document should be reviewed periodically both with the staff and with the congregation.

The spouses and children of the staff may also have problems and concerns, and they should be included in the caring aspect of the committee.

#### **2. To Advise**

The church staff support group will frequently serve as a sounding board for the staff. Reacting to new ideas, the group can help the staff test their understanding of congregational and community needs and shape proposals for more effective approaches to ministry. However, this committee should in no way circumvent or take to itself functions of regular boards and committees.

Keeping in mind that the work of the committee is to be kept as positive as possible, the group should be alert to the health of the relationship between the church staff and the people of the congregation. While not looking for trouble, the committee should recognize when

dangerous tensions exist and should give time and effort whenever mutual and honest dialog has been stalled.

The support group also serves as a communication link for the congregation, sharing with the staff the feelings and needs of the people as they are expressed. This does not mean that the committee will spend its time rehashing petty grievances or serving as bearers of anonymous hearsay. People who express hesitancy to speak directly to the staff should be encouraged to do so. While meeting as a support group, committee members will, of course, represent themselves, but they also represent those whose identity is made clear in the presentation. In all communication there must be an honest sharing of criticism and willing consideration of suggestions to strengthen and improve ministry.

### **3. To Interpret**

Communicating and interpreting to the congregation the work of the staff, so that together they may perform effective Christian ministry, is a continuing and vital responsibility of the support group. This committee should help the congregation understand the various duties that are the responsibility of the staff, as well as the priorities for the use of their time and talents.

Among the issues that cause tension in church staff/parish relations is the difference in expectations which each has of the other. Often there is a gap between how the staff members spend their time and how the average church member thinks they spend their time or should spend their time.

One must never lose sight of the fact, however, that every member of a Christian church is called by Christ to minister in some way. The staff helps lay people understand their mission and equips them to carry out their mission as people of God. Everyone in the congregation is included in implementing the ministry, goals, and planning of the work.

### **4. To Advocate**

From time to time, members of the support group may serve as the staff's advocates with the church council and boards of the congregation in order to clarify issues. Problems that develop in the relationship between staff and congregation often result from breakdowns in communication, unrealistic expectations, or working conditions. Attention must be given to those and other barriers so that effective staff ministry can result.

There are times when the support group may have to face disagreements. Stress is often inevitable when people work together, even in a Christian congregation. As change comes and growth occurs, conflict often arises. It is the way in which disagreements are dealt with, rather than the conflict itself, which determines whether it will have a positive or negative result.

There may be occasions, for example, when the committee will need to bring a staff member's concerns about compensation or other matters to the proper group. The support group, however, should not participate in setting staff members' salaries or in evaluations of their work. That would inhibit the openness and trust that is essential in carrying out the responsibilities of the committee.

The support group may also be the catalyst to bring about continuing education opportunities for the pastor and other members of the staff when the congregation does not automatically provide for them. Such concerns as adequate housing, appropriate vacations, physical examinations, and secretarial help may need to be explored also.

## 5. To Reflect

The support group should create an atmosphere in which the staff feels free to share both the joys and frustrations, the accomplishments and disappointments of ministry. The group can serve as a sounding board when the staff is faced with difficult situations or decisions. Informal review and reflection are important to a strong staff ministry. Emphasis on positive aspects of ministry and relationships is important if committee meetings are not to become “gripe sessions.”

Among a congregation’s committees and boards, the support group can best help the staff in their self-evaluation of their ministries. The support group, however, must not do the actual evaluating. It can assemble and interpret data to present to the church council or other official body within the congregation for evaluation and represent and support the staff when appropriate.

Also involved in this task is a look at the specific skills of the staff members. All people do not have the same skills and therefore should not be judged by a rigid criterion. While it can be assumed that all pastors and other church staff personnel have the basic skills needed for ministry, the specific areas of expertise will vary from person to person. For this reason, it is important for the staff and committee to spend time in identifying each person’s talents and skills and then exploring ways in which those skills can be used most effectively in relation to the goals of the congregation. It is also important to support a staff member who has areas of lesser competence and say, “That’s OK. Emphasize and use the skills you have.”

At the same time, the committee can encourage the staff to develop and strengthen skills in areas of lesser competence through continuing education activities.

### Guidelines

1. A church staff support group should strive to be effective, not just efficient. To be effective is to be suitable to your purposes. Building relationships takes time, often without visible progress. Effectiveness, therefore, is difficult to measure within a set period. It is a long-term goal.
2. Confidentiality must be guarded. This is absolutely vital. Information shared in the meetings is not to be talked about outside the group unless permission is given by the one who shared it.
3. The committee has no authority to set policy or program. While some congregations specify that one member of the church council should be on the committee, it is usually best if no current officer of the congregation or council member is on the committee.
4. Administratively, the support group is accountable to the congregation, through it does not prepare written reports. Functionally, members of the committee are accountable to each other and to the staff they serve in collegial ministry.
5. No committee minutes should be kept, and no public reports need to be made.
6. The group should be devotional in attitude, should seek opportunities to worship together and retreat together, and should be open and receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.
7. Decisions, if any, are normally reached by consensus rather than by majority vote.
8. Differences or conflicts between group members or between group members and staff members should be openly considered during meetings.

### **Some Cautions**

1. The support group should remain open to the whole spectrum of congregational concerns and feelings, so that it cannot be accused of being an “elite” group that just agrees with the pastor.
2. The support group should not be a place where people “dump their gripes” and bring only criticisms.
3. The support group should be careful not to assume powers and responsibilities that rightfully belong to elected boards and committees.
4. The support group should not participate in the setting of salaries or staff performance evaluations. However, they can and should bring needs and concerns in this area to the proper board or committee.
5. The support group should not attempt to resolve situations with which they are not equipped to deal. If exceptionally difficult problems should arise, they should refer the matter to outside agencies or to the church council if it does not involve the breaking of a confidentiality.
6. The support group should avoid the temptation that they have to “do something” before their work is worthwhile. It is more important that they listen, reflect, offer counsel, and give meaningful support.

### **Checklist**

- Be sensitive to the personal needs and feelings of pastor, staff, and families.
- Keep the staff members informed about situations, feelings, and moods in the parish which affect staff/people relations. If there are negative reactions or complaints about programs or staff performance, and if there are misunderstandings of policies, these should be heard. Mutual resources can be drawn upon to resolve the tension points. The support group will also feed back positive response to the program and ministry.
- Listen to each staff member’s concerns, frustrations, joys, and hopes regarding ministry in the congregation.
- Annually review the professional allowances, salaries, housing needs, car allowance, vacations, holidays, sick leave, pulpit supply, and continuing education. Should there be concerns they may be conveyed (through recommendations) to the council, personnel committee, or appropriate board.
- Review demands made on the staff’s time. Help them establish priorities and limits and interpret these to the council and congregation. Make sure that adequate time is reserved for self and family.
- Confer and counsel with a staff member when it appears that in the best interest of the congregation and/or the staff member he or she ought to consider a move.
- Read recommended books on ministerial and congregational care. (See Resource List.)
- Maintain a dedicated prayer support for one another.
- Share the joys and sorrows of committee members, staff, and families.
- Go out for dinner together once in a while, to a play, or to some other social event to enjoy

each other's company, always allowing time for mutual sharing, reaffirming one another in Christ, and praying together. Such activities need not be publicized or kept secret.

- At all times consider the personal sharing of staff and support group members as strictly confidential.

## **WHO COULD SERVE ON THE CARE COMMITTEE FOR PROFESSIONAL CHURCH WORKERS?**

Current committee/board

Individual(s) from a current committee/board

New committee/board

Different congregations will choose different types of teams/groups/individuals to meet the needs of their local setting.

Training to be available to care committee members

### **Examples of Care Committees**

Board of Elders--Advantage is that this group already exists and this is, in most cases, already a part of their responsibilities. Elders also have strong influence on issues impacting church workers and their families. A disadvantage may be that workers may be in conflict with this group. Families may find elders difficult to approach. More difficult for this board to just listen--they have responsibilities that sometimes require action on what they hear. Elders may be too busy to give this a special focus.

Special Team/Committee--The advantage is that a special focus group can be a very effective advocate, small enough to maintain confidentiality, not as easily triangulated. Group could be of both genders and wider age range to be more "family" focused and less difficult for spouse and family to approach/access. Disadvantages include that fact that many congregations don't use committees. This team does not have to be a completely new group--could be one elder, one LWML member, and one trustee (esp. if parsonage involved), for example. Pick people who are nurturers. Could pick someone from outside the congregation (e.g., spouse of member).

### **Some Things to be Avoided**

- Do not start a Care Committee in time of conflict.
- Do not see a Care Committee as a way "to get rid of the pastor."
- Do not wait and meet only when there is dissatisfaction.
- Do not use a Care Committee for counseling or therapy.
- Do not use a Care Committee to do tasks belonging to the Council (preparing job descriptions, matters of clarifying accountability, etc.)

### **Additional Ways to Show Care to the Worker and Family**

- The care committee can provide prayer support for and with the workers and family.
- Remember special anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays, and encourage the congregation to remember these as well.
- Be aware of community resources, such as doctors, dentists, auto repair, childcare, counselors, etc.
- Be present with workers in time of crisis (such as hospitalization).
- Provide a formal welcome for the new workers. Provide encouragement and support to worker/family in new setting. Learn of special needs. Begin to set goals.

- Provide an exit interview as professional church workers are leaving. This might be a way of learning how to improve the quality of support given to workers/families, as well as be a vehicle to bring some closure to painful experiences with a congregation.
- Be aware of district guidelines for salary. Meet with workers and family to discuss needs. Know history of how congregation sets pay. Be advocate to appropriate board or voters, but do not participate in the groups who set the salary or evaluate the work of the staff member.
- Be a reminder to keep family first. Meet with each family member to discuss needs, concerns, joys, and sorrows. Bring needs to appropriate boards.
- Check with workers to see that they are taking time off. Make certain time off is adequate and understood by congregation. Be advocate for sick leave and sabbatical leave.

### **Other Sources of Support**

(for issues that cannot be discussed with the Care Committee)

Circuit Counselor

Local/circuit/other clergy

Regional Vice President

District President

District Staff

District Chaplain (The District Chaplain is to provide pastoral care to professional church workers and their families and does not report that activity to anyone, including the District President.)

Value Options (M.A.P.--Member Assistance Program)--provides mental health counseling, financial guidance, and legal advice. Call 1-800-428-0957.

### **Questions for Small Group Discussion**

- What is your congregation currently doing to support church workers?
- What ideas do you have regarding ways you could be supporting church workers in your congregation?
- What are some stumbling blocks that might get in the way of supporting church workers in your congregation?
- What can you do right away to begin providing great support to the church workers in your congregation?

## **RESOURCE LIST**

### **Care Committee**

Keck, George E. Mutual Ministry Committee: A Vision for Building Up the Body of Christ. ELCA, 1994.

Miller, Herb. "Fielding a Winning Pastor-People Team," Net Results. May 1998, pp. 6-8.

### **Church Relationships**

Friedman, Edwin H. -- Generation To Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1958.

Olson, Charles -- Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders.

Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, Inc., 1995

Richardson, Ronald W. -- Creating A Healthier Church. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996.

Richardson, Ronald W. -- Family Ties That Bind. Bellingham, Washington: Self-Counsel Press, 1993.

Steinke, Peter L. -- Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, Inc., 1996.

Steinke, Peter L. -- How Your Church Family Works. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, Inc., 1993.

### **Continuing Education**, (granting of both money and time)

The Alban Institute has many resources (800-486-1318)

Pastoral Leadership Institute (714-560-8850) or [www.pli-leader.org](http://www.pli-leader.org)

Willow Creek Ministries (800-570-9812)

Consult with SED Facilitators

PALS (Post-Seminary Applied Learning & Support)  
Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support  
1333 South Kirkwood Road  
St. Louis, MO 63122  
314-965-9917 ext. 1378

### **Marriage and Family Retreats**

Lutheran Marriage Encounter - [www.ilme.org](http://www.ilme.org)

Via de Christo - [www.viadecristo.org](http://www.viadecristo.org)

Grace Place Retreat Ministries  
John D. Eckrich, M.D.  
108 Webster Woods  
Webster Groves, MO 63119  
[jeckgracepl@aol.com](mailto:jeckgracepl@aol.com)  
314-968-5274 or fax 314-968-5252

Marble Retreat for couples  
Dr. Louis & Melissa McBurney  
139 Bannockburn  
Marble, CO 81623  
303-963-2499

### **Mentoring**

Kosberg, Jerry -- "Mentoring: Sharing the Journey" video series. Contact the SED Video Library (800-637-5723 or 703-971-9371).

**Reconciliation**

“Synod Dispute-Resolution Process”-- available from SED President’s Office (800-637-5723 or 703-971-9371) These materials are from Peacemaker Ministries, written by Ken Sande.

**Sabbaticals**

Bullock, A. Richard and Richard J. Bruesehoff. -- Clergy Renewal: The Alban Guide to Sabbatical Planning. Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, Inc., 2000.

SED Sabbatical Policy -- available from SED President’s Office (800-637-5723 or 703-971-9371)

**Salary Guidelines**

“Comprehensive Salary Guidelines for the SED” (800-637-5723 or 703-971-9371 or [www.se.lcms.org](http://www.se.lcms.org)).

**Spiritual Formation**

Umbach, Arthur -- article available from SED office (800-637-5723 or 703-971-9371).

**Staff Covenant Development**

Nuechterlein, Anne Marie -- Improving Your Multiple Staff Ministry. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989.