



Division of Ordained Ministry Clergy Lifelong Learning

## Nurturing Innovative Clergy Leadership through Peer Learning Groups in The United Methodist Church

### NOVA Peer Group Evaluation Compilation and Comments D. Bruce Roberts

The evaluation for the NICL project included four instruments or processes. First was an “Every Meeting Feedback Form” (EMF) completed by peer group members after each meeting. The purpose of the EMF was for “formative” evaluation, and it provided information by which decisions were made for changes as the project developed. Second was a “Participant Survey,” intended to be part of a “summative” evaluation at the end of a group’s time together and was completed by participants on the last meeting of each group. Third was a “Congregational Evaluation” intended to be completed by representatives of each congregation toward the end of the group’s learning plan. The fourth source of information was “Group Final Reflections” containing a list of fourteen questions asked by the Coach to initiate a group evaluation and discussion at the last meeting of the group.

This report will be limited to a compilation of the “Participant Survey” with some comments based upon the Group Final Reflection as reported by the Coach and some information from the congregational evaluations where available.

The NOVA Peer Group had eight members with six completed Participant Surveys, a seventy-five percent return. Of course, from such a small sample no conclusions can be drawn from this data alone, but it can be combined with fifteen years of work and evaluation of other peer learning programs.<sup>1</sup>

Question 1 on the survey is related to reasons for participation in a peer learning group. Participant’s motivation involved wanting to **improve their leadership**, to **interact with other pastors**, to **be a better pastor**, to **reduce professional isolation**, and to **be part of a peer group**. NOVA participants did not join because of a ministry crisis, to enhance future appointments, to discover resources for their congregations, or to travel.

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<sup>1</sup> “Indiana Clergy Peer Group Study Program, 2007” web page, Christian Theological Seminary (cts.edu); “Motivated Learning and Practice: A Peer Group Model” in Reber and Roberts, A Lifelong Call to Learn. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute Press, 2010; Marler, Roberts, et al, So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013.

For Question 2, NOVA members reported overwhelmingly that it developed and carried out plans, that decisions were owned by the whole group, and that they felt free to share struggles in ministry with the group. Interestingly it was not unanimous (one disagreed) that the group confronted and dealt with confrontations directly.

Question 3: It was unanimous that the group was **formed primarily from an existing support group that had met for breakfasts**. There was no indication that this was a hindering factor or that others that joined the group were at a disadvantage.

Question 4 dealt with the main themes of their study, and there was a strong consensus that **the group intended to explore creativity in ministry for future ministry**. Creativity and innovation were central themes for this group.

Question 5 asked about study themes relating to the needs of congregations. Most of the comments under this question dealt with the **necessity of creativity and innovation, not just for pastors, but also for the congregational processes**.

Question 6 was primarily for institutional use. Question 7 asked about what activities and practices were most meaningful. Every respondent mentioned the breakfast meetings twice per month. This is consistent with other peer group programs that found **regular meetings** helpful for on-going conversations and sharing of differing perspectives.

Question 8, dealing with what one thing they would change about the experience is interesting, particularly for the evaluation process, because the group asked for less “paperwork,” and elimination of the “Facebook” requirement. Both of these responses indicate that the staff and consultant were not successful in helping the NOVA group understand the need for evaluative monitoring and feedback. In the future, we will need to make this clearer to groups. This is also reflected in Question 9 dealing with how participants would rate the coach, the staff, and the consultant. The Coach was given the highest rating both for an effective job and for being a good match for the group! In addition, there were comments asking for more contact with the coach.

Question 9 also gave the staff and consultant mixed ratings and comments that indicate we did not do an adequate job of helping the NOVA group understand the supervisory and evaluative functions of the staff and consultant. This is helpful feedback for work with future NICL groups.

Question 10 asked for rating of educational experiences. **The group was unanimous that the learning goals were clear and that they were able to pursue them**. Five participants thought that their leadership had improved (one did not respond to this question) and five of six thought that the travel experiences were central to their learning. Two comments wanted to make clear that the travel was important because of the events they attended and not because of travel for itself.

Question 11 asked about what learning experiences were most helpful. The most consistent response was the **group discussion itself after an event or experience including sharing of resources and perspectives**. Several mentioned the Disney creativity experience while others mentioned experiential learning, collaborative planning, and “events crafted and focused by us for us.”

Question 12 asked about how they would characterize the teaching style of favorite instructors. All six mentioned the best instructors were **interactive and involved them in discussions about their specific contexts**.

Question 13 asked about the importance of travel for the participants. Comments included the **importance of getting out of their contexts helped deepening friendships as well as providing fresh ideas and perspectives**. One comment indicated gratitude for being able to do some things with the group that would not have been possible alone.

Question 14 asked for what was most important in their self-understanding as a leader. Comments included:

~My ability to encourage and facilitate creativity

~**I am not alone**. The challenges are not unique

~How important creativity and innovation are to me as a person and as a leader

~**Collegiality—not alone—challenge** I feel aren't unique but part of what is happening in the world now and actually always. Creative leaders in the midst of change—freedom from “right way.” Nourishment gained from creative thinking.

~The concerns I have as a leader/pastor are not unique. **I am not the only person who struggles and feels isolated—or felt isolated**. People do care and have similar experience. Importance of creativity in ministry.

~a. **Freed me to try new things, because there is “no one right answer.”** With everything changing, it is freeing to try innovations. b. Saw ways to practice creative thinking in my church.

The comments about not being alone and problems not being unique are typical of many, many other participants from peer learning programs.

Question 15 asked about challenges that lie ahead, respondents said:

~1. I am going to miss this group. In my new area, the pastors are not as close. 2. Not be overwhelmed by increasingly fast pace of change so as to experience burnout.

~I am about to begin a new ministry and am looking forward to starting that new church appointment with habits and practices that encourage creativity and innovation.

~Sustain my own engagement and enthusiasm while striving to be a useful tool for God in the midst of change. Encouraging others to be creative and more attuned to that Spirit in the community that is changing and has some who are deeply holding on to status quo.

~Becoming a conduit for God's future of the church in such a way as to not impede that future.

Remaining effective and not coasting. Still...give 100% of myself to congregational leadership.

**~Having the courage to try and fail, the courage and willingness to alienate (surprise) the lovers of the status quo by daring something new.**

Question 16 asked about what participants planned to do for ongoing education or learning, the group **five of the six report that they would like to be in or to start a peer learning group in the near future.** This is also a typical response to the thousands of clergy who have been in a peer learning group over the past fifteen years. They report it as the most important and effective continuing theological education they have yet experienced.

Question 17 asked about support for peer learning in their family and congregation. The group gave the highest rating **unanimously for being supported by their families.** Five of six reported no conflict in the family over participation.

Four of six gave the highest rating for congregational support and two the second highest, **so all of NOVA felt supported by their congregations.** When asked about the \$300 per year cost, the pastors split the vote between the highest rating and the second highest rating **indicating that the cost was not excessive.** The group unanimously agreed that they were **well supported by denominational officials.**

Question 18 asked about the impact of NICL on their family relationships, participants wrote:

~It has given me something new to share with my wife, who has been very supportive

~It has been positive. We had two “informal” events in which our spouses came. The connections were uplifting.

**~Brought me closer to colleagues in my group. Modeled importance of lifelong learning.**

~Positive—reinvigorating for me, which is enjoyed by families. Lifting up value of learning and intentionality of learning and formation. Participation in small group.

~Positive. Part eight of our group included family activities and my wife participated: everyone supported.

~Deepened friendships with other clergy—deepened trust as well with peers I can share more readily with.

Question 19 asked about any recognition resulting from participation in NICL. The group agreed that there was little recognition beyond an article on the GBHEM web site and some Facebook pictures. **Clearly the rewards for participation in peer learning were internal to the individuals and the group.**

Asked about sacrifices made to participate, participants agreed that there were none beyond working out time issues. One said: “I set this as a priority in my life and ministry and didn’t see my involvement as a sacrifice.”

Question 21 asked how participation in a peer learning group influenced their understanding as a pastor and leader in the congregation. Here are the responses:

~It has broadened my perspective to hear from peers about the joys and trials of ministry beyond my own

~**Modeling a small group to others.** This experience has also added to my role as a mentor for BOM.

~**Encouraged me to be more collaborative and to draw out the creativity of others.**

~Broadened and deepened my understanding of the critical need for creativity in this time in ministry. I have learned as much from my interaction with my colleagues as in the other experiences. Lead pastor as the cheerleader and inspirational leader of the congregation. Leader's actions and attitudes are so very contagious: "Be the change you want to see."

~Change makes—be the change you want to see. Model for the congregation.

~Helped me be more authentic, more connected to others (and less needy within the church), more creative, less anxious, more willing to try new things.

Some of these responses are **resonant with the evaluation research** done for many other peer learning groups.<sup>2</sup> Many, many mention that it modeled small group life, encouraged more collaborative leadership activity, and increased authenticity and confidence.

Question 22 asked about what leaders in their congregations were saying about their leadership as a result of participation, there was a **general agreement that they were perceived as more effective and confident, willing to take more risks, and to be collaborative in decision-making.** We do not have much data to back up these perceptions, but the responses we have from congregational members are highly supportive of the pastors and the peer learning process.

When participants were asked (Question 23) whether they would recommend NICL process to other pastors, they **unanimously checked "yes."** Here is what they said:

~And I have already done so. It is the best model for lasting learning and support in ministry I have experienced.

~Highly recommend. Relationship building, modeling a practical Christian relationship.

~Nurturing personal growth and creativity through peer learning is essential to effectiveness and longevity in ministry.

~Absolutely essential to innovative leadership. Peer learning works on many levels. Very much worth it.

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<sup>2</sup> Penny L. Marler, "The Power and Promise of Pastoral Peer Learning," in So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive edited by Penny L. Marler and D. Bruce Roberts (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013), pp. 1-21.

The last question, Question 24, asked what other comments participants would like to make, and the responses were very supportive:

~Thanks for making this initiative possible.

~Thank you and VERY excited to see where this will lead the UMC in the future.

~I began my time with the group reluctantly, wondering if I had the time, interest and desire to make such a commitment. As we conclude our two-year project, I am glad that I chose to participate and have grown from the experience.

~This has been a fantastic experience, great learning, and building lifetime relationships with colleagues.

~Thanks to GBHEM for raising, promoting, and making this possible!

Although this is a very small sample, it is quite consistent with the evaluations from more than a dozen peer learning programs for clergy. Several things resonate with these data:

Several things resonate with other peer group feedback:

1. The sense of new found freedom related to not being alone
2. Changes in leadership style toward collaboration based upon the experience in the peer group
3. The group becoming a priority the longer the group worked together
4. The list of the most important aspects of the program mirror many group evaluations
5. That learning goals and objectives are helpful in maintaining focus and accountability over the life of the group

Some items which are very hopeful:

1. Development of a sense that accepting congregational decline is not a necessary or creative stance, and moving toward more intentional leadership for change
2. Ongoing theological ferment around significant metaphors in Christianity, such as resurrection
3. Moving toward taking leadership in the conference for making peer learning a significant way to deliver continuing theological education

Penny Marler summarized what our participants and “thousands of pastors discovered together over the past decade” in several different models of peer learning:

- Renews the call and commitment to ministry;
- Revitalizes the spirit, body, and mind;
- Broadens a vision of God’s world and our part (and partnerships) in it;
- Provides courage and confidence to “dream new dreams” with others who have a stake in their realization;
- Nurtures a deeper capacity to listen and respond with honesty and without

- defensiveness;
- Increases appreciation for and enthusiasm about intentional and ongoing education;
  - Clarifies interpersonal strengths and limits; and
  - Leads to tangible, positive outcomes for congregations.<sup>3</sup>

It is my hope that the whole United Methodist Church will follow the lead of Dr. HiRho Park's Nurturing Innovative Clergy Leadership project by making clergy peer learning a key method of delivering continuing theological education.

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<sup>3</sup> Marler, Penny L. "The Power and Promise of Pastoral Peer Learning," in So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive edited by Penny L. Marler and D. Bruce Roberts (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013), pp. 3-4.