



Pastoral Covenant Groups: A Proposed Structure or Starting Point

Part of being in a “covenanted order” is the willingness for pastors to commit ourselves into the care and accountability of other pastors. ECO believes this will increase our capacity to be the pastors we sense that God is calling us to be. We understand that there are forces inside of us as human beings which can make it easier to be individualists and to resist being known. We know that we will remain blind to being “curved in upon ourselves” (Luther) unless someone helps us to see and repent. Hence, we believe that the Covenanted Order provides the external accountability to keep us focused upon our missional calling and our biblical/theological roots.

Thus, a pastor shall be a part of a Pastoral Covenant Group (PCG) in order to increase accountability and encouragement and in order to spur one another on toward love and good deeds. The purpose of these groups is to coach, encourage and pray for one another as pastors strive for greater missional effectiveness, by:

- Exploring the health of each other’s current ministry;
- Exploring the future objectives of each other’s ministry;
- Addressing challenges and obstacles to meeting those objectives;
- Sharing best practices and insights;
- Exploring each other’s physical, spiritual, relational, emotional, and vocational health.

These PCGs are ordinarily 5-8 pastors organized around a relational willingness to commit. There could be groups organized with similar church types or proximate geography. These groups could be ones already in existence from years past. They may also consist of pastors in similar life or ministry stages. It would be one of the hopes of ECO that the groups might include a vision for mentoring younger pastors. Normally, due to the vulnerability and desired relational intimacy, the groups will be same-gender.

Pastoral Covenant Groups will be peer-to-peer relationships and are self reflective. They shall meet together face-to-face **at least** once a year. They are also encouraged to find ways to connect throughout the year. PCGs shall begin with the questions provided below, but may appropriately include materials from various Pastoral Rules, or other resources.

Composition of the Pastoral Covenant Groups – Each shall be comprised of 5 to 8 pastors, representing congregations or other related ministries. The groups are self-selective. Each ECO pastors, each presbytery’s Committee on Ministry (or equivalent) shall ensure that all pastors are participating in a PCG. FOP pastors shall participate in a PCG. (ECO Polity 2.0402)

Commitment – The PCG should stay together for 3 to 4 years together, thus giving a period of time to bond. After that period of time you may re-covenant, or you may change the composition of the group. This commitment provides a natural breaking point if change is needed.

Pre-work – Each pastor will need to prayerfully spend time developing his or her thoughts and answers to the questions listed below. The time each pastor spends on these questions will be significant and strategic. The answers or thoughts arising from these questions may provide the basis for discussion among the group. If the groups agrees, written copies of the answers may be distributed ahead of time.

Meeting Sites – Ideally, there might be a retreat-like setting for the annual meeting – away from normal work locations. The group can decide what location might be best and may include a rotation of hosting among the various members of the group.

Time Commitment – It would be best to plan on 8 hours of talking time together. Table fellowship is encouraged. An overnight somewhere might be helpful.

Suggested Outline of Initial Meeting

- 1) Getting to know each other
 - a. Log in with brief introductions and current ministry context
 - b. Sharing of biographical histories
 - c. Sharing of call stories
- 2) Going deeper
 - a. Sharing of 5 areas of disclosure of health:
 - i. Spiritual
 - ii. Relational
 - iii. Physical
 - iv. Emotional
 - v. Vocational
 - b. Engage in prayer after each person shares. Sharing continues into the next morning, if needed. Vulnerability and trust will grow over time together.
- 3) Conclusion and looking ahead
 - a. Concluding questions might include:
 - i. What did we all learn from this exercise?
 - ii. How will accountability work over the next year?
 - iii. When we will meet again?
 - b. Ideally, the next meeting location, date and time will be set before all parties depart.

Challenges – This is something new for many of us. It may feel awkward in the beginning – many of us have never done this with a group of pastors. For the PCGs to have maximum effect each pastor will need to focus on humility and vulnerability. Initially, groups should intentionally work on developing trust, being genuinely open, and practicing transparency. (**Confidentiality is paramount.**) Cynical attitudes and gossip will need to be resisted. Bragging would be out of place – yet a focus on what the Holy Spirit has done or is doing in your midst is to be celebrated. Best practices should be shared and enjoyed by all. Mistakes and failures can be learning experiences for each pastor.

While this proposed structure may serve as a starting for PCGs, the groups may find as relationships develop that meetings and structure may change. Groups may decide to include continuing education or learning opportunities as they gather. Or, they may engage in more structured prayer, Scripture meditation, or theological engagement as part of their time together. Although the structures and/or process can be flexible, the core purpose of these covenant groups – authentic accountability and faithful encouragement – should not be neglected.

Some Suggested Questions for Engagement

Introductions and Biographical Questions

- 1) Describe your family of origin and where it is now.
 - a. What is/was the greatest influence of your father? How has/did that relationship move over time?
 - b. What is/was your relationship like with your mother and how has/did that change and grow over time?
 - c. Describe your relationship with your siblings and how that has shaped and formed you.
- 2) Discuss your current family situation.
 - a. What are the joys and challenges in your current familial relationships?
 - b. If married, how would you describe your marriage? What are the joys and delights of life with your spouse? How does your spouse encourage or challenge your relationship with Christ? Describe some of the past challenges or disappointments in your marriage and how you and your spouse overcame them. How are you upholding fidelity in your marriage?
 - c. If not married, describe your relational status – are you divorced, widowed, never been married, dating? How is that for you – are you joyful, content, grieving, unsettled, frustrated, lonely, thankful? How are you upholding a chaste life?
 - d. Are you a parent? Describe your relationship with your children. What joys and challenges have you experienced in parenthood?

Health Questions

- 1) **Spiritual health:** What does spiritual health look like in your mind? Where are you in relation to that ideal? How are you actively engaging in your relationship with Christ? Are you keeping a regular quiet time? Are you actively engaging in scriptural study or meditation outside of your pastoral responsibilities? How is your prayer life? What prayer practices do you find particularly fruitful in your walk with Christ? How would you describe your worship practices? Describe your practice of confession of sin and repentance.
- 2) **Relational health:** What would relational health look like in your mind? Where is that strongest and weakest in your current experience? What relationships cause you the greatest struggle? Are there areas of reconciliation or conflict that need to be addressed? How will you go about resolving that conflict? In which relationships do you find peace and joy? Are there relationships in your life that you have neglected or relationships that have run their course? Are you engaged in any relationships right now that are pulling or drawing you away from your primary familial or pastoral responsibilities?
- 3) **Physical health:** What is ideal physical health for you? What gets in your way from being in that place? What will you do to get there in the coming year? Do you exercise regularly? What are your eating habits? Do you get regular sleep? Have you struggled with any illnesses, chronic pain, or other debilitating health issues? What types of medications do you take, if any? Do you have any issues with drug abuse? Do you have a healthy relationship with alcohol consumption?
- 4) **Emotional health:** What does it mean to be emotionally healthy? Where are you in relation to that ideal? What makes you angry, sad, frustrated? Do you struggle with depression? What things, situations or people do you avoid and why? When have you delighted in the Lord? When are you joyful, peaceful, content? In what ways do you struggle with fear or wrestle with doubt?
- 5) **Vocational health:** Vocational health may be a new term – but it means we are working in healthy ways – balance in our use of time, Sabbath, power, collegiality, and humility/pride. Where are you in this season of life? Are you actively keeping a Sabbath? How are you modeling a healthy work/life balance to others in your congregation and among the staff of the church? Are you practicing proper stewardship of your finances? What does stewardship look like for you and your family? In what ways are you praying and discerning your current sense of call? Additional questions regarding the congregation you are serving may be explored.
- 6) **Congregational health:** How would you describe the health of the congregation you serve? What dysfunctions have existed in the past or are currently present? What is the nature of conflict within the congregation and how have you all dealt with it? Describe your relationship with the session of the church. How have you all worked together to discern and cast the vision of the congregation? Is there a healthy development of spiritual leaders within the congregation? How has the congregation adapted to change in the past and/or how are they currently adapting to change now? Describe and discuss your Mission Affinity Group relationships and meetings. What challenges lie ahead for the congregation?