

Leading by learning

PEER LEARNING GROUPS



“The next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are.”

– C.S. Lewis

A model for continuing education for ministers being developed by equipping Leadership for Mission Unit, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

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What is a peer learning group?

Peer Learning Groups are a model for learning in which a group of practitioners commit to learning together, to explore and develop their own field of discovery.

Why join a peer group?

Recent research in the United States found that ministers who were part of a peer group were 'better at balancing their personal and ministry responsibilities than pastors without peer group experience' (Long Mahler et al 2013 p1). This research also found that belonging to a peer group enhanced a minister's sense of well being, contributed to their spiritual growth, enhanced their relationships with family and friends and result in enhanced ministry practice. The *Ministers in Crisis* report, carried out on behalf of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania in 2009, also found that many ministers would value the opportunity to meet with colleagues in a supportive environment and believe it would enhance their effectiveness for ministry and help overcome a feeling of isolation.

Peer groups, at their best, are safe places where ministers can share their struggles and fears, display their gifts, learn and grow together and find a place of refreshment and renewal. However not all peer groups were found to be equal. The peer groups that were most beneficial to ministers, both in terms of their own well-being and in their exercise of ministry, were those groups that had, as a focus, either shared learning goals or a group facilitator, or both.

Peer groups are not a substitute for supervision. Peer supervision for Uniting Church ministry agents is discouraged by the Code of Ethics. Rather Peer Learning groups are a place to share, learn, grow and reflect on ministry practice and are a practical and effective way for ministers to respond to the commitment to lifelong learning outlined in the 2011 Assembly paper *Seeking a Heart of Wisdom*.

Key principles

A key principle underlying peer group participation is that members of the group are able to exercise agency within the group. This means that peer groups works best when members freely join the group, rather than being part a group simply by virtue of age, ethnicity, gender or location. These things may be a factor in a person choosing to join a particular group but they may not be the only factor. Peer group members *must* choose to join the group.

Having agency within the group also means that members of the group participate together to set the agenda for the group, design the program, including methods of learning, and choose the spiritual practices and methods of sharing within the group. Groups that engage a facilitator should still exercise agency in these matters. The role of the facilitator is not to do this work but to help the group do this work by assisting with process and keeping the group on task.

Another key principle of peer groups is that the group shares leadership. When a peer group is being formed a key issue which should be agreed upon is how leadership will be shared so that all take a turn at leading and all take turns at receiving the leadership of others. Some share leadership by taking turns at facilitating a session of the gathering. Others share leadership by allowing different members to lead elements of a program. However it is worked out, there needs to a real commitment to shared leadership. Groups that engage a facilitator should still adhere to the principle of shared leadership. It is not the role of the facilitator to lead the group, rather it is the role of the facilitator to manage the processes of the group so that shared leadership emerges.

There are several reasons to value shared leadership in a peer group. One is that it affirms the group as a group of equal peers who each have strengths to share and areas of growth

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to be worked on in the group. Another is that being part of a group which values shared leadership enables ministers to value and practice shared leadership in a safe place and then transfer that learning to their ministry placement.

A commitment to ongoing evaluation is an important part of ensuring a successful peer group. Evaluation should not be confused with assessment. Evaluation is about seeking clarity and truth. In the context of peer learning it involves each member seeking to be open to evaluating, in company what it is they are seeking for their ministry and discipleship. This involves the whole group seeking to discern what the purpose of the group is and how that purpose will shape its shared life. Along the journey a group committed to evaluation will periodically ask if the group is serving the purpose it was established for, is it serving the needs of the members and are group members learning and growing as they hoped. At the end of the journey the group will evaluate how well they have achieved what they hoped they would, whether the group has a future life together or not and for each member to discern where to next for them.

Practices for peer groups

Hospitality

Hospitality is a key practice of all successful peer groups. This hospitality is first expressed in a sense of welcome and openness to each member of the group and to the gifts and graces they each bring. Hospitality is also expressed in a sense of openness to the journey the group will take together. Finally most peer groups find a sense of hospitality is expressed through the sharing of food. The form of this sharing will be shaped by the pattern of gathering. Many peer groups spoke of the value of eating together, including where appropriate the preparation of food which strengthened their shared life.

The establishment of a covenant agreed to by

the group is another expression of hospitality. The covenant outlines how the group will meet and the basic expectations of group members. One model of a covenant is attached in the Appendix A.

Spiritual practices

Peer groups that share spiritual practices together report that this strengthens each person's relationship with God and the sense of the group seeking to be faithful. A key practice is a commitment to pray together when the group meets and to pray for each other between gatherings. Groups that meet for several days at a time also value times of retreat that included spiritual practices. Appendix B contains some resources for developing spiritual practices and the peer learning tab on the continuing education website will have links and resources.

Learning

Research suggests that peer groups that have a major focus on learning together are those that report the greatest satisfaction and have most positive impact on the ministry practice of participants. A shared focus on learning will often be the catalyst for the formation of a peer group but existing peer groups also can develop a shared learning focus that will enrich the life of the group. Shared learning is also an opportunity for members to exercise leadership within the group and allows members to rehearse what has been learnt with supportive others before implementing the learning within ministry placements.

Learning can be stimulated through reading, attending a conference, listening to podcasts, participating in a MOOC, a unit of formal study or through input from experts or practitioners.

Learning in peer groups is richest when it is grounded in reflection on ministry practice. Whatever learning the group seeks to do together, and whatever sharing happens in the group, a focus on ministry practice will

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enhance the effectiveness of participants' ministry practice. Peer groups can also provide an opportunity for individual members to reflect on their personal learning plans.

Sharing of life

Many participants in peer groups report that they provide a safe place to share what is happening in their lives. Peer groups provide a setting where colleagues are committed to listening in confidence to each other and who will support and encourage each other through joy, sadness, frustration, illness, upheaval and celebration. Such sharing is sustaining, supportive and strengthening.

Forming a peer group

When forming a peer group the potential members need to spend time reaching agreement on the nature of the group.

Among the things that need to be agreed upon are:

1. What is the nature of the group?
 - a. Is it a group that will meet primarily for mutual support or primarily for shared learning and reflection on ministry practice?
 - b. Is it a group that will meet around a focus issue or will the group allow the focus to emerge from reflection on practice?
 - c. Will the group have a common constituency? For example: women, a culturally and linguistically diverse background, a group for people in a particular type or phase of ministry?
 - d. Will the group seek to share a learning experience together, such as going to a conference?
2. How often and where will the group meet?
 - a. Will it meet 2-3 times a year for several days, will it meet monthly for a few hours.
 - b. Will the group meet at a retreat centre, holiday flat, in a cafe, in each others' homes or place of ministry?
 - c. Will there be an expectation of some
3. Will the group be facilitated or not?
 - a. Some groups will want to find a facilitator who manages the process and ensures the group has the resources and structure to achieve its aims while other groups will rely on members of the group to facilitate the group.
4. What are the goals of the group?
 - a. What do group members hope to achieve?
 - b. How will the group assess the life and achievements of the group?
5. Spiritual practices.
 - a. What spiritual practices will the group share when they meet?
 - b. What spiritual practices will group members share when the group is apart?
6. What is the timeframe for the life of the group?
 - a. Will the group have an anticipated end point or be open-ended?
 - b. How will the group be evaluated to ensure it has met the needs of participants?
 - c. How often will evaluation happen?
 - d. If the group is open-ended how will group members leave and be replaced?
7. If conflict arises in the group how will this be resolved?

Once the group has agreed on the nature of the group a covenant can be drawn up as a point of reference and the group can begin meeting. As the group goes on, it will be important to evaluate the life of the group and whether it is achieving its aims and meeting the needs of the members.

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Some examples of potential peer learning groups

- Facilitated CPE-style action-reflection group for reflection on current ministry context and practice – although PLGs should provide this in an informal way to some extent.
- Group attendance at a conference of choice and continued meetings to explore at depth the material presented, including further reading in the field, and implications for ministry practice.
- Participation as a group by live-streaming in a eLM-held conference, or a conference held elsewhere in the world, for that matter, and continued exploration of the material.
- Joint reading of texts of choice and ongoing, disciplined reflection on their themes. This could in any area of Christian scholarship: a particular theologian or field of theology; recent developments in an area of biblical studies or other scholarship; a spiritual tradition; contemporary literature; current thinking and practice on mission, worship, spiritual practice or other aspect of church life.
- Joint attendance at the annual Preaching and Ministry conference in November and continued dialogue as a Lectionary Group.
- Joint undertaking of Pilgrim or other academic unit.
- Reflection on the nature and practice of leadership.
- A location based PLG exploring issues relating to the area.
- Reflection on an area of theology or ministry practice with each group member sharing their learning on the agreed topic
- A group of CALD minister learning and reflecting on ministry in Australia and how coming from a non-dominant culture shapes ones ministry practice.

Peer groups can be made of a diversity of people. Peer group members can be from different traditions, they can live in different

cities or towns, they can have interstate members and they can be culturally and theologically diverse.

How the eLM unit will support peer learning groups

The eLM is committed to facilitating/ fostering:

- the bringing together of ministers interested in becoming part of a Peer Learning Group;
- the resourcing of a group conversation to explore possibilities for learning;
- the application process for funding – if that is what the group requires to enable its life;
- support for group participation in eLM/Pilgrim events;
- if desired, the provision of meeting space without charge at the eLM;
- the encouragement of ministers to see Peer Learning Groups as a significant part of their own involvement in and commitment to life-long learning.
- opportunities for per groups to share their learning with others across the church.
- subsidised accommodation at Maclean House for PLG gatherings.

The UCA VicTas web page has a section devoted to resources for peer groups that will be updated regularly.

► <https://victas.uca.org.au/community-learning/leadership/#plg>

If you would like to discuss any aspect of peer learning groups please contact the Continuing Education Co-ordinator Rev Fran Barber on **03 9340 8839** or fran.barber@victas.uca.org.au

This guide was prepared by Sharon Hollis & Andrew Boyle, February 2014.

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Appendix A - Group covenant [an example]

We agree we will observe the following covenant in this group

1. We will protect the confidentiality of each participant by not sharing what anyone says beyond the group meetings unless explicit permission to do so is given.
2. We will stay curious and observe the basic of 'No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting anyone straight.'
3. We will welcome silence and meditation as ways to discern God's work in ourselves and in the group.
4. We will honour each other by coming on time, staying for the whole gathering and observing time limits within the gathering.
5. We will listen fully to each other without interrupting, talking over each other or having side conversations.
6. We will stay focused on the issue at hand.
7. We will make decisions by consensus.

Appendix B: Resources for spiritual practices

- *Uphold One Another in Prayer & The Lacuna Kit - Synod resources*
- Blythe, Teresa (2006), *50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Times and Traditions*. Nashville: Abington Press
- Calhoun, Adele Adlberg (2005) *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press

References

- *A Study of the Effects of Participation in SPE Pastoral Leader Peer Groups* (2010) Austin Presbyterian Seminary College of Pastoral Leaders.
- Long Mahler, Penny et al (2013) *So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.