

Protagonist Corner

Professional Pilgrims Need Each Other

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“Be real!?” Is it easier to preach than to practice? What pastor in her/his right mind would talk about their *real* frustrations, doubts, satisfactions, struggles, etc., etc., with someone other than their spouse (if such were available?)? Rare is the occasion for authentic dialogue to take place about matters of the soul when it concerns clergy.

One such rare opportunity can occur if one is a member of a covenant group with other “professional pilgrims” of the faith. Such has been my experience since 1972. That was the year that Dr. Louis H. Evans, Jr. became pastor of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and asked five of us nearby Presbyterian clergy-types “to join him in forming a covenant group which would meet regularly and share both personal and professional concerns.” This experience was rich and I wrote about it for *Journal of Preachers* (Vol. II, No. 2). That same article mentions how, on moving to Clearwater, Florida, I immediately sought to form a new covenant group of ministers. The composition of this group changed as members moved away or dropped out and others joined. For twelve years the following covenants became the basis of our relationship: the covenant of affirmation, the covenant of availability, the covenant of prayer, the covenant of openness, the covenant of sensitivity, the covenant of honesty, the covenant of confidentiality, the covenant of accountability.

These covenants principles were not looked upon as articles of a contract relationship. Instead they were a description of what we hoped and tried to have in our relationship, always depending upon grace to bind us together regardless of our faithfulness to the covenant.

Upon arrival at First Presbyterian Church of York, Pennsylvania, I again searched for others who would like to be in a covenant group. Seven of us gathered together over a period of six months, using monthly meetings and a retreat to test out the possibilities. Three of those seven discovered for different reasons that the covenant relationship with other “professional pilgrims” was not what they really wanted. (To be in covenant requires a substantial commitment of time and effort.) Since then three other clergy have joined and the new group is now in the process of investigating whether or not we will become covenanted to each other.

Here are some of my general reflections about covenant groups:

1. The members can come from your Presbytery or other denominations, but having them all “professional pilgrims” is important if you want to experience “being real” given the realities of the church. The members do not have to be of the same theological slant. In fact the beauty of our groups has always been their unity with diversity.
2. Draw up your own set of covenants that each and all could “own” and support depending, of course, always on grace.
3. Meet at least monthly. Three to four hours has been the usual time period for our groups. Having an overnight retreat occasionally certainly does help.
4. The agenda should include some devotional, “logging in,” and prayer components. My present group has chosen to include “spiritual development” and/or

“theological reflection” time. Being Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Southern Baptist, and United Church of Christ has made this very interesting!

5. Have a different convener for each meeting. Different members can lead different portions of your time together, but one person should be responsible for moving the group through the agreed upon agenda, making sure all are included in what is happening.

6. Covenant to be a covenant group for a period of time. This will allow a renewal of the covenant group to take place from time to time, and also will allow members to leave the group without bad feelings.

I believe it was no accident that Jesus had twelve disciples with Him in ministry. With the help of the Holy Spirit the church through the ages has been enhanced by the clustering of men and women in covenant relationships. Likewise, I believe that today small group ministries contribute enormously to the vitality of congregations. They appear everywhere in a variety of forms; some structured and some unstructured. Being in such a small group within your own congregation is one thing. However, belonging to a covenant group with other “professional pilgrims” is a dimension of koinoni that nurtures the soul like nothing else I have experienced in my ministry. Try it. You may find that to be true for you as well.