

# SO MUCH BETTER

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## How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive

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The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) Peer Learning Project

Penny Long Marler ■ D. Bruce Roberts ■ Janet Maykus ■ James Bowers  
Larry Dill ■ Brenda K. Harewood ■ Richard Hester ■ Sheila Kirton-Robbins  
Marianne LaBarre ■ Lis Van Harten ■ Kelli Walker-Jones



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*This book is dedicated to Robert E. Reber,  
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# Editor's Foreword

## Inspiration and Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Christian Leaders

You have chosen wisely in deciding to study and learn from a book published in **The Columbia Partnership Leadership Series** with Chalice Press. We publish for

- Congregational leaders who desire to serve with greater faithfulness, effectiveness, and innovation.
- Christian ministers who seek to pursue and sustain excellence in ministry service.
- Members of congregations who desire to reach their full kingdom potential.
- Christian leaders who desire to use a coach approach in their ministry.
- Denominational and parachurch leaders who want to come alongside affiliated congregations in a servant leadership role.
- Consultants and coaches who desire to increase their learning concerning the congregations and Christian leaders they serve.

**The Columbia Partnership Leadership Series** is an inspiration- and wisdom-sharing vehicle of The Columbia Partnership, a community of Christian leaders who are seeking to transform the capacity of the North American church to pursue and sustain vital Christ-centered ministry. You can connect with us at [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org).

Primarily serving congregations, denominations, educational institutions, leadership development programs, and parachurch organizations, the Partnership also seeks to connect with individuals, businesses, and other organizations seeking a Christ-centered spiritual focus.

We welcome your comments on these books, and we welcome your suggestions for new subject areas and authors we ought to consider.

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## Foreword

For almost two decades, Lilly Endowment has focused its work in religion on efforts to strengthen pastoral leadership for Christian congregations. This commitment is based on the conviction that congregations play a central role in the lives of American Christians and that faithful and effective ministerial leaders are indispensable to vital congregational life. Our aim is to promote strong congregations by supporting the pastoral leaders who serve them.

When the Endowment launched the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) initiative in 2002, we had little idea of what to expect in terms of results or impact, or even what kinds of organizations would respond. Our request for proposals stated the Endowment's hopes for the initiative, as well as a few key convictions gleaned from our work over the years about what it takes to support pastoral leaders well:

Lilly Endowment is seeking to support a variety of programs. While we have no single model in mind, successful proposals will present leadership programs that reflect careful thinking about what sustained pastoral excellence means in our time and about how it can best be nurtured.

We are particularly interested in supporting programs that are shaped by pastoral experience and designed with and by pastors. Such programs will offer pastors opportunities to take a leading role in their own renewal experiences and to participate actively while sustaining the rhythm of their ongoing ministry.

While grants will not be limited to these examples, possible pastoral leadership programs might include:

- Opportunities for deep and sustained spiritual growth.

- Especially creative clergy renewal or study/leave programs.
- Ongoing peer study groups.
- Peer networks for prayer, theological study and supportive friendships.
- Sustained opportunities to reflect on and improve competence in the fundamental practices of ministry.
- Ongoing conversations between pastors and scholars about issues relevant to church life.
- Opportunities to participate in the worship life of other congregations.

Although no single program is likely to include all these features, Lilly Endowment hopes to encourage the creation or enhancement of pastoral leadership programs that enable pastors to take responsibility for their own ongoing renewal and provide more pastors with the types of opportunities listed above.

We are not inclined to support programs that present pastors with one-shot conferences or a series of unconnected events. Instead, we plan to encourage efforts to create environments for ongoing biblical study, theological reflection and spiritual renewal as well as the development of sustained friendships and mutual support among pastors.

The organizations that received grants in the SPE initiative in 2002 and 2003, along with scores of others who joined them in providing similar programs over the last decade, have taught us that these hopes and convictions for pastoral leaders were already shared by hundreds of organizations and their leaders nationwide. They already knew that congregational life and pastoral leadership are *so much better* when ministers are members of a community that is composed of competent fellow pastoral leaders who share the practice of ministry together.

We are delighted that the SPE movement has provided so many thousands of pastoral leaders the opportunity to find membership in communities of shared practice through peer learning groups. As the wonderful chapters in this book demonstrate, these communities of shared practice have not all been formed the same way, nor have they shepherded pastors into a single type of educational experience or subject matter. Rather, they share the original hopes and convictions of the SPE initiative—namely, that great pastoral leaders find “a still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31) when they learn that ministry is not and can never be practiced apart from a community where pastoral leaders support, pray, learn, share, and grow with one another.

Therefore, we hope that pastors and the leaders of organizations who care for them will read this fine book and be inspired to launch peer learning efforts of their own. Membership in these groups truly does make the ministry so much better.

Craig Dykstra  
*Senior Vice President*

John Wimmer  
*Program Director*

Religion Division  
*Lilly Endowment Inc.*  
*Indianapolis, Indiana*  
*May 2012*



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## INTRODUCTION

# **The Power and Promise of Pastoral Peer Learning**

This is the story of a movement: a new movement with ancient roots. It's the story of committed followers in a time of great change. They form intimate, covenant-based groups. They meet together regularly. They eat, pray, play, and travel together. They listen deeply and talk frankly. They take risks in the safety of their fellowship. They hold each other accountable, and they grow together in Spirit and truth. They love as they are loved. They are better ministers, community leaders, spouses, and parents—so much better.

This is the first serious examination of the power of pastoral peer learning. It asks important questions, including how many ministers regularly participate in a peer group and what difference pastoral peer learning makes in their lives and ministries. It provides promising answers. We know that about three-quarters of all ministers meet regularly in small groups for continuing education and support. They are better at balancing their personal and ministry responsibilities than pastors without peer group experience. They are more active in community outreach, as are the congregations they lead. The kind of shared leadership that they experience in peer groups is also reflected in their churches. And ministers with a history of peer group participation lead congregations that grow.

But if so many ministers are involved in peer groups and peer groups have these positive effects, why isn't religious life in the United States more vital? First, not all peer group experiences are equal. And whereas the urge to find support among other Christians is both natural in a post-Christian society and recommended from the example of a pre-Christian one, the

## 2 *So Much Better*

very stresses of these contexts make remedies difficult. Second, peer groups take time, although their effects can ripple quickly from pastoral leaders through present and future congregations and communities. So some peer group experience is better than none; certain kinds of peer learning separate those who merely survive from those who thrive; and pastoral peer learning has revolutionary potential.

**Peer groups help good pastors become better ones.**

What follows is a close look at pastoral peer learning, including its links to the first-century disciple model and twenty-first-century adult education. We share the results of two national surveys of pastoral leaders and a survey of several thousand ministers in peer group programs. All of this gives us confidence that peer groups do make a positive difference.

It is one thing to present numerical evidence and quite another to breathe life into statistical bones. At the book's heart are seven peer group models that include stories and examples from participants, families, and church members. Also featured is information about peer group recruitment, leadership, content, and structure. You will find practical advice about the cost, sustainability, and evaluation of peer groups.

We believe that testimony from pastoral leaders themselves is the best witness to the power of peer learning, and tested advice from real projects makes effective peer learning more than a promise.

### Who Should Read This Book and Why

- By all accounts you are a good pastor. You've always relished a challenge, which keeps you interested and engaged. If you were honest, though, you'd have to admit that you are increasingly insulated from the kind of creative struggle that once fed your spirit.
- You are a woman pastor in a smaller parish. You experience great satisfaction in your ministry. But sometimes you are lonely, although you don't like to admit it.
- You haven't been in ministry for a long time, and it's still pretty exhilarating. But it's hard to know where your ministry ends, your personal life begins, and your spiritual life fits.
- You are a minister in a rural area. You thrive in your close-knit community; you feel needed and loved. You believe that your congregation deserves your very best. But available continuing education is far away and seems irrelevant.
- You are a suburban pastor. You are very busy. You know that you need a break, but you wouldn't know what to do with idle time. If it were

possible for time away to be part of the expected and useful rhythm of ministry, then that might work.

- You are a denominational leader who is responsible for lifelong learning. Events with headliners attract fewer people and cost more, and conversations around meals or at breaks get the highest marks. You wonder how to harness that energy.
- You are a lay leader and love your church. You and your family admire and appreciate the ministry of gifted pastoral leaders. You are convinced that the well-being of a congregation is vitally connected to the well-being of the pastor.

A fundamental discovery is that peer groups are especially powerful for pastoral leaders who want to go to the next level in their ministries. They are good pastors, and they want to be better ones. They are not satisfied with the latest formula for success. They want to stretch their minds, fill their spirits, and engage their congregations in more faithful ways. These are the things that draw pastors to peer groups; they stay because of the relationships they develop with each other.<sup>1</sup>

So you should read this book if you desire a thriving pastoral ministry, whether you are a minister, an educator of ministers, or a layperson who supports clergy. Certainly, if you are currently involved in a pastoral peer group, you will find affirmation for what you are doing as well as inspiration for what you might do. We also believe that these insights, stories, and practical suggestions are useful for anyone interested in adult education, inside or outside a church-related setting.

If you are ready for peer learning, you must also be willing. We know that the costs of additional time in a crowded schedule must be balanced by expected rewards. So is peer group experience worth it? We've already hinted that it is, at least when comparing clergy who have that experience with those that don't. And if you read on, the scope of that difference will be clearer.

By way of encouragement, here's a brief summary of what thousands of pastors discovered together over the past decade. *At its very best*, learning in a peer group

- renews the call and a commitment to ministry;
- revitalizes the spirit, body, and mind;
- broadens a vision of God's world and our part (and partnerships) in it;
- provides courage and confidence to "dream new dreams" with others who have a stake in their realization;
- nurtures a deeper capacity to listen and respond with honesty and without defensiveness;
- increases appreciation for and enthusiasm about intentional and ongoing education;