

# PROTAGONIST CORNER

## Pastors in Koinonia

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There are many interesting changes one experiences when leaving the seminary and entering the parish ministry. One of the most pronounced for me was not having my strong, supportive group of friends with me . . . those who during the three previous years had shared with me laughter and tears, moods and pressures, memories and dreams. It wasn't until after about six months as a pastor that I realized how significant such a peer group had been in my nurture and growth.

Now I was being called upon to feed others with few opportunities of being fed myself. Soon I began to experience a sense of professional inadequacy, pressures on how to balance my personal and professional life, how to deal with financial matters, what to do with my own moods of depression or exhilaration, how to translate from my head to my guts the knowledge that I could not be an adequate "all things to all people" pastor for the Lord. Many of these questions I was facing by myself, and this accentuated my loneliness.

During my first year, I obtained the newly-published book *Ex-Pastors: Why Men Leave the Parish Ministry* by Jerald Jud, Ted Mills and Genevieve Birch. This study examined many of the same problems with which I was dealing and pointed out a very critical truth that I needed to embrace if I were to survive and be creative in the parish ministry. Those who had left the parish ministry had listed many reasons for their actions, the most dominant of which was "the professional support structures that would have bound them more effectively into the occupation were nonsupportive, whereas the really effective support structures were extra-professional, helping during a tough time but not capable of strengthening occupational commitment." They were saying what I was discovering—that one cannot go it alone without close and loving fellowship of other pastors. Almost immediately I began to look around for ways to experience such a fellowship. Through several makeshift groups of ministerial associations and neighboring Presbyterian pastors, I began to find something of the support peer group I was needing. However, all of these seemed to be insufficient in terms of the depth of the fellowship and extent of support. I have never quite understood the failure for these attempts except that possibly these other pastors, along with myself, never really established a commitment to nurture and support each other.

It was about two years later that Louis H. Evans, Jr., came to be the senior pastor of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. Although this man seemed "to have it all together," he too had a similar need for a close support group of fellow clergy. He asked five of us to join him in forming a covenant group which would meet regularly and share both personal and profes-

sional concerns. It was in this group that I experienced again the koinonia of my previous seminary days. The six of us began to share, first on one level and then on deeper levels, the truths of the Gospel and of our lives. Sometimes we would reflect upon scripture that would launch us into periods of spiritual growth. Other times we would log in our agendas, our highs and lows, our problems, that were then focused upon by five loving souls. We were of different theological backgrounds and held different callings in the Presbyterian ministry, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, this contributed richly to the perceptions of truth and the encouragements of love.

What made this covenant group so beautiful was undoubtedly the presence of the Spirit and our common love for our Lord Jesus. Also we enjoyed each other's presence whether playing basketball, sharing a bunch of grapes, or a decision to be made. However, one of the most practical ingredients that blessed our covenant group was the eight "Covenant Principles," written by Louie that enabled us to trust and to commit ourselves to each other. These were later elaborated upon and made into his book "Creative Love" (Revell, 1977), but they included affirmation, availability, prayer, openness, sensitivity, honesty, confidentiality, and accountability.

When I left the Washington area in December of 1977, one of the celebrations that affected me the most was the last gathering our covenant group had with our spouses. We knew love had come down at Christmas and had been very present with us those last five years.

I have now been in my new parish for a year and have not delayed in trying to establish a new covenant group of ministers in this area of Florida. With seven other ministers, and using the same covenant principles, we have already begun to experience the koinonia that Christians so desperately need, especially clergy. By reflecting and recreating, by sharing pressures and prayers, we've already begun to experience a supportive love that is sure to be blessed. Our model is that we meet once a month from 12:00 to 2:00, taking turns at each others' churches with the host covenant member calling the shots for our agenda. We have had a one-day retreat at the presbytery camp. I strongly urge all ministers everywhere to join themselves in covenant with a small group of clergy and use whatever model that would enable them to experience a similar koinonia, (Other models are suggested in Gordon Cosby's *Handbook for Mission Groups*, Robert Raines' *New Life in the Church* and Robert C. Leslie's *Sharing Groups in the Church*).

Could the local presbytery be such a support group? It depends on whether you are speaking theoretically or realistically. The present nature of our presbyteries seem to rule this out. However, they could well encourage such covenant groups forming! For sure, the church, the clergy, their families, and their congregations would be much healthier and happier if covenant groups were part of the pastor's life.