

West District Leadership Resources

Pastor-Parish or Staff-Parish Relations Committee

Overview of committee responsibilities

You may access an overview summary of the committee responsibilities on UMC.org. Search for “Pastor Parish Relations Committee Overview.” This two page handout can be copied and distributed to all members of the committee at the first meeting of the year. It covers the basic organizational structure and tasks of the group. This is vital information for everyone to understand. A longer description of the committee’s tasks is written up in the current “Guidelines” materials, also published by the denomination.

Basic guidelines for meetings

It is recommended that the committee meet at least quarterly. No meeting is to take place without the pastor’s knowledge. While it may be appropriate that the pastor excuse themselves from some discussions held in the group, it is normal for the pastor to be a part of the meetings of the PPRC/SPRC.

Conducting the annual clergy assessment

It is required that the committee conducts an annual assessment of the pastor’s ministry, utilizing forms that can be accessed through the Texas Annual Conference. The assessment report is due into the district office no later than November 1st of each year, therefore it is typical that this process take place during the early fall. *Only one summary report is due to the district superintendent.* Do not have each member of the committee turn in a separate report. One method of conducting the assessment is for the chair of the committee to write up a rough draft of the report, and then share this with the other members. They would then participate in editing the final version of the report to be forwarded to the district. When the report is completed it should represent a consensus view of the entire PPRC.

It is not advisable for the pastor to be present while the report is being prepared. This would hinder transparency from being present in the process. However, it is urged that the final report be shared with the pastor prior to it being forwarded to the district. The assessment is intended to be a constructive process that helps the pastor with their ministry in the church. *While the DS receives a copy of the report, the document is intended first and foremost to be a tool for constructive dialogue between the committee and pastor. The committee, or at least the committee’s chair, should go over the contents of the assessment with the pastor soon after the document is put together.*

If a church has paid staff in addition to appointed clergy, the committee should develop some procedure for assessing/evaluating each one’s ministry. These assessments should also be performed on an annual basis, with the pastor’s involvement. It is highly recommended that the committee and pastor develop a detailed job description for every staff member who is employed by the church. Not only will such documents facilitate the evaluation process, they will help each employee to understand clearly what the church expects from them.

Personnel policies

While the general responsibilities of the pastor are outlined in the Book of Discipline, each church should take the step of developing personnel policies for all paid staff members. Policies regarding days off, holidays, vacation, sick and maternity leave, availability of benefits, and guidelines applying to discharges or resignations should all be specified. If your church does not have such policies in place, it is important that the committee undertake to develop these as soon as possible. It may be useful to gather the personnel policies that other churches have in place and use these as a resource for your discussions. When a new person comes on board, they should be given two copies of the personnel policies. One of these should be signed by them and kept in a church file, so that there is a record that they have read and acknowledged the employee policies of the congregation.

Empowering clergy and staff ministry

It is imperative that the PPRC take a proactive role in empowering and supporting the ministry of your pastor and other paid staff. The greatest gift you can bestow upon your clergy or staff is to pray – and encourage the congregation to pray – for them regularly. Beyond the gift of prayer, please be attentive to the clergy’s need for ministry growth and self-care, also.

Each pastor is supposed to obtain at least twenty hours of continuing education each year. Please understand that this requirement is designed to help every clergy person to grow in knowledge that will help them with their ministry. You should encourage your clergy to seek out such educational growth opportunities each year. Achieving twenty hours of continuing education will require several days of the pastor's time during the year. This mandated time for personal and professional growth should not be considered a part of their vacation time.

It is also very important that you actively encourage your pastor to take regular days off, so they may be revitalized from the demands of the ministry. Be concerned if the pastor does not do this, or if they have a habit of spending most evenings engaged in church work. Such habits can easily lead to burn-out, which is a great danger to clergy. Your pastor will provide a healthier ministry to your congregation if they are themselves a spiritually, emotionally, and physically healthy person.

Every few years, it can be energizing for your pastor to take some form of sabbatical from the ministry, in order to reflect and become recharged in spirit. It would be a constructive policy for your church to negotiate this issue with your pastor when they first are appointed to serve your congregation. A sabbatical is not to be considered vacation, but rather a time for renewal and rededicating themselves to service. The church should continue to pay the pastor during a negotiated sabbatical time.

Providing tools for the pastor and staff in ministry

Every clergy or lay staff person requires certain tools in order to effectively conduct the practice of ministry. A reasonable office space in most churches is a necessity, one which would also accommodate persons who need to speak with pastor.

We now live in a day when a computer is not a luxury, but rather a necessity for ministry. It should be new enough to be running recent operating systems and software programs. Fortunately, the price of computers has continued to fall to the point that a suitable desktop or laptop system can be purchased for a very reasonable cost. Except in rural areas, the church should ideally have a high speed internet connection, in order for clergy and staff to do on-line reports and have access to e-mail. The church should also see that staff members have access to a printer. Small laser printers are now very inexpensive, and provide a low cost per copy.

Almost every congregation nowadays expects their clergy and some lay staff to be accessible by cell phone. It should be expected that the church participate in this expense. If the congregation cannot afford to underwrite the entire cell phone cost for the pastor, it should at least make a contribution towards the monthly bill for this item.

The clergy or staff compensation package

It is the responsibility of the Pastor or Staff Parish Relations Committee to recommend the annual compensation packages for each clergy or paid staff member. This recommendation is normally made during the fall of the year, and should be forwarded to the churches Finance Committee for review and inclusion in the next years' budget. In the case of the pastor, the base salary is to be recommended, along with amounts to cover parsonage utilities and clergy business expenses (travel, continuing education, etc.). Many pastors and PPRC's find it to be more comfortable for the pastor not to be physically present while these discussions are taking place. The chair of the committee would visit with the pastor after the meeting and share with them what the group is recommending for the coming year.

Please be aware that each pastor is considered to be "self-employed" for the purposes of income tax and Social Security payments. They must estimate their tax liability each year and make quarterly payments. The church must, though, provide the pastor and all staff with a W-2 form for each calendar year (by the end of January). The Social Security obligations of pastors are considerable. They must pay 15.3% of their gross income, including any parsonage utilities paid. Additionally, they are to pay Social Security on the fair rental value of the parsonage, if they live in one. It is common for pastors to pay significantly more in Social Security contributions each year than they do for income tax.

Additionally, each full or $\frac{3}{4}$ time pastor is required to have a percentage of their salary withheld and paid as their personal contribution for clergy health insurance. This can also be a sizeable amount, and should be taken into account when the church is calculating the pastor's salary each year.

The church is liable for pension fund contributions for the appointed clergy, as well as health insurance contributions for full and $\frac{3}{4}$ time clergy. As a general rule of thumb, the total cost of providing these required benefits will add an additional 30% to the

clergy salary package. Please do not forget about the need to account for these expenses when recommending your pastors' salary package each year.

If complaints arise regarding clergy or staff

One of the unfortunate realities that each PPRC or SPRC must face is possibility of complaints about the clergy or staff persons at a church. It is important when dealing with such matters that several issues be considered.

First, is the nature of the complaint alleging some form of serious misconduct? These would include significant moral failures or potential criminal activity. If this is the case, then the complaints must be investigated and acted upon promptly and thoroughly. Confidentiality should be respected, and also the presumption of innocence until a person is proven guilty. Still, an allegation of major misconduct cannot be taken lightly by the PPRC and its chair. It is also urged that in this event the district superintendent be notified right away. He or she can give advice as to how to proceed, and also will contact the bishop within an appropriate time frame.

The great majority of complaints against a pastor or staff member are not of such a nature, however. At times, members of the committee will be dealing with persons in the church who themselves exhibit a complaining nature, or have some sort of "ax to grind." This is to say that sometimes the source of the complaint needs to be considered. If the person who is taking issue with the pastor or staff member is widely known to be difficult to deal with, or the complaints are petty in nature, it may be the best thing to simply not pass them along.

If complaints are more widespread and seem to have substance, than a process to deal with them needs to be undertaken. This is especially true if persons who are respected as mature, committed Christians begin to have serious grievances surrounding the pastor, or staff person's, ministry. The first step in dealing with such is to recommend that the person with the complaint speak directly with the clergy or staff member. This is to avoid "triangulation," a practice that is very common (and unhealthy) in the church.

If several persons seem to raising a similar issue of complaint, then it may be appropriate for a small group of them to set up a meeting with the pastor. The chair of the PPRC may attend this meeting, during which time the air is cleared. If the issues raised appear to be serious, notes for future reference should be taken.

Occasionally, a pastor or staff member would be helped by the committee developing an action plan for different behavior. Rather than regarding such a practice as being threatening or demeaning, the pastor and committee can choose to view doing this as a way to help the pastor/staff to become more effective in ministry. Such plans should be specific in terms of the actions expected, be signed by the pastor or staff, and state for progress to be reviewed at a set time in the future.

The parsonage

Most full-time charges today still maintain a church-owned parsonage, though some are now paying the pastor a set housing allowance each year. It is important that the church seek to keep the parsonage in good repair and maintain it as a pleasant living place for the pastor and his/her family. The responsibility for the church parsonage does fall upon the local Board of Trustees, as it is property of the church. However, the PPRC should fully assume to be involved with the Trustees in the parsonage upkeep. A yearly walk-through, arranged with the pastor's family in advance, should be expected. This does not need to involve a large group. A delegation of two or three persons can conduct the walk-through, during which repairs and other maintenance needs will be identified. It is now the responsibility for each pastor to provide their own furnishings for the parsonage.

Communication with the district superintendent

The chair of the PPRC or SPRC is to be the church's spokesperson with the district superintendent, and no other layperson in the congregation. This includes the sharing of any serious complaint issues, or the opinion of the committee that it may be in the church or pastor's best interest for a change of leadership to take place. *It is to be assumed that such a desire will not be expressed until thorough and lengthy efforts have been undertaken between the committee and pastor to enable and strengthen their ministry.* The church leaders should prayerfully take the position of doing everything they can to help the pastor be effective and support their relationship with the congregation. A decision that it may be in everyone's interest for the pastor to be appointed elsewhere should not be presumed until great efforts have been made to work through any complaint issues in play. It should be known that the district

superintendent and bishop are not obligated to work out a pastor's change of appointment unless the PPRC is willing to put this request in writing.

There will come a time, though, for every pastor to believe that the Lord is calling them to a different field for ministry. This does not necessarily mean that there are serious problems in the church. It may just seem like the right time for the pastor and church to experience a change in leadership. When a new appointment for the pastor is being proposed by the bishop, the district superintendent will communicate with the chair of the PPRC. He or she will typically set up a meeting in which to discuss this prospect with the committee members. The present pastor will normally be a part of this gathering while their departure is being discussed. The pastor would be permitted to leave the meeting while the DS goes over future possibilities and gathers information from the committee. The DS will then seek to work with the bishop and other superintendents in securing the services of another qualified person to be appointed after the existing pastor moves. The DS will follow-up with the SPRC chair to inform the church about the new pastor who is coming to the charge.

Most pastoral appointments take place at Annual Conference, which is held at the end of May or beginning of June. It is common for the appointment process, therefore, to take place largely during the months of March and April. This is not always true, but is the most typical time frame. While Annual Conference will not take place until the very end of May, by the beginning of this month almost all pastoral appointments will have already been completed.