



SUSTAINING EFFECTIVE MINISTRY IN CHALLENGING TIMES

Things have changed. The environment within which the church of Jesus Christ seeks to do its ministry is very different than it was fifty or twenty five years ago. Once it was thought that “everybody goes to church,” now about 17% of the American population will find a place of worship on any given weekend.

What does the church need for ministry today? One of the necessities is a community of Ministerial Leaders who are continually growing both in their spiritual journeys and in their leadership abilities. Without spiritually grounded Ministerial Leaders, the church will be severely handicapped in its determination to faithfully proclaim the gospel and sustain its life-sharing ministries.

The American Baptist Ministers Council knows how to sustain effective ministry in challenging times and the good news is that its effectiveness has been demonstrated. The challenge is that additional financial resources are needed to continue.

DEMONSTRATED EFFECTIVENESS

In 2002, with a significant grant from the Lilly Endowment, the American Baptist Ministers Council established the “Together in Ministry” program. “Together in Ministry” (TIM) is the name used for clergy collegial covenantal groups. By the end of 2009, about 2300 Ministerial Leaders participating in about 225 groups were funded.

What happens when Ministerial Leaders participate in TIM or TIM-like groups? A recent study from Austin Seminary, sponsored by Lilly Endowment, revealed the following.

Ministerial Leaders who participate in clergy collegial covenantal groups are more likely to:

- Create a culture of lay- involvement within their congregations that includes higher participation in New Member’s Classes, lay participation in worship, lay participation in communion, higher participation in service to the church, and the rotation of lay persons in leadership roles creating a broader base for gifts and abilities.
- Have an organized presence and involvement of youth that includes a youth minister on staff, comprehensive youth programs including conferences and camps, congregational events planned and led by youth, youth serving on congregational committees and boards.
- More intentional involvement in the community including a vision of the congregation as a change agent within the community, a strong emphasis on community service within the congregation, and an expectation that the pastor will represent the congregation in the community.

- Enjoy congregational support for continuing education including financial support for continuing education and congregational requirements for continuing education.
- Experience congregational growth when the ministerial leader has a sustained participation in a group of more than 2 years. Ministerial Leaders who participate in the groups for more than 4 years have even a greater chance of experiencing congregational growth. (For the full report, www.austinseminary.edu/cpl)

The first goal of the Ministers Council TIM groups was to overcome the sense of isolation and loneliness that Ministerial Leaders often experience. The evaluation initially focused on that goal with the following results.

- 84.4% reported an enriched perspective of self and congregation
- 83.4% reported enhanced opportunities for disciplined focus through focused study
- 74.4% reported a climate for mutual accountability among peers
- 89.1% gained a supportive network of colleagues who will pray for one another
- 74.6% gained a sense of other ministers being available for support in their work.

The group members were also asked to describe the value of participation in the TIM experience. They reported that they received encouragement and support to improve preaching and teaching and to enhance church leadership skills. Improvements in personal health, the reduction of stress, and connecting and networking with other pastors and congregations were common themes. TIM participants frequently share about having their perspectives broadened and becoming open to new ideas. (For a complete report of the effect of the Ministers Council funded TIM groups, ask for a copy of the 2009 report to the Lilly Endowment.)

The obvious conclusion is this. Ministerial leaders who participated in TIM groups are more spiritually grounded and better leaders because of the Together in Ministry Grants.

WHY DOES IT WORK?

Dr. Craig Dykstra of the Lilly Endowment's Department of Religion argues persuasively that effective ministerial leaders share this practice; they intentionally nurture networks of significant clergy friendships. Clergy who are connected with other clergy are significantly more likely to be effective than those who are vocationally isolated. Unfortunately, clergy who are isolated are significantly more likely to get into trouble than those who are connected by the bonds of shared vocation and friendship.

Why? It is within these vocational friendships that the issues and practices of ministry are explored, examined, tested, and often resolved. Friends in ministry help one another to mature in the practice of ministry, become more effective practitioners of ministry, and to avoid those serious mistakes that sometimes destroy vocations.

It is within these covenantal groups that ideas can be explored within the local context of community and tested against the realities of the local church. Within these covenantal clergy communities, skills are enhanced, encouragement to try something new is experienced and,

perhaps most importantly of all, spiritual lives are deepened as Ministerial Leaders study scripture, share their hearts and pray together. It is within these conversations that disembodied ideas become embodied in the concrete lives of Ministers and ultimately in the lives of the churches.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Ministerial Leaders are invited to form groups of 6 to 12 colleagues. As the group forms, it creates its own “curricula,” its own focus and writes its own covenant. The covenant describes the group’s focus, its meeting cycle, and its core values.

Once this is completed, the group applies for financial support to their regional Ministers Council. If the regional council approves, the application is forwarded to the Executive Director who reviews the application. If the application is approved, each member of the group who is also a member of the American Baptist Ministers Council receives \$100 to help meet the expenses of participating in the group. The funds are most often used to buy books and to offset the costs of transportation and meals.

An additional \$2000 is made available to provide compensation to a facilitator who has been selected by the group. It is expected that the facilitator will bring expertise to the group that is appropriate to the group’s purpose.

Members of the group do not have to be American Baptist. Many ecumenical groups are supported, but only Ministers Council members receive the \$100 subsidy. However, the entire group benefits from the expertise of the facilitator.

If all 12 members of a group happen to be members of the Ministers Council, the group will receive a total of \$3200 to meet the expenses of the group.

WILL THE PROCESS WORK WITHOUT THE SUBSIDY?

Some TIM-like groups do quite well without external funding. But groups who utilize the services of a qualified facilitator are of much greater service to their participants than groups that are purely self-led. Everything in the group is likely to work better with a good facilitator and most groups find the cost of the facilitator to be prohibitive.

WHAT IS NEEDED?

Sustaining and expanding the effectiveness of the collegial covenant groups requires three things.

1. The American Baptist Ministers Council needs to continue to subsidize the collegial covenant groups including TIM and Communities of Practice (COP) groups. They are a key to sustaining effective ministry in these challenging times.

2. The key group in sustaining the collegial covenant culture is the constituent or regional Ministers Council. Given the rapid turn-over rate of local leaders, it is essential to have a continuous process that teaches both the value of collegial covenant groups and the skills necessary to make them strong.
3. Having strong national conferences for ministerial leaders—including the *In the Lord* conferences, the educational gatherings at the Biennial and the collegial connections of the Senate experience—is a way to both celebrate ministry and to encourage participation in local groups. The large group celebrations provide both renewed encouragement and the honing of leadership skills that are necessary for effective ministry.

FUNDING

In 2002, the American Baptist Ministers Council was the recipient of a grant from the Lilly Endowment in the amount of approximately \$1,900,000. Five years later, the Lilly Endowment affirmed the work of the Ministers Council with a “Sustainability Grant” of approximately \$850,000. The grants have allowed significant contributions to be made in the lives of ministerial leaders.

The Lilly Endowment grants will come to an end in 2012. These grants have made it possible to develop a ministry to ministers that really works. Now the American Baptist Ministers Council must partner together with others to sustain this ministry.

If the Ministers Council can increase its endowment funds by \$2.5 million, the budget would provide continual support for:

- Sponsoring local collegial covenant groups;
- Investing in training local councils;
- Providing national meetings and conferences.

This assumes a prudent 5% draw on the endowment funds.

OPPORTUNITY

You are reading this because you love the church of Jesus Christ and you know the value of ministers who continue to grow in the depth of their spirituality and in the quality of their leadership abilities. To say it directly, you want your church to be led by an effective pastor who can lead through this era of rapid change.

Yes, the Ministers Council knows how to sustain effective Ministerial Leaders through challenging times. It happens best when ministers participate in “Together in Ministry” (TIM) or TIM-like groups.

Your personal gift to support this effort can make the difference for ministers and the congregations with whom they serve.

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