

# PASTORAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

## in this section

- Theological Grounding
  - Committee Formation
  - Best Practices
  - Resources and Case Studies
- 



## theological grounding

The pastoral office and other positions of staff leadership exist to build up the congregation as part of the Body of Christ and to equip the saints for the mission of the church:

*And these gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of Christ, to become mature, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)*

Ministers are called to embody and encourage the faith of the Church and its members. This call is lived out in relationship, whether clergy serve as pastors or chaplains, whether they are chairing committees or baptizing babies, whether they are meeting with colleagues or with counselees. The particular relationship between a pastor and congregants should be tended deliberately, so that the ministries of both pastor and congregation complement each other and further God's grace in the world. As with any relationship, it must be respected and nurtured to grow in healthy and productive ways. For this reason, a Pastoral Relations Committee exists in a congregation to advise, assist, and promote the growth of this vital relationship. The health of the relationship between the pastor and the congregation is not an end in itself but serves the ministry of the congregation as a whole.

Congregations and leaders should expect that conflict will occur. There is a difference, however, between healthy conflict that productively addresses values, expectations, and priorities, and unhealthy conflict that creates and multiplies divisions. When the pastor and congregation do not share clarity about the values, expectations, and priorities for ministry, unhealthy conflict occurs.

Additional Biblical texts offer insight about the health of the pastor-church relationship. Explore Acts 15, Romans 15:1-6, Galatians 6, and 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24 for a few examples.



## **committee formation**

The Pastoral Relations Committee is a standing committee in a congregation, with the purpose of supporting a healthy relationship between the pastor and congregants in order to enhance the effectiveness of the church's ministry. The committee serves in two primary ways:

- as an advisory group to the pastor: sharing ideas, dreams, expectations, and concerns of the congregation with the pastor;
- as a support group for the pastor's leadership: interpreting roles, functions, boundaries, opportunities, and needs of the pastor to the congregation.

The goal of a Pastoral Relations Committee is to promote faithful, shared ministry between the pastor and the congregation.

The committee works in a context of confidentiality, support, care, and honesty with the pastor, while promoting healthy communication in the congregation as a whole. A Pastoral Relations Committee is an appropriate and confidential place for the pastor to test possible goals for the congregation's life, to receive support for their professional development, to reflect on their overall well-being in ministry, to listen to feedback and strategize potential responses. This committee also provides a means for the congregation to express its care for the pastor by advocating for appropriate compensation and encouraging times for relaxation, exercise, vacation, spiritual development, and personal relationships outside of the congregation. Particularly when the pastor serves in a part-time and/or bivocational capacity, this committee helps both the pastor and the congregation set and maintain appropriate expectations about the scope of work. A Pastoral Relations Committee is not an appropriate place to circumvent church processes of decision-making, for committee members to relay anonymous complaints, for individual members to lobby for or enact their own ambitions for church life, or to empanel an adversarial group opposed to the pastor's leadership. Finally, while the Pastoral Relations Committee encourages assessment of the shared ministry between the pastor and the congregation, they do not lead the process of pastoral evaluations.<sup>5</sup>

Depending on the size of the congregation, a group of three to seven individuals is appropriate for this committee. More important than committee size, however, is the composition and character of committee members so that the Pastoral Relations Committee is able to build and maintain relationships of trust within itself, between committee members and the pastor, and between the committee and the congregation. Therefore, both the pastor and the congregation

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<sup>5</sup> Information about ministry assessment can be found in the section "Assessment of Ministry."

should have input into the committee's formation. In many contexts, the pastor and the governing body each share a slate of names from which the composition of the Pastoral Relations Committee may be chosen by mutual agreement. It is recommended that the search committee serve as the Pastoral Relations Committee for the first year of a new pastorate. When a congregation is served by multiple pastors, each pastor should have their own Pastoral Relations Committee. Members of the congregation's governing body should not serve on the Pastoral Relations Committee.

When selecting persons to serve on the Pastoral Relations Committee, the following skills and attributes should be considered:

- Christian character that has earned the respect of the congregation and the pastor;
- demonstrated discernment and prayerfulness;
- Integrity and trustworthiness;
- demonstrated maturity and patience;
- vital interest in the life and mission of the church;
- ability to maintain confidentiality;
- ability to appreciate differing points of view and to reconcile differences;
- ability to engage questions of authority, covenant, and accountability with wisdom and care;
- willingness and availability to support both the congregation and the pastor through this committee role.

What other things should be considered when selecting persons to serve on the Pastoral Relations Committee? Some Biblical texts that may help guide a nominating committee's discernment include Galatians 5:22-23 and Ephesians 4:1-16.



## **best practices**

Pastoral Relations Committees should meet at least quarterly, and more frequently if needed or requested. The pastor must be present for all meetings of the Pastoral Relations Committee. Meetings should include time for prayer and reflection, check-in on well-being, topics of pastoral concern or need, and “big picture” examination of patterns and habits across the church's life. The format for meetings may vary, and sometimes a particular topic is useful to focus a meeting. A meeting might reflect on the UCC Ministerial Code or the Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers, for example. It might explore case studies or use the “Five S's” (Successes, Surprises, Satisfactions, Solutions, and Sorrows) for reflection. It might review the

“Local Church in Relation to Its Pastor” document or discuss a book related to congregational leadership. Additional topics might include:

- best practices for communication between the pastor and members of the staff;
- reevaluation of the pastor’s scope of work and adjusting the congregation’s expectations for the pastor’s reasonable set of responsibilities within their allotted hours (e.g. part-time or full-time);
- encouragement of the pastor’s participation in denominational and community activities;
- plans for pastoral coverage and worship leadership during a vacation or sabbatical;
- strategies to address conflict in the congregation;
- discussion of the pastor’s compensation and benefits, for the committee to advocate to the governing body when annual budgets are developed.

An agenda for a meeting of the Pastoral Relations Committee might be outlined like this:

1. Opening Prayer and Reflection. This conversation can be led by any member of the committee to set the meeting’s tone and invite a Spirit-filled expectation for the time together.
2. Personal Check-ins. All members are asked to share. Prompting questions might be: “What do you bring with you into this gathering? What is hindering you from being fully present? What do you need to set aside during this time?”
3. Recommitment to the Committee’s Role. If this group meets infrequently, it is appropriate to reiterate what the group is and is not. If the congregation uses a Behavioral Covenant, this is a place to remind participants of that covenant, too.
4. Timely Matters of Pastoral Concern. The pastor may share updates on such personal or congregational concerns as appropriate. The rest of the committee may also share observations of concerns or needs of the congregation.
5. “Big Picture” Reflection. This is an intentional time for the committee to reflect and learn together as congregational leaders, perhaps brainstorming opportunities for the pastor’s professional growth or for the congregation’s renewed vitality, or discussing case studies to help untangle tricky dynamics within the congregation, or culling over the congregation’s history to understand its behavior patterns, or another topic. Conversation questions might include: “In what areas do we (the pastor or the committee or the church) feel ill-equipped for a particular aspect of the congregation’s current life? What patterns of church behavior seem to recur every year ... every five years ... every ten years? How do we handle these patterns when they emerge? Which one of the Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers excites us as a potential area for our whole church’s faith formation?”
6. Moving Forward. Review any commitments made during the time together and outline any necessary next steps before the next meeting.
7. Closing Prayer.

Conflict in a congregation is inevitable. Often that conflict focuses on a concern or a complaint that someone has involving the pastor. Matthew 18:15-20 provides a healthy format for addressing such concerns, encouraging direct communication between the complainant and the pastor (or the person at whom the complaint is directed), broadening the communication circle as needed to include more witnesses and wisdom in addressing the conflict.

When a congregant raises a concern to a member of the Pastoral Relations Committee about the pastor:

1. Encourage the person to speak to the pastor directly. It may be appropriate for a committee member to join that conversation as a non-anxious facilitator or holy witness, saying for example: “Would it help if I were present when you brought this concern to the pastor?”
  - *Caution:* Make every effort to avoid triangulation.
  - *Options:* If they have already spoken to the pastor but are dissatisfied, encourage them to continue talking directly with the pastor or to consider other positive responses and what might be needed for forgiveness.
  - *Next steps:* If the person can’t or won’t speak to the pastor, and the issue seems important, then move to Step 2.
2. Have the person put their concerns in writing, date and sign it.
  - *Caution:* Avoid anonymous communications.
  - *Options:* If they decline, tell them you cannot relay anonymous concerns to the committee.
  - *Next steps:* Convey the written, signed concern to the Pastoral Relations Committee. The church member should receive a written acknowledgement: “We received your concern and will discuss it at our next meeting on \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. At the Pastoral Relations Committee meeting (including the pastor), decide if:
  - *Options:* The concern has merit and deserves further attention, or the concern has no merit and deserves no further action.
  - *Next steps:* If not, thank the church member for their input and advise them that the Committee will remain aware of the situation. Consider doing so in writing.
  - *Next steps:* Legitimate concerns are discussed by the committee (always with the pastor present). Together, decide on a course of action and follow it. If this concern relates to job performance, it is appropriate to involve the Personnel Committee or governing body at this point.
4. The Pastoral Relations Committee should only receive letters from individuals, not petitions from groups. When there is a need to test the entire congregation’s perspective regarding a concern, the committee should not conduct polls or surveys. Instead remind the congregation (through newsletter, bulletin, etc.) of the names and faces of the Pastoral Relations Committee members and encourage congregants to speak with them.

- *Caution:* It is helpful for committee members to keep a discreet list of who approaches them. This will assist in determining if the concern is widespread or limited to a few individuals.
5. The pastor may have legitimate concerns regarding specific individuals. These concerns should be addressed and treated with the equal consideration as concerns about the pastor are addressed.
  6. Occasionally, there may be concerns about the pastor that relate to potential misconduct. While every effort should be made to encourage direct communication between the pastor and those who are raising this concern in the practices outlined above, matters of pastoral misconduct should be referred to the Committee on Ministry, as fitness for ministry is determined by that body.
  7. Similarly, there occasionally may be concerns about the congregation or a conflict within it that would merit the assistance and/or participation of the Committee on Ministry in a Situational Support Consultation. In such cases, the Pastoral Relations Committee, Pastor, and governing body would ideally reach out to the Committee on Ministry for such assistance.

A Pastoral Relations Committee, if tended with prayer and wisdom, can have a profound impact on the shared ministry of a pastor and congregation.



## case studies and resources

### CASE STUDY #1

The new pastor has begun at St. John's UCC. He accepted the  $\frac{3}{4}$  time position knowing that the congregation had previously been served by a full-time pastor, and the search committee and church leadership shared with great clarity the scope of work with the new minister and the congregation. One day, two neighbors who are members of the church begin talking about the new minister. Ned says, "I can't believe that new pastor hasn't been here to see me yet! He started over two months ago. I think I'm going to complain to the Council President. How busy can he be – I see him riding his bike through the neighborhood all the time!" That afternoon, Ned's neighbor is talking to his daughter, who is also a member at St. John. "What do we pay this pastor for, anyway?" the neighbor asks. "I don't think he's doing a very good job and Ned is feeling totally abandoned." Still later, the daughter shares the news about the new pastor with her husband over the dinner table. "Why does the Conference always send us the worst clergy? This guy isn't even doing his job and everyone is angry!"

Questions to consider:

- When a minister's job description is less than full-time, what expectations around visitation may need to change on the part of the congregation? What expectations about other responsibilities may also need to change?
- What is important in your congregation about pastoral visitation? What is its purpose?
- How would the church prioritize visitation among the following: a first-time visitor, a member who is hospitalized, a member who is in a nursing home, a member who regularly attends worship, a member who rarely attends worship but is healthy, an unchurched member of the community who has reached out for help?
- How do you feel about pastoral visitation – would you want to meet the minister at your home by appointment, have coffee or a meal outside the home, have the pastor drop by unannounced?
- How can communication about disappointments and hurts be shared with the minister?

## CASE STUDY #2

“Why is the pastor always out of town?” the church member asked the Council President. “It seems like she has been gone for half a month, usually on ‘Conference business.’ We pay her to be OUR pastor, but the Conference is taking her away from us! It’s not enough that they ask us for money, but now they want our pastor’s time, too. It’s too much!” When asked at the next Council meeting about her availability, the pastor reported that in the last month she has been out of town several days: three were for a Conference Board retreat, two were for personal trips for which she did not need to give an account, one was for a pastoral visit to a congregant in a specialty hospital a few hours away, and two were for a continuing education experience.

Questions to consider:

- How do you expect your pastor to be available to church members and others? In what ways (in the office, by telephone, via email, through social media, etc.)?
- Do you expect your pastor to keep office hours? How long? How often? For what purpose?
- Do you expect your pastor to be available via telephone at any and all times?
- What are your expectations for your pastor’s service and leadership in the wider church or world?
- When your pastor is out of town, how do you plan to be in touch? When is it appropriate to be in touch? Who should contact the pastor during these times?

## CASE STUDY #3

Changes to the worship service nearly always provoke some sort of response. “You’d never know this was a United Church of Christ church with that liturgy!” “We’ve never done it that

way before and it just feels wrong!” “Since when do our kids take Communion?” “Why are we always singing songs we don’t know? The former pastor never made us do that!”

Questions to consider:

- How are worship changes introduced in your congregation?
- What is the minister’s role in this change? What is the role of others in the church?
- How might such changes be introduced most effectively in your congregation?
- Is there a board or committee that works with worship planning?
- Which worship customs seem “sacred” to you? What might merely be “comfortable” or “familiar”? Where are you most willing to experiment?

#### CASE STUDY #4

It is Holy Week, and there are four additional services at church, including an ecumenical Easter Sunrise service thirty minutes away. It has been a challenging Lenten season, with a study series on deep matters, higher-than-usual numbers of illness and injury among the congregation, and the abrupt resignation of the choir director. Additionally, a beloved octogenarian congregant died and their funeral was held on Tuesday. A child from the church was hurt in a car accident over the weekend, has injuries that are life-altering, and is in the ICU of a children’s hospital that is an hour away. Pastor Anaya has been masterful and incredibly faithful in her leadership, but there is no denying the toll this season has taken on her and everyone in the church.

Questions to consider:

- How should the pastor prioritize the pressing needs of the congregation right now?
- What roles do the lay members of the congregation have to play in: visiting the sick and grieving, offering leadership for the study series or additional worship services, supporting the choir and music program of the church, anything else the church is going through?
- What can the Pastoral Relations Committee ask or do to offer support to the pastor right now?
- After Easter, how can the Pastoral Relations Committee offer support to the pastor?

#### TIP SHEET FOR PASTORAL RELATIONS COMMITTEES<sup>6</sup>

Effective Pastoral Relations Committees:

- meet regularly and often
- use meeting time well (agenda, identified topics, focused conversations)
- establish partnership with the pastor (maintain “we’re in this together” attitude)
- provide clear expectations (within committee, to the congregation, and with the pastor)

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<sup>6</sup> Based on resources from the Lewis Center for Church Leadership.



**Ineffective Pastoral Relations Committees:**

- only conduct annual evaluations (withhold regular feedback, neglect concerns that need timely attention, measure ministry solely by numbers such as salary and membership growth)
- allow too little time and care (unwilling to take time to listen, to care, to work)
- behave unfairly (share unevaluated and/or anonymous concerns, give all sources of complaint equal credibility)

**What Pastoral Relations Committees Most Need from Pastors:**

- receptivity (willingness to listen, openness to improvement and ideas)
- cooperation (effort to understand identified concerns, genuine attempt to make changes)
- open communication (candid assessment of church life, clear articulation of pastor's vision for ministry, information on needs and issues of congregation)

**What Pastors Most Need from Pastoral Relations Committees:**

- honest feedback (affirmation of strengths, constructive criticism, thoughtful and candid observation, information filters)
- personal care and support (advocate for minister's benefits and well-being, encourage respect/boundaries for family life)
- communication with congregation (education about pastoral role and scope of work, feedback from and to congregation)