



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Pastor-Parish Relations Committee (PPRC) (aka Mutual Ministry Committee or a Staff/Parish Relations Committee)

A Support Group

All people need a sense of support. Even the strongest of people need someone to talk to and to “lean on” at times. Faith in our Lord does not exempt us from needing the caring support of others.

The Pastor-Parish Relations Committee (PPRC) is an attempt to meet some very real needs of pastors and church staff workers and their families. While this statement refers to pastors, the PPRC can and should have the same function with lay staff members.

In his booklet, *When a Pastor Moves*, Roy Oswald says, “Good support systems involve both blankets and sandpaper.” The PPRC is a support group that serves both “blanket” and “sandpaper” purposes. This committee has the caring and comforting purpose of a blanket, but also the sandpaper task of dealing with rough edges. Your parish is encouraged to consider a PPRC for the support of your pastor and his/her family, and for the strengthening of the ministry of your congregation.

The Purpose of This Committee

1. The PPRC provides a channel for giving the pastor feedback about ministry in the congregation so that he/she is always in touch with how ministry is being perceived. The pastor can then take steps to correct any misunderstandings or inadequacies before they become too difficult to deal with or erupt into major problems. This committee can help prevent crises, conflicts, and misunderstandings between pastor and congregation and enhance an atmosphere of mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation.
2. The PPRC offers the pastor an opportunity to reflect on ministry as he/she sees it. Here the pastor can share joys and frustrations, accomplishments and disappointments. This committee can serve as a “sounding board” when the pastor is faced with difficult situations and decisions.
3. Members of the PPRC serve as the pastor’s advocates before official boards and committees of the congregation to bring about the initiation of change or the beginning of new programs where they appear to be needed.
4. Members of this committee can dream and brainstorm with the pastor to surface new and creative ways of carrying out ministry in the congregation.
5. The PPRC provides members of the congregation an avenue through which they can communicate specific needs and concerns as well as satisfaction to their pastor where those persons feel reluctant to do so directly. **At the same time, it is very important to encourage people to deal directly with the pastor rather than assuming this responsibility for them.**
6. The PPRC can help interpret pastoral ministry to the congregation.

Committee Membership Guidelines

Numbers

The PPRC should consist of 4-6 members, half of whom should be selected by the pastor and confirmed by the congregation council. The other half should be appointed directly by the church council but should also have the pastor's approval.

Where more than one congregation forms a parish, the membership should consist of persons from each congregation.

Selecting People for the Committee

No persons currently serving as congregational/council officers or council members should be on the PPRC.

Persons for this committee should be selected very carefully from among those who can maintain a high level of confidentiality. Members should also be able to relate easily to parishioners and should be sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. They also should have a high level of respect and trust among their fellow congregational members.

Members of the call committee that participated in selecting the current pastor would be good candidates to serve on the PPRC, especially when a pastor is new in the parish.

All members of the PPRC should also be acceptable to the pastor and should represent a good cross-section of the congregation. Members of the committee should reflect a strong faith and a clear understanding and deep commitment to the ministry of the church.

Terms

Committee members should serve 3-year terms and perhaps be eligible to succeed themselves for one additional term.

Terms should rotate in such a way that no more than 1/3 of the committee changes at any one time.

Committee Structure

Officers

The PPRC should elect its own leader, who would not necessarily preside over meetings but would be responsible for arranging meetings and keeping the committee focused on its task. There should be no minutes of the committee meetings unless there are specific communications or proposals that need to be addressed to other boards or agencies of the congregation.

Authority and Accountability

The PPRC shall be accountable to the congregation council. The committee shall have no authority to initiate policy or introduce programs. Its sole purpose is to remain free to offer consultation to the pastor and to help interpret ministry, especially pastoral ministry, to the congregation. It also can serve as an advocate where change needs to be introduced. Any programs or policies that need to be introduced should be addressed to the appropriate boards and committees of the congregation for action and implementation. This committee should not be involved in formal evaluations of the pastor's ministry or the setting of the pastor's salary.

Meetings

The PPRC should meet at least bi-monthly. It is important for the committee to meet even when there are no specific problems with which to deal. This offers an excellent opportunity to build trust and to affirm positive ministry which, in turn, provides a sound basis from which to deal with problems and conflicts should they arise. It is important that the pastor's spouse have the opportunity to participate in meetings and share joys and concerns as desired. Special meetings of this committee can be called whenever the need arises.

Some Cautions for This Committee

- The PPRC should be careful to remain open to the whole spectrum of congregational concerns and feelings so that it not be viewed as an “elite” group that just agrees with the pastor.
- The PPRC should not simply become the place where people “dump their gripes” and bring only criticism without also recognizing the positive dimensions of ministry.
- Committee members should always ask persons who approach them if they have communicated these matters directly with the pastor. **Do not allow people to “get off the hook” by dumping their concerns on the committee.** This could become very unhealthy. Always encourage them to communicate directly with the pastor.
- The committee should be careful not to assume powers and responsibilities that rightfully belong to elected boards and committees.
- The PPRC should not participate in the setting of the pastor’s salary or in pastoral evaluations because that might inhibit the openness and trust that is so necessary in carrying out the responsibilities of the committee.
- If exceptionally difficult problems should arise, the PPRC should be careful not to try to resolve situations with which they are not equipped to deal. In situations like this, they should refer the matter to the congregation council if it does not involve the breaking of a confidentiality.
- The committee should avoid the temptation that they have “to do something” before their work is worthwhile. It is more important that they listen, reflect, and offer counsel.
- Confidentiality is absolutely vital. What is shared with the committee must absolutely remain with the committee.

Dos and Don'ts for PPRCs

Some things a PPRC might do

- Pray for the pastor, the congregation, and their mutual ministry.
- Review with the pastor his/her annual plan for continuing education.
- Provide sermon critique (2-3 times per year).
- Assist the pastor in prioritizing various ministries.
- Have a conversation once per year about the pastor’s teaching ministry.
- Have a conversation once per year about the pastor’s approach to caring/counseling ministries.
- Have a conversation once per year about the pastor’s work in administration.
- Observe the pastor’s annual anniversary of installation.
- Listen carefully, critically to feedback about the pastor’s ministry.
- Listen carefully, critically to the pastor’s own self-reflection in ministry.
- Follow up with parishioners who offer feedback or raise questions about the pastor’s ministry.
- As appropriate, accompany a parishioner to visit with the pastor directly about a concern in ministry.
- Advocate for the pastor with the congregation, as appropriate.
- Advocate for the congregation with the pastor, as appropriate.

Some things a PPRC might intentionally avoid doing

- Serve entirely as a “gripe group”.
- Serve entirely as a “yes group”.
- Be a substitute for parishioners speaking directly with the pastor about feedback, critique, concerns.
- Try to do heavy-duty conflict management or conflict resolution.
- Usurp the role of the council or personnel committee in making recommendations about pastoral compensations, formal review processes, etc.

Getting a PPRC Off to a Good Start

Expectations

Make sure everyone in the parish, especially elected leaders, understands what the committee is all about (informal feedback sharing) and what it is not about (heavy-duty problem solving).

Commitment

Proceed when there is strong consensus and support all around the table. An unwilling pastor or a reluctant council can easily torpedo this approach to informal feedback sharing.

Boundaries

Adopt a document that clearly defines the boundaries of the committee. Do NOT appoint persons currently on the council or mix the work of the PPRC with more traditional duties of a personnel committee, e.g. conducting formal evaluations, recommending salary figures, etc.

Responsibility

Committee members need to be diligent about not letting the existence of the group become an easy excuse for avoiding direct conversation with the pastor where a breakdown in relationship may be developing. Accompany a person with a strong concern to visit with the pastor directly, outside of a regularly scheduled meeting, if need be. Build feedback loops into the way the committee does its work.

Trust

Choose members who will give themselves to this work and who already have the trust of the pastor and the congregational members. Follow the guideline regarding half of the committee being nominated by pastor and confirmed by council, and the other half nominated by council with concurrence of pastor. If the group is either a “yes” group (only able to praise the pastor) or a “gripe” group (only able to criticize the pastor in unhelpful ways), it will not work or serve the mission of the congregation.

Balance

Every meeting needs to include a balance of affirmation and admonition. Roy Oswald says that good support involves both blankets and sandpaper.

Consistency

Meet regularly regardless of whether committee members have specific feedback to share. Plan a year’s worth of discussion topics so that everyone knows ahead of time (a) that there will be a good reason to meet and (b) what the topic focus for each meeting will be.

Preventative, Long-Term Work

The best (only?) time to start up such a committee is when everybody thinks they don’t need it, i.e. the pastor-parish relationships are fine. After you’ve had such a committee for a while, and if things are going “swimmingly” between the pastor and people, don’t assume that the PPRC can be dropped. Offering this channel for informal feedback sharing is long-haul work in the parish. (Would you not regularly recharge your fire extinguishers just because you’ve never had a church fire?)

Information

Publicize every meeting of the PPRC in the bulletin and newsletter and include the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of all members. Keep explaining the PPRC to newcomers and those who may otherwise forget why this group exists.