

WHO CARES FOR THE CAREGIVER?

– Written by Joyce Basler
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To whom does a pastor turn for help in finding God's presence and care?

When crisis strikes and one's world has been turned upside down, to whom do we turn? While family, friends, doctors, and lawyers are likely to be on our lists or possible confidants, many people also turn to their pastor as one who will listen and help them feel God's presence and care in the midst of the pain. But when crisis hits in the pastor's life, to whom does he or she turn?

This was the question addressed recently in the third annual national gathering of the Presbytery Pastoral Care Network (PPCN), a national Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) association that met at Lindenwood Conference Center in Donaldson, Indiana, on October 21 through 24, 2002. In our denomination, as in many today, the number of churches seeking pastors exceeds the number of pastors seeking a call. It is, therefore, more important than ever that pastors receive the care that they need to do the most important task of leading a congregation.

Presbyteries often need help in dealing with real, everyday needs of its pastors.

As the name Presbytery Pastoral Care Network implies, we acknowledge that the care and nurture of pastors is a presbytery responsibility. Many presbyteries, however, find this to be a daunting or nearly impossible task due to many other demands of Committees on Ministry (COM) and executive presbyters. It's not that COMs and EPs don't care; it's that the urgent matters of administration and churches in conflict often absorb their time, leaving few occasions to deal with real, everyday needs of pastors. Another problem arises when we realize that it is the EP's job to make referrals when a pastor seeks a move to another presbytery. Because of this, ministers sometimes question if it is safe to share doubts, weaknesses, and human failings with the very person who could step in to block one's career path.

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Who cares for the caregiver?



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Healthy pastors need emotional resources when encountering conflict.

To address these concerns, 20 Presbyterian pastoral caregivers from 15 presbyteries across the United States gathered to address one another. Our keynote speaker, Dr. Arthur Paul Boers, shared with us concepts from his book, *Never Call Them Jerks*, a family systems and faith-based way of considering conflict within the church. Dr. Boers suggests that difficult people, conflict, and pain within the human family of the church should be an expected part of being a pastor. He feels that healthy pastors are those with the faith and emotional resources to encounter conflict without being caught in the whirlwind.

Conference attendees discovered that we represent four basic approaches (models) used in our denomination to provide pastoral care to pastors. Each of these four approaches has its own advantages and disadvantages, and operates with the authorization of the presbyteries. One crucial thing they all share is the understanding that confidentiality is their most pressing requirement. However, imminent harm to one's self or another, or abuse of a child are exceptions to this rule, as in all care-giving situations.

FOUR MODELS OF CARE:

■ Pastor-to-pastor as a specific staff position

Having a professional person on staff to act as pastor to the pastors of the presbytery probably provides the highest level of effectiveness and intentionality. The professional person serves as a confidential friend who is out of the referencing loop and is most likely to receive a receptive audience from pastors. This person can also facilitate in the formation of groups and mentoring relationships and help set up other relational opportunities to help pastors stay healthy. The struggle for this model, though, is often in justifying the position when the pastor to pastors can't offer names and situations to account for the hours they spend at their work. Another problem comes when the presbytery is extremely large. Then the task can be quite daunting for a single provider. This model has much to offer, yet it is also the most expensive since another presbytery staff position is required.

■ Executive presbyter or associate EP with pastoral care as part of the job description

Because of previously discussed potential conflicts of interest, the best model for this type of pastoral care is the associate who is not part of the referral process. Often this individual has the greatest freedom to get involved (if uninvited at times) because of a built-in awareness of problems brought forth from session consultations and when conflict situations emerge. This can also be a problem, though, because of the perception that presbytery staff sides with COM and congregations in times of conflict. If the EP pastoral care provider is seen in an adversarial light, then no care can be received by the pastor who needs it. Because of the connection to presbytery staff, the EP provider can often find him or herself reacting to crisis rather than having the freedom to proactively care for pastors who are not currently in turmoil.

On the positive side, this model can be highly effective when the right personality and strong pastoral and conflict management skills are present.

■ Volunteers who do pastoral care with pastors

Often the volunteer pastoral care giver is a retired pastor with a gift for connecting with pastors in need. This model is of a friend who "holds the hand" of a pastor in crisis or transition. The presbytery often pays the volunteer's mileage and expenses incurred when moving about the presbytery to meet with pastors. Because these people have a clear separation from presbytery hierarchy, they are considered safe. Yet because they are volunteers and often busy with other things, they are often "spread too thin" to do all that is needed. A question that needs to be addressed for this model is that of training, authority, and credibility. Effective pastoral care providers require special skills and the training to use those skills in effective and healthy ways.

■ Task force or committee with specific responsibilities for care of pastors

A presbytery may have a task force or committee that serves as pastors' advocates. This is a relatively low cost solution to the problem of who will care for pastors. They can facilitate groups, provide get-away weekends and trainings, and, in many situations, act as the spiritual friend that is needed. But trust is often low with such a group. After all, they are peers, and pastors often don't want their peers to be aware of real or perceived weaknesses. The time factor is also an issue because these people have other responsibilities around which to work the care of pastors.

PPCN lets pastors-to-pastors share their own humanness!

PPCN acknowledged the advantages and problems of each model listed above and celebrated one another's ministries at the gathering in October. They also sought to form a network so they can gain new insights and have associates to whom they can come for care themselves. Even pastors to pastors need people with whom to share their own humanness!

To this end, the Presbytery Pastoral Care Network welcomes new members. The annual membership fee is \$45 for active members who are in a care-giving capacity, and \$25 for affiliate members who are interested but not involved in care-giving. There is also an institutional fee of \$250 for a presbytery to designate a group or committee as caregivers.

Members of the PPCN board of directors are available to consult with presbyteries that are considering ways of better providing pastoral care for ministers.

For more information about PPCN check out our Web site at www.pastoralcarenetwork.org