

Lay Field Education Committee

The central purpose of the lay committee is to engage in honest dialogue with the student so that the student may better understand the lay person's views of the ministry (lay and ordained) and gain helpful feedback as he or she prepares for ministry.

The lay committee members are expected to be honest, fair minded people who are willing to share in the SPM process as educators. A committee meeting is a time for a student to learn. The committee members are not a screening group which approves or disapproves of a student; rather, they play a supportive role in the student's learning process.

The lay committee is a valuable educational group, and there are two very good reasons why. First, lay people bring perspectives to this aspect of theological education that the clergy supervisor cannot offer. They see things "from the real world" and "from the pew." Their ministry is lived out mostly in the world, not in the institutional church setting. Only lay people can offer a student that unique perspective.

Second, baptism into the Christian faith is a commission for ministry. The education of the ordained person is an appropriate, even essential, responsibility of all ministers, both lay and ordained. Lay people need to play a part in the formation of the ordained person because ministry is a mutual calling. Students need to engage in dialogue about ministry with lay people so that ministry may be a genuinely shared task.

Organizing the Committee

Four to eight people representative of the parish or ministry setting should be recruited to form the lay committee. In settings with an on-site SPM supervisor, he or she will usually initiate the selection and formation of the group. In student pastorates, usually the lay leaders involved in the recruitment of the student will play this organizing role. In either case, it is advisable to consult with the student during the selection and organization process.

Parishes and other ministry settings have widely different ways of organizing committees, but here are some common practices that have worked well:

- In small Presbyterian parishes, a subcommittee of the session may fulfill the committee's role. To gain a cross-section from the church, others may be included who are not on the session.
- In Presbyterian parishes that have a personnel committee of the session, that committee may become the lay committee.
- In United Methodist parishes the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee often assumes the role, if it is small enough. When it is a large PPR Committee, a sub-committee may be formed as a lay committee.
- In all other denomination settings, the equivalent of the Session, the Administrative Board, or the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee should be considered as the core of the lay committee.

A chairperson should be appointed by the committee at its first meeting. The chairperson's duties are:

- To convene and chair the meetings.
- To discuss the agenda for the meeting with the student.
- To consult with the SPM field supervisor about the progress of the group.
- To sign the learning contract and the final evaluation on behalf of the committee.

The Committee Meetings

The lay committee should meet with the student at least once each month for a minimum of one hour and no more than two hours. It helps to set a regular time and place and have a set beginning and ending time. At the first meeting of the committee the clergy supervisor should be present to introduce the student, explain his or her role as the supervisor of the student, and to work with the committee to assist the student in identifying four or five areas of focused learning objectives for the learning covenant. The SPM supervisor shall not meet with the committee after this initial meeting.

The chairperson and the student should plan in advance the agenda for each meeting (including the first one). Meetings should allow ample time for in-depth discussion and opportunity for both the student and committee members to express concerns and suggest issues for discussion. Ground rules for confidentiality should be established.

Ongoing Discussion Topics

The Lay Committee and the student should set the agenda for each meeting together. The committee plays a vital role in probing and prompting the student to think deeply about his or her role in ministry. The following are recommended topics to cover:

1. **Views of Ministry** - A good place to start is to share views of the ministry of both clergy and laity with the student. What does the priesthood of all believers mean? Does your church tend more toward hierarchy or mutuality in ministry? Periodically, ask the student about how his or her view of ministry and personal sense of identity as a minister are changing. Toward what type of ministry is the student heading and how has this choice been affirmed through ministry experience and feedback? What qualities of leadership have you observed in the student? What qualities need to be given more attention for balanced development as a minister? In what ways is the student affirming the priesthood of all believers and encouraging lay ministry?
2. **Context of Ministry** - Help the student to learn more about your ministry context and people. Who are the significant leaders of families, groups, and committees? How are most decisions made --formally or informally, by the pastor or lay leaders, by consensus or majority vote? What are some of the longstanding traditions of the church (for example, for who sits where, for celebrating Christmas and Easter, for lay and youth participation in worship, or for cooperating with other churches). What are some of the unwritten rules? Who are the significant leaders in the community outside the church? What are the issues and history that shape the ethos of the community? Feel free throughout the SPM term to pass on insights about the context to the student.

3. **Student Report** - The student should regularly be asked to report on a significant ministry activity that he or she has undertaken since the last meeting. What progress is the student making on each of his or her goals for ministry, spiritual growth and personal development. This may be an oral report or one of several kinds of written reports: factual reports, case studies (such as depicting the development of a problematic situation which the student worked to resolve), or verbatims, which attempt to record a significant conversation or interaction. What is the student's self-evaluation of his or her role in this ministry event or episode? What theological values did the student live out? What values were represented by the other participants? What did the student learn or communicate about the nature of God? What ministry gifts were affirmed? What would the student do differently if faced with a similar situation in the future?
4. **Observation Report** - The lay committee members should report on activities or situations in which they have observed the student. For example, you can discuss a recent sermon, teaching session, or meeting conducted by the student. What aspects of the content, methods of presentation, program, or interaction were most effective? What views of God and the church were evident explicitly or implicitly? How would you agree or disagree? What view of ministry was modeled? What suggestions would you make for continued improvement?
5. **Upcoming Plans** - The lay committee should regularly ask the student about future plans to carrying out learning objectives or for creating new programs. What theological rationale is behind them? How are they intended to minister to God's people? What view do they support explicitly or implicitly about the ministry of the laity? Are the plans feasible for this setting? What obstacles might be encountered? Who needs to be included in the planning and implementation?
6. **Spiritual Growth** - It is always appropriate to ask a student about his or her own spiritual life. What is the student doing, such as regular Bible readings and prayer, to nurture spiritual growth? In what areas is spiritual growth evident? What is he or she learning about God's grace, faithfulness, and love? In what areas is your prayer support needed? Please take time to pray for each other.
7. **Personal Growth** - It is always appropriate to ask a student about his or her own progress toward the personal growth goal established at the beginning of the term. How is the student learning to balance personal needs, family needs, ministry opportunities and the demands of graduate school?

Joint Functions of the SPM Supervisor and the Lay Field Education Committee

Both the supervisor and the lay committee (discussed in more detail in the next section) should provide the following basic functions in working with a student:

1. **To help the student get settled into the new role.** One part of this is making sure that the student's personal needs are being taken care of. Is the office space and housing adequate? If there is a spouse and family involved, how are they doing? How will you help the student get acquainted with the members of the congregation (or other institution), the local traditions of the church, and role expectations. What are some of the issues and concerns of the people in the pew? It is important that students get to know the congregation and its heritage in order to preach, teach, and minister to them effectively.
2. **To support.** Students are learning and are growing in God's grace. They need spiritual, emotional, and collegial support. Please remember them in your prayers. They need to be undergirded with prayer in order to grow and carry out their ministry. Emotional support includes accepting the whole person as a partner in ministry, even when particular actions may be unacceptable. Collegial support includes affirmation and praise for work well done and encouragement when mistakes are made (and they will be!). If there is a student family involved, please include them in your support. Is the student making sufficient time for personal and family time? How can you and your committee help? Genuine support provides the basis and context for helpful, constructive observation, listening, reflection, feedback, and evaluation.
3. **To observe.** It takes time and attention to observe the student in a variety of settings in order to give accurate feedback and useful direction. As you observe, keep in mind the following questions: Is the student doing a good job in the various ministry areas, even if it is not exactly the same way I would do it if I were in charge? How are congregation members responding? What seems to work for the student and what does not? What specific things could be done that would have been better? In addition to specific issues, what are the general areas where growth is needed?
4. **To listen.** Good listening is not easy. It is much more than simply passively hearing someone else talk. It is attention to the deep needs and root issues. It is listening for the feelings beneath the words, searching for the meaning of what is "between the lines." The SPM Supervisor and the Lay Committee need to listen deeply both to the student and to the members of the congregation in order to serve as a bridge between the two.
5. **To help the student to reflect.** The model of learning in SPM is preparation-action-reflection. The student plans and prepares for an action or ministry, and then he or she carries out the action or service. Then the student prayerfully and carefully reflects upon those acts of ministry. Experience is a good teacher. But the best teacher is experience that is reflected upon. A student will make mistakes--we all do. Reflecting upon mistakes and triumphs helps the student improve his or her ministry.

6. **To give constructive feedback.** Feedback is an essential part of any trusting and open relationship between persons. Real learning comes from giving and receiving feedback. It is communication to a person about how others are affected by the attitudes and actions of that person. Here are some guidelines for giving useful, caring feedback:
 1. Make the feedback descriptive not interpretive. Feedback is information, not evaluation. For example, "When you read the scripture, I can't hear you," is descriptive. "Your voice is weak" is interpretive.
 2. Give feedback about things that can be changed. It must be directed to behavior which the receiver can do something about.
 3. Give feedback only to be helpful. Check out your own motivation before giving it. Feedback is not helpful if it fails to consider the receiver's needs.
 4. Make the feedback timely. The closer the feedback is given to the time the behavior took place the more the receiver will be able to use the information.
 5. Make the feedback specific, not general. Give specific examples of the behavior to which you are referring. General statements are not helpful because they do not give the receiver a clear picture of your perceptions of his or her behavior.
7. **To assess.** One important responsibility for the SPM supervisor and the lay committee members is to share with the student their perceptions of his or her progress in ministry, especially the areas which the student is currently emphasizing in SPM. The purpose of such assessment is to help the student shape his or her learning agenda for the future. At the end of the SPM course the supervisor and lay committee will complete an evaluation on a form provided by the seminary and discuss what they have written with the student. The evaluation form is then submitted to the Field Education Office at the seminary.
8. **To discern.** The processes of observing, listening, reflecting, giving feedback, and assessing all help a student to discern more fully the different aspects of God's call on his or her life. Prayerful attention to the observations and feedback of the congregation, the supervisor and the lay committee play a vital role in helping the student discern vocational call, giftedness, and needs for further growth.

Learning Covenant

The learning covenant is a tool to help students focus their learning experiences. Experience is a good teacher, but a better teacher when students identify beforehand what they seek to learn. The learning covenant is found in the packet of SPM forms.

In Part II of the contract, the students write out briefly the job description that they have agreed to fulfill. This job description will have been settled prior to the time of writing the learning covenant. If a description has already been developed, it may be attached. An estimate of the number of hours per week in each activity may also be appropriate.

In Part III, students covenant to work on specific learning objectives in two ministry areas plus one spiritual focus and one personal care focus.

A learning goal for SPM should have three parts: a) a specific statement of what the student wants to learn; b) the specific objectives or tasks involved in reaching the goal; and c) the means built-in for gaining feedback. Another way of saying this is that a learning goal is what you wish to accomplish within an area of focus and the objectives are specific steps you plan to take to accomplish your goal. Learning objectives are to be: a) measurable; b) related to guidelines for ministry that emerge from specific ministry courses; c) indicate growing ability to reflect theologically upon the practice of ministry; d) achievable; e) "owned" by the student; and f) represent a moderate rise in ability--success must be possible but not guaranteed. (Please see the SPM packet for good examples of learning goals and objectives.)

The following are useful questions in helping to formulate and evaluate learning goals:

1. Is this the right goal? Is it already one of my strengths? Or should I concentrate on an area of ministry which needs strengthening?
2. Are the objectives which I have written down as specific as they can be?
3. Do they involve doing?
4. Can the objective be acted upon rather than just talked about or hoped for?
5. Is this something that I can do within the limitations of the field setting?
6. Can it be done within the period of hours and weeks which I have available to me?
7. Can it be measured once they are done?
8. Can the goals and objectives be observed by others such as the supervisor or lay committee? (This is so that others can help me understand that the performance has or has not been accomplished and why.)
9. Is some means of feedback or evaluation included for each goal?

Evaluation

At the end of the course, written evaluations are to be completed by the student, the field supervisor and the lay committee. These evaluation forms are also in the packet of SPM forms. The student and the supervisor should exchange and discuss their evaluations and sign them prior to submitting them to the Field Education Office.

During the last month of SPM grading period, the committee should meet without the student present. At this meeting the chairperson should solicit responses from each member to the questions on the evaluation form provided by the seminary. Discussion should follow in an effort to reach consensus. The chairperson should then write out the consensus and check this out with the committee. A final meeting should be held with the student to share and discuss the evaluation. The student should also have his or her evaluation form completed and shares it with the committee. At the end of this meeting the forms are signed and then submitted to the seminary.

The evaluations should reflect whether or not the student completed the SPM learning goals written at the beginning of the term. It is not necessary for a student to meet all the objectives to receive a good evaluation. When a student fails to meet a goal, the student, supervisor, and lay committee should determine what, if anything, the student learned from the failure. If the student learned from his or her failure to complete a particular goal, this should be a part of the evaluation. The student may learn more in failure than in a successful completion of the goal.

A second area of evaluation relates to the student's ability to assess personal growth or achievement, including a growing sense of strengths in ministry and areas of needed improvement.

The final section of the evaluation assesses the student's performance in several specific areas. Please see the evaluation forms for a listing of those areas. In writing these evaluations, it is important to remember that they are often reproduced and sent to various people who are involved in the student's preparation for ministry and evaluation for ordination. Therefore, it is important that these evaluations be clear, concise, and legible, they may be handwritten or a word processing document attached to the evaluation forms.

Summary

SPM involves careful planning, hard work and intentionality on the part of the student, the gifts of time and counsel on the part of the field supervisor, careful feedback and genuine support on the part of the lay committee, and thorough evaluations by all. Yet it is not just the student who gains by this process. In helping a student prepare for ministry, the field supervisor gains new ideas and insights into his or her own ministry work, as well as forms collegial bonds of caring and support. By working cooperatively with the student, the lay committee members are able to exercise their own ministry gifts and serve the church as they help train a future leader. They are also recipients of the benefits of the student's growing skills to minister to a congregation.

Each party in the field education process has an opportunity to serve and to be served. As a result, the whole church is strengthened. May this bring spiritual growth to all and glory to God!