

## **BEST PRACTICES PERIODIC VOCATIONAL SUPPORT**

### **Purpose of Periodic Vocational Support**

The purpose of a Periodic Vocational Support conversation as described in the Manual on Ministry Section 2:6 “Accountability and Support” is to encourage the vocational development and ongoing discernment of authorized ministers by engaging one-on-one with members of the Committee on Ministry. This conversation also provides an opportunity to strengthen covenantal relationships and to clarify the Association’s expectations for ministerial standing. Periodic Vocational Support is not intended to address fitness concerns.

As Committees on Ministry adopt or renew this practice, authorized ministers may have questions and even concerns about this expectation. Over time, with care and persistence on the part of the Committee, Periodic Vocational Support conversations can become a welcome opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the Committee on Ministry and authorized ministers as well as to offer support and resources. If resistance to this practice by ministers is encountered, this may indicate a fraying in the current covenant between clergy and the Association, and may confirm the value of regular, supportive contact between clergy and the Committee on Ministry. Supportive conversations that demonstrate care, clarify covenantal expectations, focus on the needs, struggles, and joys of the minister, and offer an opportunity to express gratitude for their unique gifts for ministry and contributions to the United Church of Christ are opportunities to build trust, strengthen covenantal relationships, and reduce the isolation that many authorized ministers experience.

### **Periodic Vocational Support Conversation Recommendations**

- If Periodic Vocational Support conversations are a new practice for a Committee on Ministry, it is advisable to send a letter to all clergy explaining clearly what it is and is not, the format and scheduling plan, the expectations for clergy participation, any expectations of written reflection, and any other pertinent details. If such conversations are a requirement to maintain standing, clarify this expectation in all written documents to reduce confusion.
- Scheduling a regular rotation of all authorized ministers to have a Periodic Vocational Support conversation every 3-5 years is advised. The task of organizing, scheduling, and maintaining the schedule, and documenting completed Periodic

Vocational Support conversations may be assigned to a member of the Committee on Ministry. Careful and consistent record keeping is another essential way to build trust with clergy.

- When scheduling a Periodic Vocational Support conversation with a minister, there are a variety of options. Some Committees on Ministry prefer to meet in person, scheduling a regular day and place for such meetings. Others use a virtual platform such as Zoom and schedule at the convenience of the Committee on Ministry members and minister. Some Committees give the ministers an option of how they would like to meet.
- It is preferable that at least two members of the Committee on Ministry meet with the minister.
- When the minister is contacted to set up the Periodic Vocational Support conversation through email or phone call, the scheduler clarifies with the minister the purpose of the meeting, who will be there, the place and time, and the expectations for the minister and the Committee on Ministry representatives before, during and after the meeting.
- A short (1-2 page) written reflection may be requested of the minister in advance of the meeting to provide context for the Periodic Vocational Support conversation and to offer the minister some reflection time in preparation for the time together. These or other questions/prompts might be offered for their reflection as they reflect on the last 3-5 years of ministry:
  - *How would you describe your vocational discernment journey at this moment in your life?*
  - *What makes authorized ministry the best way to live out this call?*
  - *What surprises have you encountered as you have sought to live into God's call?*
  - *What do you want to celebrate about your ministry?*
  - *What are your sources of support in your ministry?*
  - *What are some areas of new exploration or desired change?*
  - *Using the Marks for Faithful and Effective Ministry as your discernment tool, which Marks do you think are strengths at this moment in your life and which ones are areas for growth or focused development?*
  - *Reflect on the Ministerial Code of Ethics: what stands out for you at this moment in your ministry?*

- *Review your written Three – Four- or more- Way Covenant prior to the meeting. Does it need updating? If you don't have a written Covenant, plan to have a conversation about this.*
- It is recommended to use the Marks for Faithful and Effective Ministers and the current Ministerial Code of Ethics as sources for reflection in the Periodic Vocational Support conversations. Many ministers are unfamiliar with the Marks because they were authorized prior to their use. A Periodic vocational Support conversation provides a rich opportunity to introduce the Marks as a tool for discernment and vocational growth. For example, the Marks might be useful for exploring new areas of continuing education in the coming years or inspire the focus for the next sabbatical. Providing copies of the Marks and the UCC Ministerial Code prior to the meeting is advised.
- An hour is recommended for the Periodic Vocational Support conversation. However, if the minister expresses additional need for support or consultation, the meeting may be scheduled for a longer period of time, an additional meeting may be scheduled, or Committee on Ministry members may offer to connect the minister with other resources or support that can be of help to them. Make a plan with the minister for any follow-up and make sure the Committee on Ministry members follow through on the plan.
- Committee on Ministry members are to be active listeners and ask questions that invite further reflection and discernment on the part of the minister. Be thoughtful and spare in advice-giving. Ask if further resources would be helpful. With permission of the minister and others, there may be opportunity to connect clergy with others in their region who have common interests or needs. However, permission should be granted explicitly to share information and to make connections beyond the Committee on Ministry.
- Should concern about the minister's well-being or potential risk for a fitness concern arise, the Committee on Ministry representatives must consult with Conference/Association staff person for further resources and follow up. Early intervention, resources, support, and timely follow up are important ways to avoid possible harm to self or others. Whenever such a concern emerges, faithful and clear communication between Committee on Ministry members and staff is of vital importance.

- Allow some time in this meeting to review the requirements to maintain ministerial standing. This is a good time to answer questions, clarify, and discuss challenges that the minister might be encountering in meeting the requirements.
- Does the minister have a current Three- or Four- or More- Way Covenant? If not, why not? If so, take some time to review their current covenant to make sure it still reflects their covenantal relationships. All ministers, not just those in specialized settings, are advised to have a written covenant. This may be new to local church pastors so be prepared to offer resources and support for creating their covenant. If a current covenant does not exist, explore why and encourage the minister to make a plan to complete one in collaboration with covenantal partners. Schedule a time to follow up with the minister.
- Committee on Ministry members open and close the meeting with prayers of encouragement, support, and gratitude for the minister. This offers the minister the opportunity to receive the kind of prayerful support they offer to others but rarely receive themselves.

### **Sample Periodic Vocational Support Conversation Outline**

- Welcome, Introductions and centering/opening prayer led by Committee on Ministry member.

Review the purpose of the Periodic Vocational Support meeting:

- To reflect on the ministers' vocation and call in light of the Marks for Faithful and Effective Ministers.
- Opportunity for the Committee on Ministry/Association to offer support to the minister, answer questions, and clarify Standing requirements.
- Clarify process – for example, a brief summary by the Committee on Ministry members with the minister's reflection attached may go into the ministerial file indicating that this requirement has been fulfilled (if applicable).

Invite reflection on these or additional questions:

- A) Describe your current call: what are some challenges and joys you are encountering?
- B) Reflect on self-care and sources of support, including mental, emotional, social, physical, spiritual.
- C) Using the Marks for Faithful and Effective Ministers, what are areas of strength and areas of growth in ministry for you?

- D) Are there resources and support that would be helpful to you in your ministry?
- E) What might be the next steps for you on your vocational journey?
- F) Are there further opportunities for support in your ministry that you would like to create or explore?
- G) How might we support you?
- H) Anything else you want to add or any questions you want to ask?
- I) Reflect on your Three- Four- (or More-) Way Covenant. Is the covenant still reflective of your covenantal relationships? If you don't have one, what might it look like to create one with your covenantal partners?
- J) Reflect on the UCC Ministerial Code at this moment in your ministry.

At the conclusion of the conversation, the Committee and the minister review any next steps. One of the Committee on Ministry members offers a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing for the minister and their ministry.

Following the Periodic Vocational Support meeting:

- The Committee on Ministry follows up in any way appropriate. It may be in the form of a letter, a summary of the conversation and the minister's written reflections, or some other means. If these conversations are required as a part of Standing requirements, this information is placed in the minister's ministerial file and a copy is sent to the minister. Updates to the Data Hub are made.
- Committee on Ministry members who hosted the conversation communicate to the Periodic Vocational Support scheduler that the meeting is complete and ensure that appropriate documentation has occurred.
- Committee on Ministry members follow up on any further resources, connections or support that have been offered to the minister.