

Penny Long Marler

on

Pastors Helping Each Other Thrive

By Tracy Schier



Readers of a certain age recall the song “People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.” Lilly Endowment’s Sustaining Pastoral Excellence (SPE) Peer Learning Project provides an ecclesial variation on that theme: “Pastors who need other pastors are the luckiest people....”

As part of Lilly Endowment’s ongoing emphasis on strengthening pastoral leadership, SPE began in 2002. Over more than a decade over 5000 pastoral leaders have participated in peer learning groups that assist ministers to experience mutual support, share prayer, engage in learning, and support one another in spiritual, intellectual and leadership growth. A total of 32 SPE projects received Lilly Endowment funding as part of this program.

Penny Long Marler, a professor of Religion at Samford University from 1993 to 2013, has had multiple roles with Lilly Endowment programs that facilitate professional and spiritual growth among congregational leaders. She served on the Board of the Lilly Network of Christian Universities and Church-Related Colleges and was Samford’s faculty representative to that group for 17 years. She authored the original grant narrative for Samford’s SPE project, the Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence (RCPE), served as its first director and afterward as grant and research coordinator. Currently, Marler is Research Fellow at the RCPE. She is lead editor and one of eleven authors of the book *So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive* (Chalice Press, 2013). Co-authoring with Marler are D. Bruce Roberts, Janet Maykus, James Bowers, Larry Dill, Brenda K.

Harewood, Richard Hester, Sheila Kirton-Robbins, Marianne LaBarre, Lis Van Harten and Kelli Walker-Jones.

SPE programs profiled in *So Much Better* include the Institute of Clergy Excellence in Huntsville, AL; College of Pastoral Leaders at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas; the Pentecostal Theological Seminary of the Church of God in Cleveland, TN; the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention in Washington, DC; The Christian Reformed Church in North America in Grand Rapids, MI; Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry in Seattle, WA; and the Triangle Pastoral Counseling Center in Raleigh, NC.

The authors explain in the book's introduction that this is "the first serious examination of the power of pastoral peer learning." Some 75% of ministers meet regularly in small groups for continuing education and mutual support. The authors look back to Jesus as a model facilitator and how his small group of disciples related to one another and to him. Two millennia later, that model initiated by Jesus is found in pastoral groups that

- “1. gather around their calling;
2. make an intentional covenant for spiritual support, theological challenge, and mutual accountability;
3. spend time with one another in prayer, at meals, and through travel; and
4. take what (and how) they've learned into their ministries.”

This type of peer learning, the authors tell us, is sacred practice. They also say that “Adult learners are their own best teachers, and the world is their best classroom.” Further, adult learners have deep appreciation for the lived experience of others.

This conversation is edited.

Q: Are there learnings from all of the SPE programs that could or should go back to seminaries?

Marler: Certainly, for continuing theological education this information is critical because it provides strong evidence that pastoral peer learning produces positive consequences for pastoral leaders and congregations. The research that has accompanied these programs provides information about key ingredients for successful peer learning in small clergy groups in general as well as what differentially attracts, holds, and results in positive benefits for men versus women, homogeneous groups vs. heterogeneous groups, and early career clergy versus later career clergy.

There is widespread agreement among over 2500 SPE participants that this kind of learning is so much better than conference-and-a-notebook continuing education. For clergy in training, knowledge of and experience with what Larry Dill calls a “radical agency” model that includes a facilitator and group-determined membership, curriculum, structure, and process should be helpful to lay the groundwork for peer learning as a natural and expected habit for ministry.

It is important to understand the difference between pedagogy and andragogy. We explain in the book’s introduction that most people think of learning as an experience in formal classrooms. The term “pedagogy” comes from the Greek concept of leading a child. We use the term andragogy (originally from Malcolm Knowles) to identify how adult learning happens. There are differences between the ways that children and adults approach learning. Children need to know what they need to know and adults, on the other hand, need to know why they need to know. We tell our readers that adult learning is about mutuality more than hierarchy and when adults can collaborate about how and what they learn, their motivation and payoffs are greater.

We caution, however, that just because adults have a larger reservoir of experience and wider contexts than do young learners, it does not mean that adults have all the knowledge, imagination, and resources required to meet their most pressing needs. Sometimes it is difficult even for adults to articulate what they want or need, and that is why peers, facilitators, and coaches can be an important part of adult learning. They appreciate learning from the experience of other adults.

Q: Do you think what you have learned is getting back to seminaries and judicatories?

Marler: We have consistently disseminated the information from our research since the beginning of our data-gathering. From 2008 through 2010, a dedicated web page at Austin Presbyterian Seminary’s College of Pastoral Leaders included ongoing findings from focus groups and surveys.

The results of three national surveys (one, of SPE participants and the others, of clergy leaders in the U.S.) were analyzed and the results presented at a gathering in Indianapolis in 2010 of all SPE projects. This meeting included seminaries and divinity schools, judicatories, retreat centers, and independent clergy support organizations.

Written reports were disseminated to all SPE project directors and presentations were made to several groups of seminary administrators at two Association of Theological Schools (ATS) biennial gatherings.

An ATS-related gathering in 2008 focused on the results of our peer learning research. In addition, our work was the theme of the Society for the Advancement of Continuing Education in Ministry's annual meeting in 2010.

Study findings were posted on the Duke SPE project website and the Chalice *So Much Better* web page. That report is still available as a free download (<http://www.chalicepress.com/assets/pdfs/SPEFinalSurveyReport.pdf>).

We also have offered workshops, written essays, and given interviews to various on-line and print publications on the findings from the research.

Finally, the Pastor Enrichment Network (PEN) has consistently featured the book, the research results, as well as interviews and blogs. At least one co-author, James Bowers, has packaged the book with other materials for establishing Pastor Covenant Groups, pioneered by the Church of God in Cleveland, Tennessee.

Q: Talk about the necessity of a pastor's congregation being involved/giving encouragement.

Marler: We know from the research that congregations offering funds for and/or requiring continuing education for their clergy are significantly more likely to have pastoral leaders involved in peer learning. Pastoral leaders who are active in peer learning influence their congregations so that laity are more actively involved in their congregations and in their communities, and they support clergy continuing education.

There is a real ripple effect that is empirically substantiated by the research: congregations promote peer learning, pastors participate, pastors move to other contexts with these habits and influence new congregations that may or may not already value such clergy practice.

Q: What differences show up between male and female pastors involved in the programs?

Marler: There are socio-demographic and lifestyle differences between women and men clergy in our sample. More women are single, spend more time on the Internet, and are more isolated in their jobs. They also report what some scholars call a "triple time bind" — they work, are responsible for household chores, and travel further to and from their jobs. Not surprisingly, these kinds of differences are reflected in why they join peer groups — and what kind of peer groups they join.

Female pastoral leaders are more likely to join groups because they are isolated in their ministry, either geographically and/or by virtue of being a minority in their denomination.

They are less likely than male clergy to report that their families are involved in their peer group. More women clergy are single or have spouses who also work and/or are empty-nested. In fact, because female ministers are a minority in many denominations, it is not surprising that they are more likely to join peer groups that are interdenominational or interfaith.

Male pastoral leaders are more likely to be involved with peer groups that have a prescribed process or curriculum as well as are denominational. They are also more likely to be interested in Scriptural study. Women are more likely to participate in spiritual disciplines as a part of their peer group experience. They are also more likely than men to express spirituality in their peer groups through means such as art, music, drama or literature. More than their male counterparts, women report that their peer group helped broaden their worldview — diversity in their peer group has a lot to do with this — and interestingly helped them to be better listeners.

Q: What ethnic differences might show up?

Marler: Only seven percent of the SPE peer group participants we surveyed were African American and three percent Hispanic. Analysis does not reveal significant difference by race, but this could be an artifact of the sample size. We did oversample racial/ethnic groups in the qualitative part of the research. Three groups were distinctive in their racial/ethnic diversity. The Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention in Washington, D.C. was African-American with age, gender, and denominational diversity; the Church of God, Cleveland was diverse by age and race/ethnicity; and Austin Presbyterian's College of Pastoral Leaders included an unusual proportion of Hispanic clergy groups.

Based on focus groups and interviews in these programs, no significant differences were observed in terms of positive outcomes. As with overall survey findings, however, diversity within a group is consistently associated with the best outcomes. Denominational diversity is particularly related to superior peer group experiences both spiritually and practically. And to some extent, of course, denominational diversity is correlated with racial/ethnic diversity.

Q: What did you see when you compare young pastors with older pastors?

Marler: For younger pastoral leaders who sometimes don't know how to balance professional responsibilities with personal relationships and needs, a peer group that has a pastor mentor, is unstructured, involves their families as a part of the initial group

covenant and/or as a part of group activities and is focused on spiritual development is recommended. Such peer groups may be denominational or interdenominational.

For older clergy who need a creativity boost, a peer group that has a skilled facilitator, allows for the radical agency of participants, is interdenominational or interfaith, focuses on intellectual challenge as a vehicle for ministry improvement, and includes some travel, is likely to be just the ticket.

Q: Can we say that seminaries and judicatories have fallen short?

Marler: We know from the survey that peer groups that are denominationally-determined with little input from participants are not very attractive nor associated with positive outcomes. So in this sense, judicatories or even seminaries that create groups for their own purposes and/or provide mostly institutionally-determined content or process that is delivered by an “expert” in a didactic way are less likely to be successful.

The peer groups highlighted in the book, on the other hand, all include a large amount of member participation and decision-making, even programs with more structure like the Church of God, Cleveland and Seattle University.

Participants stress the importance of the joint wisdom and mutual accountability of a peer group for positive personal and professional benefits. This differs, they say, from their experiences in seminary where professors largely delivered content and either have or had less contact with or make little helpful connection to the day-to-day challenges of congregational ministry. An approach that may work, or even be necessary depending on subject matter, in a seminary context continues to be uncritically valued and uniformly employed for all theological education. Many seminary students want to be a professor or a preacher or a prophet — a “sage on the stage” — in every educational circumstance rather than experiment with (or bless) educational alternatives that utilize or develop roles such as enabler or shepherd.

One of the positive outcomes of the kinds of peer groups the SPE initiative formed is an appreciation for what James Bowers calls “facilitative leadership” which involves nonjudgmental listening, mutual accountability and joint discernment. It is the kind of process leadership that peer groups with trained facilitators tend to model. It is also the kind of educational approach that is fruitfully included with more traditional pedagogy in the Masters of Theology and Ministry program at Seattle University where all students are assigned intentionally to diverse peer groups who share leadership using Shalem’s spiritual direction process. Evaluation shows that this small group experience helps students better integrate classroom learning into their personal and professional lives and ministries.

Q: Are there any striking denominational differences in outcomes?

Marler: The seven peer group models in the book are denominationally different: they include programs offered by United Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic institutions. And the way that each program balances freedom and discipline, the strange and the familiar, and the inside and outside of group life may be traced in part to these diverse heritages.

What is perhaps most striking are the similarities among our models — especially in terms of outcomes. They start from different places but they share a destination, so it is not surprising that the ways they get there are so similar. They are all committed to the goals and much of the methodology of andragogy as distinct from pedagogy. When you read the testimonies from peer group members at the end of each chapter it is very much an echo chamber.

Q: The title of the book indicates efforts to help pastors thrive. Do some need help just to survive?

Marler: Many participants in our groups might say that they were just surviving in some area of their personal and professional lives, but that their group experience helped them to find hidden or unnamed strengths. Other participants who entered a peer group with a sense of relative strength experienced major setbacks along the way and the group “carried” them for a time until they were back on their feet — and that could be financially, professionally, spiritually and/or emotionally. So it is a complicated reality, but the goal of these groups is stimulating health rather than treating illness.

The Lilly initiative that provided generous funding for all of our work was intentionally titled “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence.” From the beginning, the Endowment encouraged participant projects to focus on helping good pastors to be better ones as opposed to helping flailing (or failing) ministers get back on their feet. So the initiative is a preventive one aimed at keeping pastoral leaders healthy and growing rather than focusing on stalling and stagnation.

Much of this is a matter of perspective, and in my opinion pastoral survival and excellence are not two points at disparate ends of a single pastoral health continuum. Clergy and their congregations are dynamic and organic: sometimes pressures for economic survival coexist with circumstances of personal strength, and sometimes circumstances of personal stress are coterminous with congregational stability. It is never all black or white.

A small group helps pastors learn to negotiate different “seasons” which are extra-personal, time-related, and largely dependent on external forces. Such groups also help ministers negotiate different “spheres” that are intra or interpersonal, interpretive, and overlapping and include the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, physical, professional

and financial. Negotiating all of this is part of the gift of a small group of peers who know what another is going through even if he/she is not in the same place. The group supports and holds the pastoral leader accountable.

Q: What could seminaries do for alumni/ae that would fit into this project?

Marler: They can experiment with continuing education that takes the form of intentional peer learning groups. Incentivize the experience in creative ways;

- use continuing education program money for small grants that peer group members must match with funds from their own continuing education funds;
- provide some recognized certification or denominationally required continuing education units for participation in a small group;
- and ask extant small groups to generate ideas for one day retreats or workshops where all peer group participants in a program can gather to share insights, celebrate worship and participate in a focused educational experience on a topic of common interest.

From an organizational perspective, alumni/ae officers could form an intentional small group of diverse alumni/ae for the purpose of studying the impact of peer learning and coming up with actionable ideas for new ways of doing continuing education going forward. In other words, use the method to inform curricular ideas for the future.

Q: When programs are over do the pastors attempt to reconstruct the experiences with pastors in their own areas?

Marler: The short answer is yes, and it depends. In our survey of more than 2500 SPE peer group participants, 75% continued to meet together, some with the support of the sponsoring organization and others without it. Only 25% ended their participation in their SPE small group. SPE projects had term limits for small groups from one to three years with the average being two years. Several programs provided additional funding, often reduced, for groups to continue to meet.

Responses from peer group members themselves indicate that the small group model is one that they either continued in some way, shape or form (sometimes with new members) or that they replicated in their own congregations with other staff or laity, or that they replicated with pastoral leaders in their local communities. This was especially true if their original SPE group was geographically dispersed.

Q: Does the ecumenical/interfaith understanding that the pastors experience translate back to how they encourage the same in their congregations?

Marler: Again, the short answer is yes, and it depends. Not all SPE groups or models that we feature in the book are interdenominational or interfaith. In fact, the SPE peer group participant survey found that only 37% of respondents were in peer groups that were interdenominational or interfaith. Still, analysis of the data shows that involvement in such mixed groups provides a superior experience.

Stories from pastoral leaders involved in interdenominational or interfaith groups almost unanimously emphasize the translation of their growth in understanding into their way of doing church with positive results. One of the book's chapters features a particularly poignant story of a Protestant and Roman Catholic group member, their initial antipathy, growing friendship, and eventual pulpit exchange.

Q: Do pastors who have gone through these programs go on to mentor — or at least share their experiences — with younger clergy/pastors?

Marler: Once again, the short answer is yes, and it depends. Some programs are intentional about including younger and more seasoned pastoral leaders in a peer group. In general, clergy who participate in peer groups tend to encourage others to become a pastor, priest, or minister. Eighty-one percent of respondents to the SPE peer group survey reported that they had done so in the past two to three years. Remarkably, over 60% said that they had encouraged two or more persons.

Q: What are the greatest lessons SPE pastors can teach to new ministers?

Marler: Two of the lessons I have heard mentioned are the value of a peer group for safety and accountability and the importance of balancing one's professional and personal life.

Q: What surprises have you had during your extensive involvement with these programs?

Marler: First, that there are indeed many roads to Rome — in other words, many ways to do peer learning in small groups with equal success. Our featured models

included leaderless groups and trained facilitators or pastor mentors; a prescribed structure or process and entirely group-determined structures or processes; self-selected members and appointed ones; and content with a specific focus like spiritual direction, pastoral leadership, or cross-cultural immersion and content that ranged widely (and creatively) depending upon the interests and resources of the group. Some peer groups were diverse, denominationally, racially and ethnically, and in terms of gender or age, while others were more homogeneous. What all shared was a group covenant or mutually-agreed upon learning plan which guided their work together as well as (as I have emphasized) a large amount of group-determined decision-making.

Second, having a pastoral leader with a history of experience in a peer group, especially six or more years of experience, is the fourth strongest predictor of congregational growth in a congregation. Further, having a pastoral leader whose peer group has a trained facilitator or a prescribed curriculum is the sixth strongest predictor of numerical congregational growth.

That peer group experiences would figure in so strongly in a multivariate analysis of growth was a complete and pleasant surprise to us. As such, this speaks to the power of peer group experience for a pastoral leader's attractiveness to congregations that are already growing numerically. And it speaks to a pastor's ability to lead or to continue to lead a congregation toward growth. And finally, I think we were surprised and gratified that SPE peer group participants would be so strongly positive about their experience.

Editor's note: The following are some websites that elaborate about individual SPE projects in detail:

*PEN (Pastoral Enrichment Network), www.cpx.cts.edu/network

Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, Pastoral Enrichment Network,
www.alsbom.org

Resource Center for Pastoral Excellence, www.samford.edu/rcpe

American Baptist Churches USA, Together in Ministry, www.ministerscouncil.com

Association for Hispanic Theological Education (AETH), *Tertulias Pastorales*,
www.aeth.org

*Austin Presbyterian Seminary, College of Pastoral Leaders,
www.austinseminary.edu/cpl

Bethany Seminary, Brethren Academy for Ministerial Leadership,
www.bethanyseminary.edu/academy

Center for Ministry, Shepherd's Sabbath, www.centerforministry.com

*Christian Reformed Church in North America, Creating a Culture of Pastoral Excellence, www.crcna.org/pastoralexcellence

Church Resource Ministries, Pastors' Network, www.crmleaders.org

Columbia Theological Seminary, Sabbath, Study and Service (S3),
www.ctsnet.edu/LL/S3.aspx (THIS LINK DOESN'T WORK.) Alternatives:
<http://www.ctsnet.edu/sabbath-study-service> and
<http://www.ctsnet.edu/files/forms/S3%20brochure%20Final.pdf>

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Initiative for Ministerial Excellence,
www.thefellowship.info

Cornerstone Church Network, Master's Groups, www.cnetonline.org (THIS LINK DOESN'T WORK) Alternative: <http://www.cornerstonepastorsnetwork.org/masters-group/>

Green Lake Conference Center, Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership,
www.cecl.glcc.org

*Institute for Clergy Excellence, Peer Learning Groups, www.theice.us

*Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Missionary Convention, Pastoral Excellence Program,
www.lottcarey.org

Loyola University Chicago and the Archdiocese of Chicago, INSPIRE,
www.inspireproject.org

Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, Pastoral Excellence Program, www.macucc.org

North American Church of God, Sustaining Health and Pastoral Excellence (SHAPE),
www.chog.org/shape

Reformed Church in America, Renewed Leadership for a Revitalized Church,
www.rca.org

Saint John's School of Theology, *Conversatio*, www.csbsju.edu

Samaritan Counseling Center of Albuquerque, Called Back to the Well,
www.calledbacktothewell.org

Samaritan Counseling Center of Birmingham, Pastor As Shepherd,
www.samaritancc.org

*Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry, Pastoral Leadership Program,
www.seattleu.edu/stm/plp.aspx (THIS PAGE DOES NOT EXIST) Alternative:
<http://www.seattleu.edu/stm/certificates/pastoral-leadership/>

Texas Methodist Foundation, Institute for Clergy and Congregational Excellence,
www.tmfminstitute.org

The Pastors Roundtable, www.thepastorsroundtable.org

Western Theological Seminary, Journey Groups,
<http://www.westernsem.edu/journey/journey-groups/>