

Evaluation of Ministry

Evaluation of ministry is a critical piece of healthy, thriving congregations. To speak of “pastoral evaluation” is to examine only a portion of the ministry that takes place in and on behalf of the congregation, and is necessarily incomplete. Ministry does not happen in isolation, and involves the ministry of the congregation, its pastoral leadership, its non-pastoral staff, lay leadership, members and regular participants, community partners, and other settings of the United Church of Christ. The most effective evaluations explore all facets of a congregation’s ministry, and seek to provide honest feedback about the ministry in order to improve it for the sake of God’s realm.

Why evaluate? David McMahill says it beautifully: “the purpose of reviews done in congregation is to provide the ministerial staff and lay leaders reliable and valid feedback about how their work is going, so that they may strengthen the congregation’s ministry and mission” (*Completing the Circle*, p. 35). Jill Hudson adds, “The goal of an evaluation or review process should always be to improve the ministry of a congregation and the effectiveness of its members and staff” (*When Better Isn’t Enough*, p. 25). To that we can only contribute that all of this needs to be done “in order to make more visible the realm of God through our congregation and its leadership.” In short: *the goal of evaluating ministry is to affirm ministry and to discern ways for it to grow and thrive in this setting, to bring glory to God’s realm.*

In order to do this well, congregations must have:

- Clear and appropriate job descriptions for all staff and volunteer positions
- Specific goals for the ministry of the congregation, approved by congregational leadership
- Individual goals for staff and key volunteer positions, approved by congregational leadership

These, in turn, should be rooted in:

- The congregation’s mission and vision statements
- The United Church of Christ’s Code [of Ethics] for Ordained, Licensed or Commissioned Ministers
- “The Church in Relation To Its Pastor” (a code of ethics for congregations)
- The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers

The personnel committee in partnership with the church council should plan, lead and interpret the formal evaluation process, in partnership with the Pastoral Relations Committee. In some contexts, it may be appropriate for the Pastoral Relations Committee to take primary leadership of this process. They should include feedback from staff and volunteers and other lay leaders at every step of the process. There needs to be opportunities for evaluation by those being evaluated (self-evaluation), supervisors/supervisees, participants in ministry programs, and other stakeholders. Remember that not only staff and volunteers are being evaluated, but that the ministries of the whole church are being assessed in this process.

Outcomes of the evaluation process should be shared appropriately with all the stakeholders, starting with staff, volunteers and the Pastoral Relations Committee, so that the community as a whole can discern how and where to put time and attention in the coming year.

Regular, Consistent Evaluation

Establishing a pattern of seeking regular feedback from stakeholders helps both lower the general anxiety about “evaluation” in a ministry setting, and sets the tone for continuous improvement. Regular, consistent evaluation of ministry is vital for continued growth in ministry – both for the authorized minister and for the ministry setting.

Evaluation of ministry should be rooted in the congregation’s own theological understandings of ministry, leadership, and covenant. It should be woven into the regular practice of the congregation, with specific points set in a church’s life to dedicate time and energy in this direction. The formality of these cycles and the content of what feedback is being solicited will vary greatly based on the minister’s job description, the size and context of the congregation, and the goals and priorities of the ministry setting. Ongoing evaluation of ministry projects, events or programs helps identify areas of strength and needed growth more or less immediately.

Evaluation should not be done at moments of great tension in the ministry setting or when problems with the minister’s leadership emerge. In such times, the Pastoral Relations Committee and the pastoral staff should find ways to facilitate open and honest dialogue with the congregation towards the goal of healthy ministry. .

Alignment with Job Description, Goals, Priorities, and Vision

Evaluation is most effective when there is clarity about job descriptions, the goals and priorities of the ministry setting, and the minister's own goals and priorities for the year. This clarity should come through faithful discernment and affirmation by the church leadership.

A regular review of the job descriptions for the pastoral staff, non-pastoral staff, and key volunteers by the church's council or governing board is essential. This allows staff and volunteers to have clarity about spending their time focusing on the work to which they are called, and will help them establish their own individual goals and priorities for their work. The individual goals and priorities should be shared with the congregational leadership and the congregation as a whole, and support given to meet those goals.

Likewise, congregations should also set goals or priorities for their life together. Rooted in the church's vision, mission and purpose statements, these goals and priorities help focus a congregation's life together for a set period of time. They allow the church's leadership (including its pastoral leadership) to remain focused on the discerned will of the congregation, even when others express dissatisfaction that X isn't happening.

Finally, of course, vision, mission and purpose statements themselves need periodic discernment and re-evaluation to confirm that the congregation is still focused on those core values and purposes. As these evolve over time, so too should the goals and priorities of the congregation and its leadership evolve.

Alignment with the Marks and the Codes of Ethics

Three other tools are invaluable for congregations, ministers and lay leaders to use when evaluating ministry.

1. [The Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers in the United Church of Christ](#) were developed as a result of the passage of the Ministry Issues Pronouncement at General Synod 25, and continue to penetrate the life of the UCC. While most commonly used as a discernment tool for Members in Discernment and Committees on Ministry, ministers and settings for ministry are growing in their use of these Marks for ongoing formation, discernment, and feedback of one's

growth in ministry.¹ We recommend the use of the Marks, either through the [Marks Rubric](#) (for a more assessment-oriented conversation) or [Journaling the Journey](#) (for a more conversational approach to the Marks), as a tool to be integrated into the feedback and evaluation of the minister and the ministry of the congregation as a whole. Ideally, pastoral and lay leadership of the congregation would choose two or three of the Marks to integrate into their goals and priorities for the coming year, and reflect on those Marks throughout the year and during the evaluation period.

2. The UCC Minister's Codes of Ethics (the Ordained Minister's Code is [here](#)) is a critical tool for ongoing growth and health of our authorized ministers. Ministers are not only accountable to their setting for ministry, but they are accountable to the United Church of Christ as a part of the Church universal. The code of ethics reminds clergy what their call is and what their covenant responsibilities to God, self, family and the church are. A regular review of this document helps to continue to frame a minister's ongoing sense of call, and identifies a minister's additional responsibilities to other settings of the Church. Like the Marks, it is best to choose one or two areas of the Code to focus on and to integrate into the goals and priorities for the coming year. Discerning what parts of the Code are most appropriate is best done in partnership between the ministers, church leadership, other staff and key volunteers.
3. The Local Church in Relation to Its Pastor is a code of ethics for local congregations. Modeled after the Ordained Minister's Code, this tool outlines the covenantal responsibilities of local congregations, particularly as it relates to their partnership in ministry. It can be found on pages 20-21 of the [Manual on Ministry, Section 1](#). Reflecting on how the congregation relates to its minister is a powerful tool to deepen our theological understandings of ministry.

Feedback and Evaluation

¹ Portions of the Marks are positively correlated with congregational vitality. The full report can be found here: <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/UCC-Congregational-Vitality-and-Ministerial-Excellence-Report.pdf>. Nearly "all leadership qualities, skills or abilities ...related significantly with at least one congregational vitality measure." Some ministry-specific skills are associated with some aspects of vitality, but "most vitality measures are associated with general leadership skills in pastors."

What sort of evaluation is most helpful for ministers in a ministry setting? Different kinds of feedback and evaluation serve different purposes; all are appropriate ways of sharing information for the purpose of affirming and growing ministry.

Descriptive feedback invites people to describe their experience of some aspect of church life. “Describe your experience with X.” “How often does X happen?” “How has the minister prepared for/contributed to X?” “How has the congregation prepared for/contributed to X?” These sorts of questions give far deeper information to church leadership than asking congregants to rate their experience of worship on a 1-5 scale.

Evaluative feedback has a place in this process, too; it is most effective when there are objective, common standards about which a minister or ministry may be evaluated (such as institutional management of money, development and implementation of Safe Church policies, building maintenance). Ethical conduct in relation to the UCC’s Code of Ethics is another area where evaluative feedback may be fairly applied.

Summative evaluation bears a strong resemblance to evaluative feedback, although its emphasis is closer to alignment with a job description or goals set by congregational leadership. Summative evaluation asks, Is the individual doing work consistent with the position description? Is the ministry focusing on programs consistent with the goal set out? Are the stakeholders completing their assigned tasks?

Formative evaluation invites conversation about the improvement in performance. Where has growth happened in the past year in this ministry? Where have we seen excellence displayed? What changes can be made to aid X in advancing the overall mission of the congregation?

Post-event evaluation can provide immediate feedback that leaders can incorporate into their future planning of events and projects, and is also helpful for developing a culture of continuous improvement. A simple, three-question evaluation at the end of a meeting or event can achieve this: What worked well? What insights did you gain? What could be improved for next time?

The astute reader will notice that all of these types of evaluation and feedback tend to affirm ministry by identifying strengths of the ministry and those in

leadership positions (including pastoral staff). While there are always areas for growth in ministry, and while evaluation is the appropriate setting to explore those areas of growth, the feedback and evaluation process should provide plenty of genuine affirmation of strengths in ministry. Additionally, when negative information is important to share, such reviews should be proportional. To catastrophize on one or two areas needing attention or growth to the exclusion of 8-10 things going really well can damage both the ministry setting and the minister (as well as the relationship between the two!). If it is genuinely not possible to affirm several areas of ministry happening in the congregation or with the minister, consultation with Association or Conference staff, and/or the Committee on Ministry, may be necessary.

Model Healthy Communication

If the goal of a minister's evaluation is to improve in the practice of ministry and to increase vitality in the ministry setting, it is critical that this time of evaluation "be an example of healthy communication for the congregation [or ministry setting]" (McMahill 20). This means that feedback and evaluations should not be offered anonymously, that those offering feedback should speak for themselves and not "some people," and that all participants should be empowered to both speak their truth and to listen to others speaking their truths.

If feedback or evaluation is solicited in written form, make sure that there is a place for someone to write their names. Consider space for the following at the end of the written document: "If there is any relevant feedback you'd like to share with [minister, lay leader, other staff member or volunteer] with your name attached, please share it here. Otherwise, [minister, lay leader, other staff member or volunteer] will only know the names of those who gave feedback as a group – your responses will not be linked to you and not all of your responses will be shared." This allows people to share honestly, without necessarily attaching a name to every piece of feedback. This is most effective when a group is offering feedback or evaluation for a particular role (for example, choir members sharing information about the choir director).

Not Tied to Compensation Conversations

All of the best literature on this subject recommends that evaluation of ministry and compensation NOT be linked. Ministers should be paid fairly and justly for the work they do, with regular raises for costs of living increases, as well as increases or changes in the responsibilities of the work, and trusting in the

congregation's ability to pay. If evaluations of ministry are done in the spring, conversations about compensation would be appropriate in the fall.

Remember, too, that what is being evaluated is the ministry of the entire congregation, of which the pastor's ministry is just a part. Understood holistically, how could such an evaluation fairly connect to questions of compensation for church staff?

In Summary

Remember: *the goal of evaluating ministry is to affirm ministry and to discern ways for it to grow and thrive in this setting, to bring glory to God's realm.*

Ministry evaluation is critical to understand how the church and its leadership are living out their call from God. Done in effective ways, evaluation can affirm the places where ministry is happening, point to places of discernment where ministry needs some attention, and strengthen the mutual ministry of the pastor and the church.

For additional information, we suggest these resources, some of which were referenced in this document:

- When Better Isn't Enough: Evaluation Tools for the 21st Century Church by Jill Hudson (Rowman and Littlefield; Lanham, MD: 2004).
- Completing the Circle, by David McMahill (Rowman and Littlefield; Lanham, MD: 2003).
- User-Friendly Evaluation: Improving the Work of Pastors, Programs and Laity, by Jeff Woods (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; Lanham, MD 1995).