

Involvement in support group can lengthen pastoral tenure

By Ken Walker

State Correspondent

Richmond, Va.—While there aren't definitive statistics available on how many pastors participate in support groups, they likely are a small minority, according to Charles Chandler, executive director of the Ministering to Ministers Foundation,

"Some of George Barna's research shows 70 percent of ministers had no close friends they could talk to," Chandler noted. "I would assume if they have no friends, they're not in a support group."

Chandler, a former pastor, wrote a book several years ago for the former Baptist Sunday School Board (now LifeWay Christian Resources) on support groups.

The book was based on his support group experience as a pastor in Illinois. A professor at the University of Illinois who attended the group subsequently conducted research on the issue.

The professor discovered that people who suffered from depression or other problems found the best help came from peers going through similar experiences, Chandler noted.

He said another strength of support groups is how they help pastors overcome a sense of isolation, often a problem in forced terminations.

"Especially if you have church conflict, one part of the church is already cut off from the pastor," Chandler said. "Others in the congregation will tell you what you want to hear; only a few will tell you what you need to hear."

It is a mistake for pastors to air their frustrations in front of members, he added. Instead, Chandler said, they need to find an impartial audience outside the church, which a support group can provide.

Chandler recommends six to eight members to avoid extremes such as solely affirming each other if the group is too small, or too many confrontations if the group gets too large and loses an intimate atmosphere.

"If all they do is agree with each other it can become a sick group," Chandler emphasized. "If all they ever do is confront each other, the group will never last."

In addition to healthy affirmation and confrontation, Chandler said support groups can provide such positives as:

- Developing friendships and a sense of community, which he said can only come through sharing time and experiences.
- Producing a sense of belonging, which is especially important for pastors who move frequently.
- Providing differing perspectives, which are valuable when pastors are involved in congregational conflicts.
- Helping participants get in touch with their feelings.
- Helping reduce competition between ministers and developing closer bonds between them.
- Encouraging longer pastoral tenures.

On the last point, Chandler conducted research over two separate decade-long spans of time.

He discovered pastors involved in support groups were three times as likely to remain at the same church for long periods as those who weren't part of one.

Chandler said one reason some small groups don't last is that participants don't invest enough time to form meaningful relationships.

He said that means spending at least 50 hours a year together, whether that involves one hour a week or two hours twice a month.

"It's the telling of stories and spending time together," Chandler said. "You can't have *koinonia* without sharing time and experiences."

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