

FAQ's for Clergy Communities of Practice

Groups and Leaders

What makes the Communities of Practice different?

COP groups are designed to be peer learning groups, focused both on the practice of ministry and your growth in your role as a pastoral minister. They are facilitated by a “seasoned pastor,” but rely on the wisdom and experience of the whole group in caring for and supporting one another.

Who are the facilitators and what do they do?

The facilitator is responsible for process and hospitality, so that the participants can be free to be present without leading. All of the facilitators are either seasoned, respected pastors or therapists who are lay leaders in UCC congregations, and who have expertise in group dynamics and experience of leadership in their local churches.

Therapists? Is this a therapy group?

No. Groups led or co-led by therapists follow the same model as groups led by seasoned pastors.

Starting Up

I'd like to join a group. What do I do?

Print out the registration form (on the Community of Practice webpage) or register through the Conference website [online](#).

I'm new to the Conference and missed the deadline. Can I still join a group?

Yes. Pastors can't predict when they'll move to a new call. We understand that, and so do the groups. There is a place for you.

Does our group have to accept new members?

Yes. It's one of our ground rules that all groups are open at the start of the fall program year. After that, groups decide when they will close, or whether they will remain open to new members.

Can I talk with someone who is in a group to find out what it's like?

Yes, email Joanne (jthomson@wucc.org) and she'll be happy to give you contact names.

Groups

How are the groups put together?

Joanne Thomson and Cathy Wille put the groups together after the fall registration deadline. We take lots of things into consideration, but two of the most important factors are *affinity* (will these people feel good about each other and trust each other?) and *geography* (often a challenge in Wisconsin). We recruit leaders who are located all over the state so there is a wide geographic range in group locations.

In our experience, the matching of participants with groups is pretty obvious about 90% of the time. But we do face some real challenges that are almost always created by geography and distance. You may be offered a group which seems just too far for you to drive. Please let us know, and we'll try to offer an alternative. We are deeply appreciative of your understanding of how hard it can be to put groups together in a state where we don't always have roads located where we need them to be.

There are some colleagues in my area that I'd love to meet with in a group. Can we form our own Community of Practice and be part of the program?

Yes, we encourage you to assemble your own group if you're interested in doing that. We will find a facilitator for you.

How do I know where and when my group will meet?

Groups make their own decisions about scheduling meetings, based on everyone's availability. You will be contacted by your facilitator to work on this.

I've been in clergy support groups in the past. After a few meetings, hardly anyone shows up.

One of the first things that groups do together is create a covenant. Attendance is taken at every meeting. We expect everyone to take seriously the commitment to be present for and with their colleagues and to make the group a priority in their calendar. This means, for example, scheduling funerals for a different day.

And sometimes no one wanted to show up because the meetings just disintegrated into complaining or competing.

This is the number one reason clergy stay away from groups. We work hard to create a culture of learning, support, and care in our groups. This model makes that possible, through the presence of a facilitator, the format for the time together and, above all, through the development of a covenant in which we commit to a common, non-complaining, purpose.

We're all human. There is a person with whom I do not want to be in a group, or a facilitator with whom I do not want to work. What do I do?

Understood. We want this to be an experience you value and look forward to. If there's something you think we should know when we put the groups together, please tell Joanne (608-846-7880). This information will not be shared and you will not be in a group with that person, no questions asked.

Fees, Scholarships, Other Things

Why is there a fee? Why \$250?

The original model for these groups, which was supported by the Lilly Endowment, expected groups to be self-supporting so that they could be around for the long haul. The fee pays for almost all of the out-of-pocket operating expenses of the groups: facilitator honorarium and travel, refreshments, a few resources. The administration of the program is paid for by the Conference through OCWM, and the Conference is providing financial support at a high level.

In addition, asking participants to pay a fee is a good way to make your investment in the group tangible. Maybe it shouldn't work that way, but it does.

The participation fee should be paid by your congregation. The Conference Church and Ministry Commission now includes participation in a Community of Practice in the pastoral call agreement, along with the expectation that the fee will be paid by the congregation as an investment in healthy ministry. The fee should not be paid from the pastor's continuing education fund.

I need financial help.

We will not let the fee stand in the way of your being in a group. We can't say this strongly enough. Ability to pay will not prevent you from joining a group.

There is a scholarship application form on the Community of Practice webpage on the [Conference website under the Resources tab](#). Please fill out the application and send it to Joanne at the Conference office.

However, *we ask everyone to ask their church* to pay the fee, or at least a portion of the fee, before requesting a scholarship. Our experience is that often churches are more willing to pay than pastors are willing to ask. The scholarship funds are available but limited – once they're gone, they're gone. So we are trying to be responsible in stewarding the scholarship funds. Please don't ask just because the fund is there.

Your Association may have financial help for you as well. The Northwest Association in particular has made a significant commitment to supporting its pastors who belong to groups.