Continuous Professional Development Guidelines for Clergy

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Developed by Leadership Development Commission Sub-Committee: John Hudson, Terry Martinson, Bruce MacCullagh, Larry Adkins, Bob Livingston, Cal Mutti; Ann Plumley providing staff assistance.

Continuous Professional Development Guidelines for Clergy - Rationale

Continuous professional development is essential for all clergy. The Leadership Development Commission of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ makes this assertion because the practices of ministerial leadership are changing rapidly – demographics are shifting in our ministerial settings; the missions God calls us to are challenging; the social, political, and environmental settings within which we minister are confoundingly complex. We believe God is Still Speaking, and that there is always more to learn about God, God’s call on our hearts, and God’s plans for achieving God’s kingdom on earth.

Clergypersons learn and grow in faith and in leadership skills in many ways, of course, but chief among them are intentional study of our faith traditions, challenging give-and-take with colleagues in ministry, and careful examination in concert with leaders of our congregations about what together they need to learn to grow towards God’s vision of peace with justice. While solitary study and prayer are foundational, we know robust engagement with others is also essential to learning. We walk together in covenant with God, clergy colleagues, our own local churches and other ministry sites because it is through the gifts God has granted others that our own gifts are called forth most effectively and faithfully. We are listening to, and growing in faith with God – together.

The Leadership Development Commission of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ presents Continuous Professional Development Guidelines for Clergy to stimulate discussion among clergy, local church leadership and Church and Ministry Committees about living into a culture throughout the Conference that overtly, conscientiously and faithfully supports growth in ministry for the up-building of God’s Kingdom. These guidelines support growth in leadership and pastoral skills in those whom God and we have called to authorized ministry in the United Church of Christ. The Leadership Development Commission recognizes that circumstances, needs and resources vary among our local churches and other sites of authorized ministry. We encourage thoughtful and creative examination of these guidelines, followed by conscientious and tenacious work towards
implementing them in spirit and in fact for the sake of the vitality of our local churches and the Church we love.

**What characterizes a “Continuous Professional Development Plan” for Clergy?**

A well-constructed plan for Continuous Professional Development will have several characteristics:

- **Well, first, it will be ON-GOING.** This connotes intentionality, and involves periodically stepping back to ask questions like:
  - What do I need to know or to know how to do?
  - Where are the chafe points in our ministry together?
  - As an ordained leader in this setting, what am I avoiding for fear of failure?
  - Where are my ministerial leadership skills or knowledge tired, habitual or shallow?

- **It will be BALANCED.** This means that, over time, attention will be paid to:
  - **PRACTICAL LEARNING,** studying new resources to incorporate fresh perspectives on stewardship, or exploring narrative preaching styles, for instance. This should involve reading beyond what is required for sermon preparation; selecting specific areas in which lay and clergy teams need to bolster their skills and experiment with new approaches to perennial challenges; and looking to the gifts of the next generation of leaders in a particular ministry to examine where their strengths can be bolstered and their blind spots addressed. A clergyperson recently characterized this type of professional development as, “a trip to the tool shed.”
  - Some segment of professional development will be FUTURE ORIENTED, discerning the wider scope of change and the overarching call that God is presenting in your ministerial setting. Perhaps the demographics of your town have changed greatly in the past decade, for example. Or, through involvement with ecumenical partners, perhaps you come to realize that missional work is taking on a radically new focus in your setting. Perhaps with other clergy, often with lay leadership teams, spending some time on “the mountaintop” is an essential part of clergy professional development.
  - **RENEWING** activities comprise the third component of a balanced continuous professional development plan for clergy. Periodic, intentional time with God who is the source...
of all we have and are, sustains clergypersons in times of difficulty, change and joy. Selecting from and modeling the incorporation of retreat, contemplative prayer, spiritual direction, silence, Sabbath, fasting and other ancient Christian spiritual practices into your busy life gives hope to others, and gives life to you and to your relationship with God. Go “to the well”, and drink deeply.

Finally, a well-constructed continuous professional development plan will be ACCOUNTABLE. Learning and professional development doesn’t happen in a vacuum. Accountability involves talking with lay leaders in your setting about what you are learning and why, and listening to their suggestions and reactions. Committees on Ministry are increasingly attentive to clergy professional development issues, seeing this as a key path toward health, fitness and faithfulness in local church leadership. They are, therefore, increasingly likely to include discussion of your professional development activities and plans in informational and periodic reviews.

### How might one go about developing a Continuous Professional Development plan?

A thorough continuous professional development plan is cyclical in nature, moving intentionally through the stages of:

**Assessment:** Discerning what you need to learn now, and for the future;

**Investigation:** Researching where you can find effective resources, mentors and experiences to meet your current needs and those of the setting you serve as well as those you see in the future, though through a mirror dimly;

**Investment:** Gathering the support of the local church leadership, making plans for pastoral coverage in your absence, and committing to doing pre-reading, journaling and other preparation steps that foster deeper learning. This also includes active participation while in the learning environment: turn off your cell phone; put thoughts of the emails accumulating in your inbox aside so you can be truly present; rest in the arms of assurance that the coverage plans you and your lay leadership team put in place are, in fact, in place.

**Integration:** Through application in the place of ministry you serve, assess whether you learned what you expected to learn, and if not what other avenues are open to you? Did you learn something unexpected? How can these new learnings be supported in your ministerial setting, so
they don’t evaporate? Which lay leaders need to know more about this subject, and how do you bring them into the loop?

**Reflection**: What is God saying to you through this experience? What does this mean for the ministry setting you serve? What’s next, God?

How can church leaders and clergy work together toward a more comprehensive, faithful and challenging Continuous Professional Development plan for clergy?

**Communication**: Discuss the priorities of this ministerial setting. Where is God calling the ministry we share?

**Support**: Monitor mixed messages – professional development is not time off, vacation or a nice option if it happens to be a year when the budget is balanced. It is an essential part of vital leadership. Understanding what it costs – and its far-reaching benefits – is a key element to the whole congregation’s understanding of pastoral leadership and covenantal ministry;

**Invite participation**: Engage in team learning, discerning together what needs to be explored, changed and learned;

**Creativity**: Recognize both the direct and indirect costs of continuous professional development. Ideas to mitigate these barriers to ongoing professional development for clergy include: negotiating coverage swaps; providing union services; inviting seminarians, retired clergy, professors, and lay teams to plan and lead worship services; inviting judicatory and ‘specialist’ worship leadership i.e. your Associate Conference Minister, a member of the MACUCC program team staff, the Just Peace Players, etc. to plan and lead services.

**Think incrementally**: Take a few steps in the direction towards the model outlined in these Guidelines. With your lay leadership team, covenant to work towards this vision of continuous learning for clergy. Put into motion a 3-5 year plan to incorporate continuous professional development money and sabbatical savings accounts into your local church budget. Use this time also to broaden the congregation’s expectations for clergy professional development and to expand lay leadership understanding of the benefits and importance of this practice for them, personally, for the local church and for the clergyperson called to serve this setting.
What are the MACUCC guidelines for Continuous Professional Development?

**Continuously:**
- Receive collegial mentoring or supervision for your ministry. This can take many forms: Spiritual Direction, participation in a Clergy Community of Practice; a covenant group among ecumenical partners, etc.

**Annually:**
- Take a minimum of 2 weeks intentional time away from daily ministerial tasks focused specifically on **PRACTICAL, FUTURE ORIENTED** and **RENEWING** professional development activities as outlined on page 2.
- Spend an additional 5-8 days per year with lay leaders, committees, teams or task forces of the local church engaged in team learning. This could take many forms. Some examples are:
  - A retreat within a local church;
  - A gathering of churches in your Association facing similar missional changes; or
  - Preparing for, attending, and then debriefing and applying learnings from a developmental program sponsored by the Conference, a seminary or other source of programming.

  This is a powerful step towards building the recognition among all the baptized of the importance of learning for faithful living and leadership.
- Participate in at least one dimension of the wider church.
  - Maintain covenantal relationships by attending Association meetings and though service on an Association committee, attending the MACUCC Annual Meeting, and / or serving on Conference commissions and task forces.
  - Additionally, the ad hoc and standing committees of our national setting, the many local seminaries, and regional entities like the Committee on Theological Education of New England, the New England Association of United Church Educators, and the Massachusetts Council of Churches all provide rich opportunities for generating new perspectives, connections and learning that serve to foster clergy professional development.
- Participate in a Periodic Support Consultation with your Association Committee on the Ministry. During this meeting, review of the health of your current call, your work / life balance, your sense of where God is leading you and the ministry you currently serve, as well as specifics of how you have learned and grown in the past year and the development plans you and your local church leaders have for the coming year.
Every 5-7 years: Sabbatical

For years, the UCC Manual on Ministry and MACUCC compensation guidelines have strongly recommended that both pastors and churches take action to enable pastoral sabbaticals every 5-7 years. We know through recent research and overwhelming anecdotal reports of the enormous value – to both the local church AND to the clergyperson – of a thoughtfully planned and challenging respite from “church as usual”. Among the benefits are revitalization of both clergy leadership and congregations and valuable perspectives that cannot be gained in shorter sprints of learning. The MACUCC Guidelines for Continuous Professional Development emphatically reiterates these long-standing recommendations, and adds the following suggestions to enable this healthy practice:

- Include in the church budget 1/5 of the expected expense of a 3-6 month sabbatical leave expense each year;
- Determine well in advance the theme or intent of the sabbatical;
- Enlist the prayers, thinking and assistance of congregational leaders in preparing the congregation for its own sabbatical time – what will the congregation learn during this important interlude?
- Re-enter well. Communicate broadly about your new understandings; listen carefully to the experiences of the congregation and the sabbatical supply pastor; discern together the implications for your shared ministry;
- Celebrate your refreshed covenant and the new directions in which God is calling you.

More information on sabbatical planning can be obtained from the Pastoral Excellence Program team members and web site.

So, why does the Leadership Development Commission think we need to do this?

The UCC is justly famous for soft verbs like suggest and recommend, so there isn’t a person, function or entity in the Massachusetts Conference that will “make” any clergy person or local church implement these guidelines. Yet, our prayers for vital congregational life and embodiment of the ministry of all the baptized would seem to compel continuous learning. As this is true for laity, it is true in important ways for clergy. God is too big to learn in seminary and the way we have been “doing” church is not necessarily the way church could or should be “done” in the future. Thanks be to God for the challenges and excitement and promise that is before us! The Leadership Development Commission of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ urges all authorized clergypersons and each local church to prayerfully examine...
how continuing professional development is currently supported in their setting, and to covenant together towards implementing these Guidelines as near as God shall provide.