

## Covenant Communities for Pastoral Excellence Iowa Conference, UCC

Covenant Communities for Pastoral Excellence (CCPE) are a ministry of the Iowa Conference designed to offer intentional opportunity for professional learning and support to all authorized ministers in the conference.

These groups are predicated on the conviction that group learning can empower clergy to enhanced function in several areas of professional competency, including,

- **Emotional maturity** and intelligence,
- **Courage to act wisely** and shrewdly based on deep conviction,
- **A growing and deepening faith** that provides a substantive foundation for the conviction mentioned above, and
- **Operational sophistication** in the ways of institutional structure and interpersonal relationship.

These groups are the result of an ongoing evolution in similar covenant communities here in the conference which for several years have been called SAG groups (Support-Accountability-Growth), or some places SAGe (add “education”).

Most of these SAG groups were facilitated by conference staff, but the CCPE’s will mostly be facilitated by other experienced and trained leaders.

### HISTORY:

CCPE’s are based in a model borrowed from the Southwest Wisconsin Association, where they are called “Ministerial Development Groups.” When Rich Pleva was called as Prairie Association Minister in the Illinois Conference (1997) he began to implement a similar model in the association. He recruited seven individuals to participate in a pilot group. He choose individuals who he believed would participate with commitment and who would then be able to serve as “witnesses” for the expansion of the model in subsequent years. During the second year the number of groups was expanded to two and the original participants were split between those two groups. In the third year a third group was added. When Rich left the association in 2005 there were four groups meeting.

### FORMAT:

In the Prairie Association each group met twice monthly at a set location, usually at an association church (though one group met for one year at a Presbyterian Church, and another group met for a time at a parsonage). The four groups met at four different locations within the association, but given the geographic size of the association, this still meant that some

participants traveled an hour each way to participate. Participants chose their own group but at times individuals were encouraged to join a particular group, either for reasons of numerical balance or else for various relational reasons (For example, one pastor chose to drive to a group further away so as not to meet in a group where the senior minister of the church where his wife was employed was a participant. Another associate chose to travel to a more distant group so she and her senior pastor would not be in the same group.). The groups met beginning in the fall and then broke for the summer. The groups were reconstituted each fall. It was not assumed that the membership of the groups would remain constant from year to year.

Each of the meetings lasted for two hours and followed a similar format. Each meeting began with a brief time of biblical reflection and then each person present was given a few minutes to check in. Subsequently an assigned individual presented a situation that is, or has been, challenging or problematic in his or her own ministry. The assignments for these presentations were made in advance on a rotating schedule. The group then processes the individual's issue with an eye to offering support, creative objectivity, challenge, and group learning. Time was left at the end for any individual to raise a current issue which that person desired to process with the group before he or she would next be scheduled to present an issue. The meetings ended with a time of group prayer.

The models evolving in Iowa are not exactly as described above. For example, none of the groups currently existing meet twice a month. It can be imagined that some groups might eventually (for reasons of wide-spread geographical dispersion) meet less frequently but for a longer period at each meeting – perhaps even overnight, or some groups might augment their less frequent face-to-face gatherings with more frequent electronic meetings. In the past each group had a general agenda focused on broad issues of parish ministry, but in the future some groups might gather around specific ministry issues or around particular demographic criteria. All these details are open to negotiation and modification as the model continues to evolve.

In the Prairie Association persons newly authorized for ministry were required by the Committee on Ministry to participate in a SAG group for their first year in the association. The hope was that they would freely choose participation in subsequent years, and nearly all did. There is currently no such requirement in Iowa.

## GOALS:

CCPE's exist to provide in-depth relationships of support for clergy who inevitably experience significant isolation. They provide a caring context in which true and rigorous accountability can be offered and received. They provide the potential for growth in professional expertise, in spiritual maturity, in relational and emotional process. This structure provides a context in which pastors may be coached into stances of greater self-differentiation. Among the many potential benefits to participants are improved leadership capacity, better connection with the wider UCC, more comfort and skill in dealing with difficult issues including the use of money, social justice issues, hermeneutical teaching, attitudes toward conflict, and more. Underlying these stated goals is a more fundamental goal, that is, the enhancement of local church health and mission.

This model is predicated on the assumption that local churches benefit when they are served by pastors who are themselves more healthy, competent and mature.

## EXPECTATIONS/COVENANT COMMITMENTS

The following statements summarize the operational intentions of the CCPE's:

1. **High commitment/High Expectation** - Participants are expected to attend all CCPE meetings. Courtesy and accountability require that absences be reported to the entire group – in advance, if possible. Once having decided to join a CCPE, regular participation is expected rather than optional.
2. **Confidentiality** - What is said in the CCPE belongs to the group. Lacking explicit permission to share elsewhere, it stays with the group.
3. **Ministry Focused** - There are times when group process may push up against what some would consider “therapy,” but that ISN'T the usual *modus operandi*, nor is it what we ordinarily expect to happen. We don't focus on personal issues for their own sake, but since personal issues inevitably impact our approach to ministry, we won't be reluctant to address them.
4. **Honesty/Kindness/Respect** - We must be willing to tackle difficult issues if this experience is to be valuable. That requires at times that we challenge each other quite directly. When we do, we will temper those challenges with kindness and respect.
5. **Trust** - Trust is the critical foundation for such a process to work. Trust cannot be legislated; instead it grows out of experience. Each group will inevitably begin sharing in a more superficial way. It is important, however, that the group gradually moves toward greater openness and vulnerability as the participants themselves are comfortable doing so. It is expected that this will happen and the leaders will nudge and prod participants toward greater openness.

## LEADERSHIP:

In the past, these covenant groups have been led by conference staff. There are obvious pros and cons to this model. One determinative limitation has been logistical: the existing staff has insufficient time to support the expansion of the model conference-wide. A few groups may continue to be led by staff, but in the future groups will be led by individuals with proven ministerial competence and with sophistication regarding group process. These individuals will participate in regular orientation and training for this work, and will be modestly compensated. Their ordinary function will be process facilitation, but they will materially participate in the content of the group's work to an extent deemed mutually beneficial by the group itself.

## PARTICIPATION FEES

Believing that economic investment increases emotional investment and to cover leadership expenses, CCPE's will move toward a system of participation fees. The fee will be set

sufficiently low as to present little barrier to involvement, but sufficiently high to encourage active and intentional commitment. The fees will be used to compensate the facilitators for their leadership (when facilitators are not conference staff). Because fees are foreign to current practice in the wider church, the groups will participate in a process of education and feedback prior to implementation of the fee structure. Scholarships may be requested in case of need. It is appropriate to ask one's local church or ministry setting to cover this expense.

## STATEMENT OF COVENANT

All participants in a CCPE will be asked to affirm this covenant:

### **Iowa Conference United Church of Christ CCPE Covenant 2012-13**

Together with my colleagues — fellow members of Christ's church — I covenant;

- To be present at each CCPE meeting as a matter of highest priority. When I am not able to attend, I will report my absence, in advance, if possible.
- To offer loving and honest challenge and support to each group member, as I am able, even as I open myself to receive the same from my fellow group members.
- To refrain from negative judgment in order to help build a safe environment where risky acts of vulnerability can thrive.
- To respect the boundaries of our sharing by maintaining confidential that which is shared in the group.
- To seek God's presence and help and the insight of God's Spirit in our common work.

If an individual decides to give this process a try but then concludes that it isn't what they expect or need, they are welcome to withdraw. There's no shame in that, nor is explanation needed (but please inform the other members of the group that you're dropping out).

Participation in a CCPE will eventually be open to all persons actively involved in ministry in the Iowa Conference. If you have other questions, please contact your ACM or Conference Minister Rich Pleva.

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