

A COMMON LIFE IN MINISTRY



KEY RELATIONSHIPS AMONG MINISTERS

The relationship of clergy and ministers in a local neighbourhood is a major influence on the life of the churches in their work and witness together. Friendship and fellowship among the ministers can enhance their ministry and be a strong support to them and to their families. Ministers' Groups can be the focus for a common life of ministry. How do they function? What are the issues? How could they work better?

FIRST - MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Fewer groups now call themselves *Fraternal*s; they search for something less gender-specific, *Group, Fellowship, Meeting, 'The Complement'*.

Not all *ministers* like being called *clergy*, not all *clergy* like being called *ministers*. Not all *priests* are pleased to be called *ministers* and not many *ministers* are pleased to be called *priests*. Pastors may or may not be ordained. Not all *Catholics* are *Roman Catholics*; not all *Roman Catholics* are comfortable being called *Roman Catholics*, and none appreciates being called a *Roman*.

BUILDING UP ONE ANOTHER

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together ... but let us encourage one another. *Hebrews 10.23-25 (NIV)*

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. *Galatians 6.2 (NIV)*

MODELLING UNITY

"I have discovered that the church leaders must 'buy-in' to ecumenical endeavour in a big way to role model ecumenical unity to their flocks, if it is going to be any more than a damp squib and a half hearted commitment that is accomplished."

"The evangelical wrote to me saying that because he didn't hold the same theology as me, he couldn't come, and quoted Amos 3.3 - Authorised Version - 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?'

I replied, and quoted Amos 3.3 - English Standard Version - 'Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet?' "

*"God did not make this person as I would have made him... Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction." Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Life Together**

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ISSUES TO BE FACED TOGETHER - RECOGNISING THE CHALLENGES

Multiple belonging

Ministers are expected to belong to denominational meetings - chapters, circuits, councils, teams. Sometimes they want also to meet in groups of common interest or emphasis - Forward in Faith, Evangelical Alliance or Fellowship of the Kingdom.

"They feel more valued and befriended by the Fraternal than by their Chapter."

Size

There can be a mismatch between parochial boundaries (C of E) and the more geographically dispersed Roman Catholic parish, and the fewer and further-between Black Majority Church, Baptist, United Reformed Church or Independent Church ministers. A market town or city may forget its rural or village fringe.

"The problem is that most Anglicans meet anyway and are their own 'support body' and don't always realise how isolated other ministers can feel."

Recognition

For theological reasons, some ministers may find it difficult or impossible to recognise the fullness of ministry of other ministers, or the completeness of the church to which they belong. Sometimes, also, within a church there may be questions, e.g., about the ordination of women to the priesthood. And sometimes there is pain when recognition may seem to be more of a reality *between* churches than *within* them. There may be awkwardness when a minister in one denomination has changed to minister in another denomination.

The Ministers' Group is an opportunity to discover the richness of a variety of integrities. Alongside the theological reservations, there are opportunities to discover one another's gifts and insights, to minister to one another through hurt and pain, and to work towards an existential recognition of one another's ministries.

Roles and gifts

There may be issues too about one another's roles and status in the community, giving rise to questions about the best use of each person's opportunities for service, and offering the chance to be mutually accountable.

"One niggle is Establishment - A team of equals is disrupted if one member assumes a privileged role simply because he is the Vicar in a church which nationalised religion in 1662."

Agenda

Busy clergy and ministers will only prioritise their Meeting if it is either mutually supportive or has a stimulating and worth-while agenda.

"Our discussion is too often like the breakfast - a bread and butter occasion where we are planning the next event. But we try hard to spend time on some big issue."

Churches Together

Groups needs to be clear if they are operating as the executive of the Churches Together grouping, and take care not to disempower lay people or negate their decision-making.

Relating to lay people

Ordained ministers need to recognise that in some churches lay leaders are on a par with them, and may be sharing the same responsibilities and stresses. Ministers' Groups may wish to include all who are in local ministry positions, and certainly avoid being a clerical club.

GOOD PRACTICE / IDEAS OF WHAT COULD BE

Some things don't need a meeting -

Pray for one another.

Celebrate personal joys and share pains.

Care for one another's families too.

Welcome new clergy/ministers - call round with a bottle of wine or an apple pie.

Take part in formal welcomes within newcomer's induction/welcoming/commissioning services.

Invite one another to significant worship and social events.

Remember that good relationships will endure outside and beyond meetings.

"We do minister to one another, listen to and pray for one another - and it's wonderful."

- and for some things, ministers do need to meet

Find the best time (not everyone is available during the day).

Find the best venue.

Identify a sensible catchment for membership - and then remember those on the fringe.

Develop a significant agenda.

Ensure that the congregations know that you are meeting.

Be open to the lay leaders of those churches whose leadership is lay.

Commit to joint ministry: ask how you may "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel you to act separately?"

Invite a guest speaker from the community - doctor, head-teacher, drug counsellor.

Consider shared preparation for baptism, confirmation, marriage, care of the bereaved, whilst taking care not to assume that pastoral care is the sole preserve of the ministers.

Go on pilgrimage together.

Share subscription to periodicals.

Identify personal skills of one another, and be willing to share insights.

Clarify the different roles of a Churches Together group and a Ministers' Group (the latter is not the executive of the former).

Expound the Bible to one another.

Study a theological book or essay.

Visit a local factory, business or utility together.

Arrange holiday and sickness cover.

Make statements or send letters to the press.

"The priest said he would only come if we went out to lunch; so that's what we do."

"When we do meet (once a term for soup and sandwiches) I feel that we meet as brothers and sisters who are colleagues and so we essentially form a sort of support group - able to name and complain about troublesome parishioners, parish politics, the cost and hassle of hiring our parish halls etc. Very ordinary things yet very significant."

"Christians (especially ministers) think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they can render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking." Dietrich Bonhoeffer Life Together

MUTUAL SUPPORT

"Pastors need a place where it is OK to be themselves and admit that things can be difficult."

"One of our ministers is currently pastoring the spouse of a clergy member in another denomination through a difficult time. Another is helping an adult child of a member of the clergy in personal matters."

"There is no doubt that we strive as a group to bear each other's burdens. All of us are more than happy to step into each other's shoes as far as we are able when the occasion demands."

"We have sensed over the years a big bonus is that of mutual support. We have to come to trust one another and confide in one another. Thus we learned that our colleague was leaving a month before he told his people and kept his confidence."

"We respect each other's confidentiality but there are no formal agreements in this respect - merely professional expertise and understanding. We try to be always available for each other."

"The meeting is about friendship and relationship in the work we do. We share personal news about health, family, plans for training, etc."

As an Anglican parish priest in an area where there is no Fraternal I very much value my membership of the CLC (Christian Life Community) group to which I belong. The group consists of four Anglican priests and a Roman Catholic working in lay ministry. We are drawn together not only by our working in full time ministry, but also by a shared spirituality, a seeking and longing for God in all we do.

The support I receive from this group is tremendous. It gives a safe environment to touch the deepest parts of my life, the joys and the pains. The members allow me to be me, and love me unconditionally. There is no judgement only a willingness to support and help in every situation.

The prayer we share helps me to become 'centred' again and gives me strength to carry on when times are not good.

- Thanks to the many clergy and ministers who are quoted in this leaflet.
- This publication is primarily intended to stimulate local activity. You are invited to send your comments on it to 'Common Life', Churches Together in England, 27 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HH, or email commonlife@cte.org.uk. Copies of the leaflet may be obtained from CTE, 10 for £3 incl. p&p, preferably in stamps to save handling costs and bank charges.
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**A COMMON LIFE
in MINISTRY**

*O God, Holy and Eternal Trinity,
We pray for your Church in all the world.
Sanctify its life; renew its worship;
Empower its witness; heal its divisions;
Make visible its unity.
Lead us, with all our brothers and sisters,
Towards communion in faith, life and witness,
So that, united in one body by the one Spirit,
We may together witness to the perfect unity of your love.*

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