

SITUATIONAL SUPPORT CONSULTATION - PROCESS AND MEETINGS OUTLINES

How a concern may come to a COM

- The COM may receive a request from a minister or a church
- The COM may hear of a conflict or a situation and in response, offer an SSC as an option
- The COM may determine a situation warrants initiating an SSC and invite all parties to meet
- May be a referral after a Fitness Review Concern

Setting up a SSC

- COM chair or rep connect with pastor and/or church leadership
 - Determine if the situation fits criteria for an SSC
 - Is there a concern about ethical misconduct? (if so, an SSC is not appropriate and the Fitness Review process should be engaged)
 - Is this an issue that would best be addressed with a hosted conversation and/or outside expertise?
 - Determines who should participate
 - Determine dates and number of meetings
 - Determine location
 - Decide who from COM should participate
 - Those who:
 - have excellent listening skills
 - have a good sense of congregational polity and process
 - have experience with conflict management
 - have the time and ability to see the process through to completion
 - do not have a conflict of interest with congregation or pastor
 - Determine sequence of meetings/people

Goals and Best Practices for all meetings

- With minister, then individuals/committee small groups, goal is to understand the situation and dynamics
- With everyone together, goal is to create transparency and increase communication, and discern a way forward
- Give attention to the content of the issue that has been raised
- Pay even more attention to what's underneath
 - Feelings and values
 - Difference in expectations - generational, cultural, etc.
 - Priorities
 - Hurt or grief
 - Hopes
- COM may offer some healing just by listening

Preliminary conversations with the pastor and key stakeholders will provide insight necessary to develop a proposed format for initial meetings and scope as well as clarify expectations.

Sample Meeting format

- Common meeting structures for situation involving Pastor and Congregation
 - 4 pm: COM meets with Pastor
 - 5 pm: COM dinner break
 - 6 pm: COM meets with Council*
 - 7 pm: COM meets with Pastor and Council together*

**Terminology and understanding of leadership structure may vary. Your preliminary conversations should include an understanding of how leadership functions in this particular congregation.*

Common meeting structure for situation involving interpersonal relationships with person or smaller group:

- COM meets with Pastor
- COM meets with other involved persons
- COM meets with Pastor and involved persons
- On subsequent meeting, COM meet with Pastor and involved persons and Council/PPRC so that there is broader accountability and appropriate cultural shifts become possible

Meeting Outline

- Opening Prayer led by COM member
- Check-in with people
 - “How are you actually doing today?”
 - “How is everyone showing up today?”
 - “What are you setting aside for a time so that you can be present here?”
 - “What are you hoping for?”
 - “What question do you bring into this space?”
 - Other more specific questions may be appropriate for meetings with pastor or individual leaders.
- Invite people to tell you their story
 - “Tell us about what’s going on for you in the life of your church.”
- Listen with curiosity and compassion, withholding judgment
- Ask open ended questions
- Invite stories beyond the surface level with “Tell me more”
- Practice “the pause” to make space and to allow people to process what’s said
- Remember the presenting issue is rarely the actual or only issue
- Ask about the feelings behind their account of events
- When the situation seems clear, summarize what you’ve heard

- Ask what way forward they could imagine
 - Closing Prayer led by COM member

Small Group Meeting format (bookended with prayer)

- Sit in a circle or create zoom equivalent with community building
- Set the intention
- Open time with prayer or devotion
- Suggest group norms
 - Confidentiality
 - Listen with attention
 - Share speaking space
 - “I” statements
 - No anonymous feedback or “some people think”

Large Group Meeting Format (bookended with prayer)

- Sit in a circle (or zoom equivalent)
- Set the intention
- Open time with a “Holy 3rd”
 - Prayer, devotion, scripture, church mission statement
- Suggest group norms
 - Confidentiality
 - Listening with attention
 - Sharing speaking space
 - “I” statements
 - No anonymous feedback or “some people think”
- Set the tone. Summarize what hopes you have heard each party express
 - Ex. hope for healthier church
- Summarize what you heard the different groups as articulating as happening. Check in for correct summary or additions.
- Summarize what you heard the minister articulate as happening. Check in for correct summary or additions.
- Reframe the summaries, if appropriate.
- Open up conversation. Be curious about the circumstances and what’s really underneath
- Summarize the differences in interpretations, if appropriate
- Encourage them to dialogue openly with one another
- De-escalate unhealthy conflict
 - Not all conflict is unhealthy
 - Pause if there are accusations or name calling, redirect and reframe
 - “I know you are a smart and compassionate person and that your first reaction didn’t really sound like you. I’m wondering if you might want to try that again?”
- Simply name if things are tense or conflictual and invite the group to pause
- Wonder with them about what a way forward could look like?
- If needing to spur creative thinking, propose an extreme or the absurd, simply so they can say “no”

- This reestablishes their agency
 - Makes the group the experts again
- If they are avoiding an answer because it is too hard to say, ask if they are avoid saying something hard, encourage brave space
- Most groups can identify ways forward
- COM task is to help the group distill a plan for themselves about the “next faithful step,” as well as any goals and timelines

COM Steps after meeting with Pastor, individuals, and small groups

- Summarize with COM member(s) what you each heard and experienced
- Assess where the stories or interpretations are different and why
- Assess where sticking points are to moving forward
- Discern who in the groups have the ability and/or relational capital to move past the sticking point
- Create a basic plan for questions or approach needed for next and/or the all group meetings
- Help discern the best faithful next steps as well as any goals and timelines

Outcomes

- There are 4 specific outcomes of a Situational Support Consultation
 - No further action needed
 - Mutually agreed upon plan of action
 - Advisory statement issued by the COM
 - Season of Discernment about continued ministry together or separate

Acknowledgements

MESA specifically thanks Revs. Erin Gilmore and Ellis Arnold for their assistance in creating this document.