

BEST PRACTICES FOR VOCATIONAL SUPPORT

VOCATIONAL SUPPORT

Vocational support is designed to reduce isolation, honor the evolving call of the spirit, and provide for an ever-deepening relationship between the Committee on Ministry and those ministers who hold standing in that Association. The Committee on Ministry will provide opportunities for all authorized ministers to reflect on the ministry that they have been doing, to discern what God is calling them to do at this time, and to reflect on the gifts and graces that have served them well and those that need further development. *The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers* serve as the primary tool for these conversations.

The Manual on Ministry describes two categories of vocational support: Ongoing Peer Support and Periodic Vocational Support.

ONGOING PEER SUPPORT

The purpose of Ongoing Peer Support is to build relationships on a regular basis among those with standing in an Association or Conference. Committees on Ministry develop, host, or sponsor a variety of activities for Ongoing Peer Support. This may take the form of annual clergy retreats, a geographically-based ministerium, facilitator-led clergy communities of practice, ongoing gatherings of clergy by cohort (associate pastors, clergy under 40, clergy heading towards retirement, solo pastors of small membership churches, recently retired clergy, ministers in their first five years of ordained ministry, etc.), or other practices that bring clergy together.

A **clergy retreat** may focus on one section of the Marks, inviting deep reflection and conversation among participants. **Clergy communities of practice** may covenant to explore their ministries in the context of the Marks, critically reflecting on their habits, practices, and patterns in a group whose confidential setting provides for mutual vulnerability, support, and learning. An **Association ministerium** may gather monthly (perhaps over a shared meal) to discuss areas of mutual concern, provide an opportunity for members to share best practices or encourage theological reflection, and to offer prayer and support to one another. A **cohort group** provides the space for similarly-situated clergy to deepen their relationship as they focus on concerns specific to their context.

Ongoing Peer Support opportunities should be available throughout the year and participated in regularly. While such relationships tend to thrive best when there is an in-person component, Associations and ministers are encouraged to be creative in the use of technology to facilitate Ongoing Peer Support.

PERIODIC VOCATIONAL SUPPORT

The purpose of Periodic Vocational Support is to encourage the vocational development and ongoing discernment of those with standing. This meeting between a Committee on Ministry and persons with standing, held once every three to five years, also provides an opportunity to strengthen UCC covenantal relationships and to clarify the Association's expectations for ministerial standing, including any new requirements and opportunities to meet those requirements.

The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers serves as the primary tool for these conversations. The most common ways that Committees on Ministry meet to fulfill Periodic Vocational Support include:

- The full Committee on Ministry meets one-on-one with the minister;
- On-site meetings with representatives from the Committee on Ministry and those with standing;
- Gatherings of many ministers and the Committee on Ministry or its representatives;
- Retreats, hosted by the Association, for those with standing and attended by Committee on Ministry members.

As much as possible, Committees on Ministry should strive to meet in person with those with standing for Periodic Vocational Support, while also offering flexibility to those who hold standing in the Association but may not reside regularly in that Association (such as deployed military chaplains).

SAMPLE AGENDA FOR PERIODIC VOCATIONAL SUPPORT

An agenda for Periodic Vocational Support will vary greatly depending on the format of the conversation. The use of a portfolio and/or *Journaling the Journey* may help individuals and the Committee on Ministry focus on strengths, interests, passions, and areas of growth in light of the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers. Additionally, the use of *The Five Year Vocational Discernment Support Guide* (a separate Section 3 Resource) may be helpful for all those with standing. If the minister is expected to share materials in advance of their meeting with the Committee on Ministry, expectations about when and how this material is to be shared must be made clear to the minister in advance of the gathering.

No matter the format, Periodic Vocational Support should include the following components:

1. **Gathering and Sharing of Names and Ministries.**
2. **Prayer for Discernment.**
3. **Reflection or Sharing by the minister or ministers (if done in a group setting),** which may be rooted in one of the following practices:
 - Self-assessment of ministry based on a section of the Marks or a portfolio;
 - The Five S's of ministry – Successes, surprises, satisfactions, solutions, sadness;
 - Conversation on the following questions:
 - ▼ How does the individual view their spiritual and professional development?
 - ▼ In what types of continuing education has the individual participated and found meaningful?
 - ▼ Does the individual have regular and trusted sources of support and feedback?
 - ▼ How is the Local Church of membership providing support of the individual's continued development?
 - ▼ Does the individual have a sense of fulfillment in the current setting and in their overall vocation?
 - Five Year Vocational Discernment Support Guide;
 - Some other topic mutually agreed upon in advance.
4. **Reflection by the Committee on Ministry or its Representatives, including:**
 - *Discernment* – the Committee on Ministry or subcommittee listen and ask questions designed to go deeper into the topics explored;
 - *Affirmation* – the Committee or others speak to strengths and areas where the minister has grown over the past few years, highlighting areas of deepening skill, understanding, commitment, and/or passion;
 - *Growth* – Remembering that ministry is a lifelong vocation, the Committee on Ministry and the individual underscore areas of potential growth and brainstorm ways to support this growth.
5. **Prayer of Thanksgiving for God's Call and the Ministry of All God's People**
6. **Follow-Up**

If any follow-up is required, a plan of action may be developed between the individual and representatives of the Committee on Ministry.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR NEWLY-ORDAINED MINISTERS

Research indicates that a significant number of clergy leave the ministry within the first five years following ordination. Some focused attention to forming effective peer relationships and ongoing reflection on ministry can support ministers at the start of their vocational career. The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers provides a tool for assessment for Members in Discernment prior to ordination; a minister in their first five years of ministry is encouraged to do an annual review and update of their self-assessment on the Marks. This may be shared with leadership in the ministry setting. A Committee on Ministry should plan to meet with a newly-ordained minister for Periodic Vocational Support twice in the first five years post-ordination.

RESULTS OF PERIODIC VOCATIONAL SUPPORT

Periodic Vocational Support may result in one or more outcomes, including:

- Affirmation of particular strengths in ministry and recommendations for continued professional development;
- Acknowledgment of a person's vocational struggles and encouragement for specific areas for vocational growth and/or discernment;
- Encouragement for continued or improved care of self and personal relationships;
- Connection to peer groups and networks;
- Referrals for support resources appropriate to address difficult circumstances;
- A program of personal or vocational development that may be carried out in consultation with the Committee on the Ministry;
- Referral to a Situational Support Consultation.