

SITUATIONAL SUPPORT CONSULTATION: CASE STUDY AND REPORT

Conference staff receives a complaint regarding a Pastor. The member says that their Pastor is being secretive about the church's finances, is refusing to meet with Treasurer, and does not seem to supervise bookkeeper. And during the stewardship message, the Pastor made it clear that contributions would no longer be kept "secret". Member is demanding a full audit and sees this as both unethical and poor management.

What follow up questions should be asked?

Background

Pastor is new to authorized ministry in the UCC, having grown up in a different denomination, and in a small church that had no staff other than the pastor. In that church, contributions were made publicly and lay folks handled the books. During the search process the new congregation emphasized their informality – they were easy-going, and didn't make a big deal about job descriptions, processes, and systems. It all just works, they said.

Visitation, engaging worship, and getting to know the community were the priorities mentioned in the search process. When the Pastor arrived, they interpreted the needs of the new congregation as a desire for pastoral attention and decided not to engage the lack of policies and formal processes until after the first year.

Pastor was surprised to discover that there were money issues that hadn't been disclosed in the profile. Concerns started emerging between the interviews and their first day of work. The compensation package wasn't quite what they had discussed initially, and the amount offered for the move wouldn't come close to getting all their belongings moved. And this was shared on the day of the congregational vote!

Since arriving, the Pastor has become aware of power struggles around finances – and has asked to see all detailed reports for the past year to determine if there has been any wrongdoing.

Questions for Consideration

How would you determine whether this required a Situational Support Consultation or a Fitness Review? And would there be a place where Vocational Consultation would be of help? After determining that there has not been an ethical violation, the COM offers to provide a Situational Support Consultation.

COM arranges meetings with the Pastor, the person who shared the concern, the Moderator, and Trustees Committee (which includes both the Treasurer and Bookkeeper). After those initial conversations, it becomes clear that the church council as a whole should be involved in these conversations.

Report

The meetings with individuals and leadership groups were helpful in naming the history of how the financial work is managed in the congregation, and surfaced some hidden and differing expectations for staff and lay leaders.

Cultural issues were also discussed. The pastor's previous church experience aligned with many of the elders who saw their church as a family where roles and expectations were simply understood, and not written into policies and procedures. They expressed some resistance to "corporate" structures and rules. Newer members brought expectations from their contexts, where structure and documentation were seen as essential and appropriate for managing a church. While the elders and the newer folks agreed that keeping the pledge information secret was important, there was less agreement on how to better clarify and communicate roles and expectations between the pastor and lay members.

The pastor was also able to name the initial discrepancies between what was offered, and what was provided financially. A plan was established to reimburse the pastor for remaining moving expenses and revisit the compensation package by year end.

After several meetings of the church council and trustees, a compromise was reached that outlined the committee, volunteer staff, and pastor's expectations as they relate to the financial matters of the church. The compromise documents which include clarifications on scope of work as well as policies and procedures, have provisions for easy revision in the future, should that be necessary. They will be shared with the rest of the congregation, and adopted at the next annual meeting. This process will be used to address some other issues that surfaced in conversation related to lay and staff roles and expectations.

The lay leaders also agreed to explore a behavioral covenant that addresses the ways that communication and decision-making are handled. They have hopes to more fully integrate the newer members into leadership and see that their older ways of relating excluded the newer members.

The COM is grateful for the opportunity to engage with this congregation, and trusts that should a need arise, the church leadership can reach out for additional support.

Alternate Report

The COM has spent six months working with the congregation. Though difficult to schedule, the meetings with individuals and leadership groups were helpful in naming the history of how the financial work is managed in the congregation, and surfaced some hidden and differing expectations for staff and lay leaders. Trust is low between the pastor and the lay leadership, as well as among lay leaders, and we discovered that communication had been reduced to weekly newsletters and formal leadership meetings.

When the pastor raised the discrepancies between what was offered initially and what was received for compensation and moving experiences, there was no response from congregational leadership.

Cultural issues were also discussed and it became clear that there are two competing ways of communicating that are culturally significant. While the congregation is hoping to be a true multi-racial congregation, there are differences in how power is held and communication is conducted. The older, historic members have a familial style of leadership, where the Matriarch makes decisions, outside of other formal leadership roles. Communication among the elders is indirect, and there is an unspoken understanding of what is shared and not shared. Some newer members have joined who bring a different way of communicating (more direct) and who have experiences in other organizations with more formal structures and explicit expectations.

The COM has appreciated the risk-taking and engagement of all involved. The issues raised represent on the surface of the differences that exist in the congregation. Much deeper concerns about church identity, trust, and how to conduct the work of the church were raised, and the work before the congregation is going to take some time.

The COM recommends a season of discernment where the congregation commits to working through these deeper issues to determine how or whether they can remain a single congregation, served by this pastor. The COM will continue to provide reflective facilitation to the meetings and will engage a cultural consultant to support this work as it moves forward.