

Faithful, Fair Feedback

for Partners in Ministry

An approach to doing ministry reviews for church staff persons¹

Introduction

In considering the question of how congregations conduct ministry reviews with church staffers, several core convictions should be noted:

- The mission God has given to the church deserves our highest and our best.
- All members of the church and all church staff persons are *partners* in ministry.
- We are, therefore, all accountable to one another and called to encourage one another in the ministry that we *share*.
- Any review of ministry--whether it be the ministry of the entire congregation or of a specific staff member--is done, first and foremost, to foster greater faithfulness to and effectiveness in God's mission.
- The most helpful feedback is *formative* rather than summative, i.e. it actually assists the congregation or a staff member to improve in ministry.

Three Approaches to Feedback in Ministry

A. Informal/Continual: "Speaking the Truth in Love"

This congregation will provide regular learning opportunities (especially for elected lay leaders) to understand and practice Ephesians 4:15 and Matthew 18:15-20. As a matter of course, a Bible study on Matthew 18:15-20 and Ephesians 4:15 will be included in every congregation council orientation/retreat. These texts will also be the subject of regular (a) Bible studies, (b) new member orientation sessions, (c) sermons, (d) parish newsletter articles.

See *Appendices A and B* for some Bible study thoughts on Ephesians 4:15 and Matthew 18:15-20.

B. Informal/Periodic: Mutual Ministry Committee (MMC). This sort of committee is high on *authority* (the authority of the Word, open communication, "mutual conversation and consolation"), but low on *power* (not part of the parish organizational flow-chart, doesn't recommend hiring/firing/compensation matters).

Reasons why a MMC is good to have around:

- (a) recognizes that for a host of reason some parishioners aren't going to bring affirmations/concerns directly to church staff member,
- (b) provides another means whereby affirmations and/or concerns can be shared with ministry staffers
- (c) "hard-wires" mutual accountability right into the parish system,

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(d) offers a forum for working through the Pinch Theory, i.e. dealing with minor irritants before they grow into open wounds

Three functions of the Mutual Ministry Committee:

1. Reporting and information-sharing. The committee might be thought of as “six extra eyes/ears” for the ministry staff. This goes both ways--some concerns of parishioners are based on information that is lacking or inaccurate.

2. Interpreting. This sort of committee can be especially helpful in aiding ministry staffers to be aware of (a) “intangible” or feeling-oriented feedback, and (b) feedback about appearance/reality concerns. (I.e. regardless of what was intended, how did the ministry staff person “come off?”) This also goes both ways, i.e. committee members can interpret things in parish life to members.

3. Facilitating conversations between church members and ministry staffers. The committee is, by rights, never a completely acceptable substitute for Matthew 18 when we’re in the realm of “sin!” Nevertheless, even in such cases, perhaps the MMC can be a vehicle whereby a parishioner honors the spirit if not the letter of Matthew 18, e.g. a member of the MMC facilitates conversation between pastor and parishioner.

C. Formal: Annual ministry review by the parish Personnel Committee (or equivalent).

1. The congregation, normally through its council, commits itself to an annual review of the entire mission and ministry of the congregation. Such an annual review will, among other things, assist congregation members and staff in differentiating responsibilities that are shared by all parishioners from responsibilities that belong specifically to staff members.

SAMPLES: Kennon Callahan, Mark Olson, Augsburg Youth and Family Institute, ELCA evangelism resources, etc.

This over-arching process will form the backdrop for (a) developing ministry descriptions for every staff member and (b) conducting regular ministry reviews of individual staff members.

This aspect of evaluation is so crucial that a congregation probably **SHOULDN'T** evaluate its staff members **IF** it isn't evaluating the total mission/ministry at least once per year. If a total congregational evaluation isn't done with regularity, it becomes more likely that staff evaluations will be (or be perceived as) **UNFAIR**.

2. The congregation, normally through its council or personnel committee, commits itself to providing every staff member with a clear, reasonable, flexible ministry (position) description. Care will be exercised to make sure that expectations of each staff member are fair, capable of being measured, and communicated with clarity. Such ministry descriptions will be drawn up when employment begins--but also reviewed and revised on a regular basis thereafter.

3. The congregation, normally through its council or personnel committee, conducts an annual review of every staff member's ministry. This will normally take place six months prior to the

time when the compensation package for the following year is developed.

4. Personnel Committee will engage staff member(s) in developing the specific method(s)/tools(s) for review used each year.² The method will normally make use of both subjective and objective modes of offering feedback. Although the Personnel Committee will assume responsibility for conducting the review, information will be gathered from a wide variety of suitable sources within the congregation and the community.³ At least one component of each ministry review will involve looking back over previous year's ministry reviews for each staff person.

It is critical that the council or personnel committee (a) involve staff members in designing the way evaluations are to be done, and (b) tailor any resources received to the local situation. Again, these two steps are so crucial, that if a congregation is not willing to do both, no staff evaluation should be done.

SAMPLES: Jeff Woods, Jill Hudson, Alvin Rueter, Frank Olsen, ELCA churchwide resources

5. A summary of key findings from the annual ministry review will be shared with each staff member in ways that identify both strengths and growing edges in ministry. Ample opportunity for reflection by and response from the staff member will be provided. Goals for the future and plans for life-long learning will be shaped, at least in part, on the basis of feedback drawn from the annual ministry review.

6. The Personnel Committee will provide each staff person with a written report on each year's ministry review. Copies of such reports will be retained in the congregation's records. Such written reports will be available to the Compensation Conversation Team as compensation packages are developed (normally six months after the annual ministry review).

Resources

Ammerman, Nancy T., et al., eds. Studying Congregations--A New Handbook. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998.

Berry, Erwin. The Alban Personnel Handbook for Congregations. Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1999.

²One popular--and somewhat valuable--evaluation technique involves having staff members and Personnel Committee members review the goals that have been named for each staff member. "How did the staffer do on the goals set one year ago?" Two considerations should be kept in mind, however: (a) this sort of evaluation approach will be heavy on summative reflections, and (b) this approach may also tend to ignore the unintended consequences of a staff member's ministries. In other words, a staffer might not have accomplished all goals, but he/she may still have done outstanding ministry in other areas--including areas of ministry that were not foreseen in the previous year's evaluation time.

³ Sources for feedback outside the congregation might include: ecumenical neighbors, ministry peers in neighboring ELCA congregations, agencies with which the congregation or church staffer has an ongoing relationship, etc.

Clark, Catherine Holmes. Annual Church Review Procedure--The Church's Ministry and the Minister. Washington, DC: Alban Institute DATE.

Hudson, Jill M. Evaluating Ministry. Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1992.

Keck, George. Mutual Ministry Committee: A Vision for Building up the Body of Christ. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America/Division for Ministry.

Olsen, Frank H. Church Staff Support. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982.

Oswald, Roy M. Getting a Fix on Your Ministry--A Practical Guide to Clergy Performance Appraisal. Washington, DC: Alban Institute, DATE.

Rueter, Alvin C. Personnel Management in the Church. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.

Southwestern Minnesota Synod Compensation Guidelines (1999).

Woods, C. Jeff. User Friendly Evaluation--Improving the Work of Pastors, Programs and Laity. Washington, DC: Alban Institute, DATE.

Congregations may also wish to use resources from

- ELCA churchwide sources
- other denominational sources
- educational institutions,
- non-profit organizations,
- university extension programs, etc.

Appendix A

Some Thoughts on Ephesians 4:15 by Pastor Larry Wohlrabe

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...

Key word	What is NOT being talked about	What IS being talked about
<i>SPEAK</i>	<p><i>Stuffing</i> feelings.</p> <p><i>Stewing</i> over hurts, frustrations, disappointments, etc.</p> <p><i>Stifling</i> those who are willing to speak openly and honestly.</p>	<p>Being willing to look one another in the eye, level with one another, speak from our hearts to one another.</p> <p>HARD WORK—but always rewarding!</p>
<i>THE TRUTH</i>	<p>“A lot of people are saying...”</p> <p>“Do you know what I heard at the coffee shop?”</p> <p>“I heard that someone said that so-and-so did thus-and so...”</p>	<p>Taking time to check out the facts—get your story straight.</p> <p>Speaking for yourself: “I think/feel/believe....”</p>
<i>IN LOVE</i>	<p>...in hurt</p> <p>...in disappointment</p> <p>...in disgust</p> <p>...in anger</p> <p>...in frustration</p>	<p>Putting the best construction on whatever you heard, saw, felt, experienced. (Luther’s meaning to the Eighth Commandment)</p> <p>Speaking in ways that <i>“promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love”</i> (Ephesians 4:16)</p> <p>Remembering that in the church we do not write one another off. If we belong to Christ we belong to everyone else who belongs to Christ!</p>

Appendix B

Jesus is Here--Even When We're At Each Other's Throats (Reflections on Matthew 18)

by Pastor Larry Wohlrabe

Reprinted from the September 1999 issue of *Connecting*

Unless you're sneaking in one last summer getaway, most of you will find yourselves in the pulpit on September 5 (Pentecost 15) when the gospel lesson will be Matthew 18:15-20. Would you believe this is the text most often quoted by members of the synod staff, when called upon to address parish conflicts?

Here are some things I've noticed about this text over the years:

1. First there is the almost-matter-of-fact way our Lord begins: "*If another member of the church sins against you.....*" (v. 15) It's as if Jesus simply *assumes* that conflict will be a *regular* part of life in the community of faith. There is no hint here that inter-personal tensions are extraordinary or rare in the Body of Christ.
2. Although this text is quoted more than any other in parish constitutions--usually in the article on "Excommunication"--it is more about reconciling than about shunning. Jesus invites us into a lengthy, pain-staking process of restoration that requires considerable patience and fierce determination. And the one who is called to initiate that process is the one who is most *aggrieved!*
3. Although it is always, always, always a last resort--a parting of the ways may prove to be necessary. In other words: conflicts are not to be allowed to smolder forever. Managing conflict after conflict within the church must not deter the church's momentum outward and forward in mission.
4. Even when a parting of the ways comes--after bending over backwards in pursuit of reconciliation--observe how the excluded one is to be treated: "*let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*" (v. 17). Now let's see: how did *Jesus* treat Gentiles and tax collectors?
5. Finally, a startling promise: "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*" (v. 20). We yank this verse out of its context, turning it into a pious platitude about prayer and fellowship. Remember what's going on right here in these verses--aching hurt, prickly frustration, fierce conflict! Jesus' fabulous promise to with us comes (in Matthew 18) *precisely when we're at each other's throats.*

Appendix C

Characteristics of Faithful, Fair Feedback

(Notes for an oral presentation by Pastor Larry Wohlrabe, Autumn, 1999)

Quick answer: mission-oriented, partnership-building

Second quick answer:

“Faithful”=faithful to our common commitments about God, our mission, one another.

“Fair”=not done in an arbitrary, inconsistent, careless fashion. Also fair to the minister and also fair to the community of faith.

A. **Mission-driven**.....done in the context of looking at our total mission and ministry--what is the minister responsible for within that? What do we share? How is the community itself and its others leaders contributing?

B. **Involves both blankets and sandpaper**

Blankets=support and affirmation. Sandpaper=admonition and constructive critique.

C. **Continual**.....something we do “for the long haul”

D. **Multi-dimensional, comprehensive**.....i.e. employing a variety of different types of evaluation and feedback:

Subjective AND objective,

Written AND oral,

Broad-based (occasionally seeking feedback from wider group) AND focused (discussion among the primary review group itself)

Results of using such tools are always studied, interpreted, “tested” with great care. (E.g. if decreased worship attendance is a concern--what are all the possible reasons why this might be happening?)

LRW: I challenge each congregation to provide, at the very least, one informal mode and one more formal mode of offering feedback. .

E. **“90% formative, 10% summative”** (Jeff Woods)

Summative=how well is NAME contributing to the advancement of our mission? (LRW: summative tends to look backward)

Formative=“What changes or enhancements can be made to assist NAME in advancing the mission of the faith community?” (LRW: formative evaluation looks ahead)

“The purpose of evaluation is not to prove, but to improve.” (Jill Hudson)

Implication: when do you do evaluation? How do you look at that question? Do you do evaluation at the end of the year, sizing up how things went? Do you do evaluation at the beginning of the year, imagining how things might be? (LRW: obviously this is a little academic. Evaluation always has about it a summing up of what has been--but to what end? As an end in itself, or as background for looking ahead? Perspective matters!)

[Side note: Best NOT to link PRIMARY evaluation time with compensation decisions. Linking the two too easily (1) "tilts" evaluation into the summative direction, (2) increases the likelihood that evaluation will seem to the staff person a threatening, coercive venture. Thereby--a counter-productive move. Folks are much more likely to work at improvement when they have a host of reasons for wanting to improve--not when their job security or economic livelihood depends on it.

This is NOT to suggest that compensation planning groups shouldn't take into account--in appropriate ways--the results of the continual ministry review efforts of the congregation. How a ministry staff person's work is received will affect compensation decisions--to a greater or lesser degree. We say this, convinced that if discontent may diminish compensation packages, excellence also deserves gratitude expressed tangibly. LRW: my bias is that evaluation folks steer clear of linking their work to compensation matters--perhaps best if done by two different groups. Compensation groups, however, will want to include data from evaluations in their deliberations and recommendations. This "division of labor" allows evaluation to keep its integrity.]

- F. **A collaborative venture**--Because the congregation and the minister have shared responsibility for ministry, it makes sense that they also share in designing, discussing, implementing evaluation procedure.
- G. **Tailored to the local community situation**. ("Synod office--can you just send us a survey we can mail out to the whole congregation?" Sort of a "add water and stir" approach!) Any tool that could be used anywhere probably isn't good enough to use in YOUR ministry setting!
- H. **Reviews measure/assess things that can be measured and assessed**. A ministry review probably cannot tell whether or to what degree the Holy Spirit has been at work in a pastor's preaching. A ministry review CAN offer feedback on whether a pastor's goals for preaching are being attained.

Related to this: standards within an evaluation process are appropriate and clear. Start with the Letter of Call and the attached statement of responsibilities, etc.