

Building connections among the clergy

by Steve McCutchan

All General Presbyters/Presbytery Executives know the challenge. First, we live in an age of institutional distrust and the presbytery represents one more institution in our society. Second, our denomination is experiencing ideological division similar to that taking place in our larger society and even clergy seem to place their fellow clergy in categories-liberal, conservative, small church, large church, rural, urban, etc. What we lack is more face to face time where we get to know each other as colleagues in the faith. I've rarely had a conversation with another pastor, regardless of theological position, where I didn't discover that we shared many of the stresses and challenges of being a pastor.

A Company of Pastors

Recently I had phone conversations with each of the General Presbyters of the Mid-Atlantic Synod. When I asked what one of the biggest challenges they saw among the clergy in their presbytery, they agreed that it was isolation. This was reinforced by conversations that other board members had with executives in other sections of the country.

Because of time demands, geography, theological differences, etc., clergy do not regularly convene to support each other. In the early days of our denomination, John Calvin formed a "Company of Pastors," in which the clergy regularly came together for nurture and support. Many of the executives that I talked to have tried various ways to form clergy cohort groups to break this isolation.

New Castle Presbytery tried on idea that I want to build on. Tom Stout, the moderator at the time said, "I saw that both teaching and ruling elders had little opportunity to interact on a person-to-person basis. We seem to usually treat each other as supporters or opponents on a variety of business items before the presbytery. I wondered if that could be countered in some fashion by a setting where we shared something of ourselves in a focused and 'non-business' environment." His proposal was to form a reading group that would come together once a month and discuss a book of common interest." He reports that the idea had modest success.

The Executive Discussion Group

Even in this age of institutional distrust, the presbytery executive still has some extra influence because of his or her position. I want to suggest that the executive offer to guide a book discussion group in order to both strengthen relationships across the presbytery and the personal relationship between clergy and the executive. There are two dimensions to this proposal.

First, there is the suggestion of a "common read" of a book during a period of time across the presbytery. Everyone would know that everyone is reading the same book

that relates to church life so that whenever one pastor met another, they can raise the subject. (In this sense, it is like the lectionary readings that are meant to unite the church.)

Second, once a month the executive convenes a discussion group on the book for all who are interested. Or, if a group is formed in another region in the presbytery, when possible, the exec can Skype into the group's meeting. In presenting the proposal, the executive acknowledges the problem of division and encourage clergy deliberately to join with other clergy of diverse perspective.

Choosing a Book

New Castle Presbytery read

- *Falling Upward* by Richard Rohr,
- *Saving Creation* by Kathleen Sullivan,
- *Surprised by Hope*, by N. T. Wright, and a book by Tom Long on suffering.

You might also consider

- *The Renegade Pastor* by Nelson Searcy,
- *Incarnation* by Will Willimon and
- *Stitches* by Anne Lamott.

I encourage you to alternate non-fiction books with some novels that involve clergy struggling with church life. Of course, I want you to consider some of my fictional stories about clergy life. I have three volumes of Clergy Tales-Tails, which might offer some short stories to begin the discussion. My mystery novel, *A Star and a Tear*, is a longer story that explores the story of a pastor that helps the police track down a serial rapist.

There are several other authors who have explored the life of clergy in fictional stories. Have fun while you build relationships among the clergy under your care.