



## Isolation in Ministry

The Working Group on Isolation in Ministry has been mandated by the Permanent Committee on Ministry and Employment Policies and Services (PC-MEPS) to prioritize the eight recommendations arising from the Isolation in Ministry Study and to develop policies consistent with those recommendations. The recommendations were presented to the 39th General Council in 2006. The Rev. Donna Bowman-Woodall, the Rev. Elizabeth Brown, Mr. Harry Brown, and Ms Tracy Murton are members of this working group.

### Focus on Recommendation 3

Institute a national policy to provide programs and funding that promote collegial, supportive relationships among ministry personnel based on their call to a common vocation.

Two members of the working group share stories of successful support groups. Their stories demonstrate effective ways of achieving the goal of Recommendation 3.

### Getting Together: Sharing within the Unique Context of Clergy

Elizabeth Brown writes of her experiences, remembering significant acts that addressed her feeling of isolation as a newly ordained, single parent of two preteen children settled in a rural, multi-point pastoral charge.

*I faced many challenges in my first few years in ministry—before the Internet or long distance phone plans, and with only one fax machine in town! Being far away from my school friends and even farther away from my family, I often spent more on long distance bills in a month than I did on groceries.*

*People were very kind and gracious but sometimes I wanted and needed to speak with others who were going through the same things I was. There were a few different groups that enabled me to find my way through this incredibly lonely time and to discover my strengths in and for ministry.*

### One Conference's Approach

The Manitou Conference personnel minister called during the first month after Elizabeth's arrival and visited her during the first six months. Elizabeth reports that their conversations gave her the confidence to volunteer her time at different levels of the church. This helped her develop skills and learn more about our church's governance.

The Conference gathered new ministry personnel for a driving tour to help them get to know the area and meet others recently settled there. The Conference also planned and organized a winter gathering/retreat in a local First Nations spiritual centre. Because the Conference supported the retreat financially, any ministry personnel could attend for a nominal registration fee.

It was a week of sharing experiences: singing together, wandering through the forest, cross-country skiing, skating on the lake, worshipping, and discussing and exploring different spiritual practices. The retreat became an annual event which the ministry personnel planned, organized, and led themselves. During these gatherings Elizabeth gained valuable skills, developed her talents, and made lifelong friends.

### Ecumenical Colleagues

In one of Elizabeth's pastoral charges, her closest colleagues were a Lutheran pastor, a Roman Catholic priest, and a retired United Church minister. They were



**The Church Leadership Network** is a new online community that offers a space for ministry personnel from across the country to connect as well as to share resources, wisdom, experiences, and questions. The network is administered by the Ministry Personnel Support staff of the General Council Office.

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a collegial group, constantly supportive. The pastoral charge had an ecumenical spirit and there were many events at which the clergy shared in leadership, such as the week of prayer and a Lenten series. Elizabeth and her clergy colleagues attended continuing education events together, sharing travel costs. Elizabeth realized that discovering more about our denominations actually helps us to be more open and inclusive.

There was another minister 45 minutes away. Although he was a self-declared evangelical renewal fellowship follower and differed from Elizabeth in theology, ministry, family, social, cultural, and political ideas, they made an effort to get together once a month for lunch. They were also on call for each other during vacations. This worked well despite their differences. In fact, the resulting friendship taught Elizabeth about the value of being open to others' ways.

### **Peers**

Elizabeth reports that a group of eight to 12 women ministry colleagues decided to get together once a month for a potluck lunch, taking turns hosting. The group was a good source of fun and encouragement: a gathering where the women could laugh, share stories about family, support one another, and be supported while also discussing ministry issues.

### **Passing Along the Blessings**

Elizabeth states, "I've always made a point of travelling to visit colleagues who arrive in the presbytery at least once during the first six months after their arrival—and I never complain about the drive!"

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## **Sourcing Strength and Support**

Ministry personnel sometimes prefer a group that is guaranteed to be secure and confidential. In these cases, a "closed" group (which is limited to a certain size and whose members don't change unless the change is approved by all members) meets their needs. **Donna Bowman-Woodall** was able to create this strong source of support with her colleagues.

### **The Story of a Closed Support Group**

*For some time I had been feeling the need for a support group, a group of colleagues with whom I could meet and be "real" on a regular basis. Colleagues told me stories about support groups they had enjoyed, and how helpful they had been. They spoke of being able to share honestly the problems they were encountering or the joys they were celebrating.*

*I yearned for the same experience and kept waiting for someone to organize something similar, but eventually it occurred to me that I needed to organize it myself. Having considered some other support groups I knew of, I decided to invite a group of colleagues in roughly the same geographic area to join me.*

*It took a few meetings before we had one with everyone present, and before the group was a priority commitment, but once we were up and running we agreed to a number of loose guidelines: the group is closed; meetings are monthly; confidentiality is a top priority; we are as honest as possible with each other, yet we don't ask for more information than anyone is willing to give. Support is for everything from personal life needs to work concerns. We don't operate as a lectionary group or a worship planning group. Prayer is the centre of our meetings.*

*We have now been meeting for 18 months. Our group, all ministry personnel, began as six individuals; two have moved on recently, and we made the decision to invite two new ministry personnel in the area to join us. We will continue to meet monthly, getting to know each other better, and growing in trust. Some of us have had huge life and ministry issues to deal with, and have benefited greatly from the support and prayers of this group. All agree that it has been very helpful.*

## **Human Resources Contacts**

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