

THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH - WESSEX SYNOD

SUPPORT GROUPS FOR MINISTERS

Many Ministers and their families are now finding very real help through the Support Groups which have been set up in their congregations. The Synod Pastoral Committees have encouraged the establishment of such groups as one of the most effective means of providing care and support for Ministers and their families. This paper has been produced to give help and guidance in the setting up and operation of such groups.

Purpose

The overall purpose of such a group is to provide whatever pastoral care and support may be most effective for the Minister. His/her family may also be included, if this is desired. It may also serve as a reference group, where the Minister can share concerns in confidence and where concerns can be shared with the Minister affecting his or her ministry. A group like this can deal caringly and positively with matters which could be magnified out of all proportion in a larger body like an Elders' meeting.

Composition

The group should be set up by the Minister in consultation with the Elders. The members will be invited to serve by the Minister, as people whom he/she is happy to work with in this way. There should be no more than four or five members and it is an open question as to whether the Church Secretary should be a member or not and whether all should be Elders, or whether some other members of the congregation should be included. If this is a Support group for the family as well, it should include someone with whom they can relate easily and who will have special responsibility for their care and support. It may be found helpful for the group to meet regularly with the minister's spouse. In a joint pastorate, it is essential that there should be a close link with each of the congregations. Some Ministers may choose to work with a more professional type of Support and Reference Group, consisting mainly of people with counselling and management skills, drawn mainly from outside the congregation.

Functions

The group should meet regularly and at least once a quarter. Dates should be arranged well in advance, so that they can be a firm priority in diaries. Meetings are best held in someone's home, either the manse or elsewhere, as convenient. The whole format should be informal, but it is better for it to be convened and chaired by someone other than the Minister, It will be for the Minister and the group to decide what should be their areas of concern, but they will include some or all of the following:

1. Support and Care for the Minister
 - a. In supporting the Minister and his or her family in prayer, both at meetings of the group and outside of it.
 - b. In ensuring that the Minister takes adequate time off and the full entitlement of holidays. (This also means ensuring that the congregation know what is the Minister's day off and respect it.)
 - c. In examining the Minister's workload and ensuring that he/she is not burdened with unnecessary responsibilities, which could easily be discharged by someone else.
 - d. In helping the Minister to decide, when necessary, what should be the priorities and where he/she should be encouraged to say "no".
 - e. In looking at any particular causes of stress or frustration in the congregation and seeing what can be done to deal with them.
 - f. In considering whether there is any help, secretarial or otherwise, which could be given, which would enable the Minister to function more effectively.
2. Support and Care for the Minister's family
 - a. In making sure that the family have adequate time to spend together.

- b. In safeguarding the privacy of the family and making sure that the congregation does not expect the manse to be used in ways which invade privacy.
- c. In ensuring that the manse is properly looked after by the appropriate body in the church and being ready to advise this body of problems and concerns.
- d. In being aware of any undue financial pressures and ensuring that adequate provision is made for car and other expenses.
- e. In providing someone in the group for the Minister's spouse to confide in, as necessary.

3. Support in the Minister's Work

- a. In helping the Minister to face realistically the expectations of the congregation.
- b. In providing a forum in which the Minister can share problems and concerns.
- c. In being a sounding-board for the Minister's plans and visions and ideas.
- d. In dealing in a constructive and caring way with any criticisms which may need to be made, or any niggles or undercurrents that may exist.
- e. In reviewing annually with the Minister his/her work aims, priorities, shortcomings — but only provided that this is something which the Minister would find helpful. (Another paper is available at the request of Ministers, suggesting how this may be done.)

Some Pitfalls

The work of such a group will be totally undermined if it is not carried out with the strictest confidentiality on the part of all concerned.

Care must be taken to ensure that such a group does not become a Minister's clique or cabinet.