

BEST PRACTICES

A STUDY OF 176 PRESBYTERS IN 30
DISTRICTS WITHIN THE ASSEMBLIES
OF GOD AND HOW THEY ARE
USING SECTIONAL MEETINGS TO
BUILD COMMUNITY IN AN
AGE OF ISOLATION.

BY GENE RONCONE



Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:25, NIV

Best Practices

How relational presbyters are building community in an age of isolation.

By Gene Roncone
December, 2018

A study of how 176 sections in 30 districts within the Assemblies of God are using sectional meetings to build community.

Special Thanks

I wish to express sincere thanks to Don Steiger, my Network Pastor, who is a stable leader, secure in himself, and easy to serve. He gives us freedom, encouragement, and support. I also appreciate the presbyters of Colorado's East Slope region who helped me launch this project by suggesting survey questions, giving suggestions, and providing feedback. Don Henderson, Sam Scalf, Joe Berry, Michael Popineau, Paul Church, Phil Steiger, and James Naron serve faithfully and are greatly appreciated. This project would also not be possible without the enthusiastic participation of the 176 presbyters from across the nation who took time to take the survey, give feedback, provide examples, and support this effort.

Dedication

This research project is dedicated to the nearly 1,000 sectional and executive presbyters serving at the district level of our Fellowship. They give time they do not have and energy that is scarce as an offering unto the Lord. In a culture of narcissistic individualism, they are willing to be inconvenienced for the "betterment of us." May their tribe increase!

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INTRODUCTION

As a pastor, I have always warned couples considering divorce that they will spend more time, energy, money, and resources starting over than had they worked to fix the marriage they already had. I feel the same way about sectional meetings. Many think them ineffective. To some point, I agree; however, I believe they are worth fixing. Why? Because they have the potential to do what the best conferences, podcasts or books cannot—build relationships. They are one of our last remaining structures that facilitate relationships through human interaction. Some call it “real time.” I call it “face to face.” In his book, *Unfriended: Finding True Community in a Disconnected Culture*, Joe Battaglia called it “intersecting in real space.” Whatever you call it, we all seem to agree we need more of it! Unlike conferences, networks, or social media, sectional meetings allow us to collaborate in Kingdom building on a local level. They enable each one of us to receive prayer and support from sympathetic colleagues in real time. In an age of isolation, they give us an opportunity to work together and make our cities and regions a better place to live.

Do not get me wrong. I am not selling Pollyanna wrapped in mournful nostalgia. I am a pragmatist who has learned the hard way that starting over often demands more energy, resources, and effort than fixing what is broken. No meeting or model is perfect. Deep down we know this. We do not participate in meetings because they are perfect; we participate because of what they accomplish in and through us. I believe that is the wisdom the Bible speaks about in Hebrews:

“Do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (10:25 NIV).

The writer is not only saying we need each other, but he is also saying we will need each other more the closer we get to the Second Coming of Christ. That verse is what inspired me to launch this national survey. One of the presbyters in my region totally revived his sectional meetings. I was eager to find out how and to learn if others had accomplished the same. **After reading over 700 pages of data from 176 presbyters representing 30 different districts, I was pleased to learn that my hunch was right. Leaders, not programs, create community!** The purpose of this project was fourfold.

1. **Research.** I wanted to identify best practices from presbyters who revived their meetings and turned them into relational power plants.
2. **Resourcing.** I wanted to create an “idea well” and share these best practices with presbyters in my own region.
3. **Training.** I wanted to help new presbyters learn from experienced and innovative peers.
4. **Reinvestment.** I wanted to reinvest in a concept that has served us well, is worth saving, and has more potential than a fad whose life span is limited to its creator’s tenure.

I believe community is a well of enthusiasm, belonging, and effectiveness for all organizations. Without it, nothing works. With it, almost everything works. That is why it is my hope that as you read this report, you will reflect, write down ideas, and dare to dream of building a true sense of community in your own section. After all, we really are **BETTER TOGETHER.**

Gene Roncone
Executive Presbyter, East Slope Region
Rocky Mountain Ministry Network

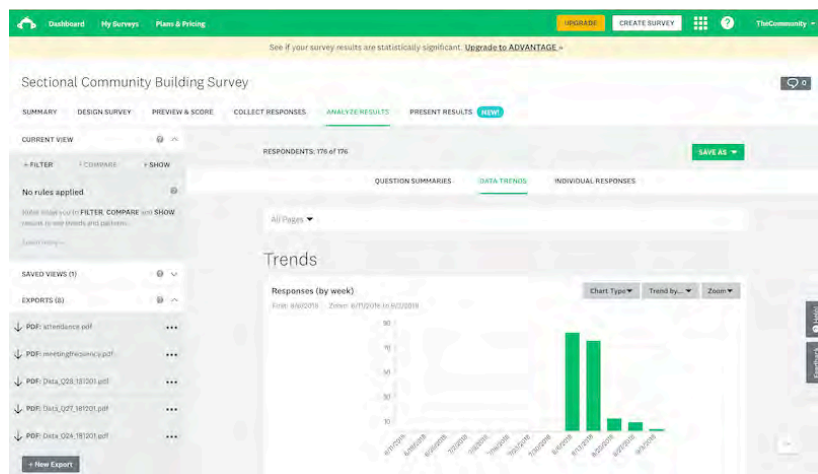
SCOPE OF PROJECT

- A. Project Formation.** In early August 2018, Colorado’s East Slope presbyters were given my initial list of questions and asked to make improvements. The improved list was then given to Allison DeHorn, a survey and data specialist with a degree in statistics from the University of Michigan, who was contracted to consult, create the survey, test reporting, and make interpretive observations.
- B. Platform Used for Survey.** The Survey Monkey interface was designed, tested, and released on August 5 and closed on September 9, 2018.
- C. Invitation to Participate.** Invitations to participate were sent to every district superintendent, assistant superintendent, and district secretary/treasurer whose email addresses or contact forms were listed on their district webpage. They were asked to forward a link to the online survey to their presbyters in return for receiving a report of the findings. Additional invitations were also emailed to individual presbyters whose email addresses were listed on their district’s website. In cases where email addresses were not provided on their website, invitations to participate were sent to district leaders via online form feed from their respective websites. Language districts whose websites were not published in English were not included (for language reasons) in the invitation group.
- D. Survey Questions.** The survey consisted of the following 28 questions:
1. What is your full name?
 2. What is your email address?
 3. What AG district are you from?
 4. What is the name of the section you are in within your district?
 5. Are you a presbyter, executive presbyter, or sectional committee person?
 6. Which of following best describes the community type of the majority of your sectional churches? (urban metro, suburban, small city, rural farm, rural mountain, or other)
 7. What are some of the most creative things you have done or have heard that other sections do at their sectional/community meetings?
 8. What is the most effective method you have used or have heard other sectional presbyters use to build a stronger sense of community?
 9. Does your section have regular meetings or not? (Those meetings might be formal sectional meetings or other more informal and relational community-building events). Answer options were: yes, fairly regularly; yes, but not regularly; or no, we do not meet at all.
 10. About how many times a year does your section have some kind of sectional, relational, or community meeting?
 11. If you do not meet regularly, please indicate the main reason why you do not. Select all that apply (too busy to plan or run the meetings, the meetings are not beneficial or productive, too difficult to find a central/convenient location, too difficult to find a day/time that works for everyone, too difficult for bivocational pastors to attend, not applicable as we do not meet, other (please specify).
 12. What would need to happen that would make planning or holding sectional/community meetings worth the effort?
 13. On average, about how many people attend your meetings? Answer options were: not applicable as we do not meet, 1-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, or more than 50.

14. About how long is the average commute for the attendees of your section? Answer options were: 0-10 miles, 11-20 miles, 21-30 miles, 31-50 miles, 51-70 miles, 71-100 miles, or more than 100 miles.
15. Does the location of your meetings vary or stay the same? Answer options were: varies or stays the same.
16. Which of the following best describes your meeting times? Answer options were: daytime, evening, or meeting times vary.
17. Who most often plans and administrates the details of your meetings? Answer options were: the presbyter alone, the presbyter with the sectional team, the sectional team alone, or one sectional member given that responsibility.
18. Does your meeting usually involve a meal? Answer options were: yes, sometimes or no.
19. Out of the average attendance, about what percentage of attendees bring their spouse? Answer options were: none/spouses are not invited, 25% or less, between 25-50%, between 50-75%, 75% or more, or not sure.
20. Which of the following methods do you use to promote the meetings and maintain interest and attendance? Check all that apply. Answer options were: email, snail mail, phone calls, texting, social media announcements, blog/website, or other (please specify).
21. Briefly describe the agenda or program order for a typical meeting.
22. What kinds of resources are made available for those who attend your meetings?
23. Have you ever brought in a guest speaker for your meetings?
24. What speaker topics have been most well-received or most interesting?
25. If you have speakers, what is the typical/average amount of honorarium you give them? Answer options were: \$0-we do not give honorariums, \$25 or less, \$26-\$50, \$51-\$100, \$101-150, or over \$150.
26. Have you ever brought in speakers from outside the section or Fellowship? Answer options were: yes or no.
27. How do you accommodate bivocational ministers?
28. Are there any comments you would like to share?

E. Synthesis. The data was then evaluated to identify trends, compare data groups, and isolate best practices. The Survey Monkey platform was able to produce calculations, graphs, and reports. The open-ended questions required individual evaluation.

Individual evaluations were completed by reading every survey word for word and a second reading by compiling responses by question. Some responses were verified by contacting participants or district officials to confirm understanding and facts. This process took three months to conclude.

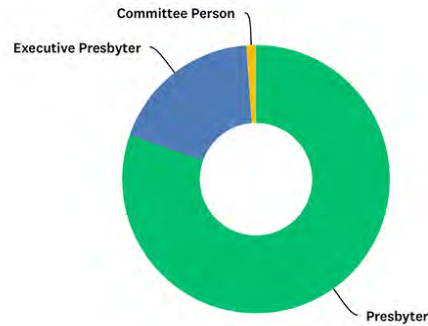


SURVEY PARTICIPATION

A. Survey Window. The first response (#1) was submitted on Monday, August 6, 2018, and the last response (#176) was submitted on Sunday, September 9, 2018. This consists of a window of 35 days.

B. Individual Participants. One hundred and seventy-six (176) presbyters completed the survey. Of those presbyters:

- 80.35% were sectional presbyters.
- 18.5% were executive presbyters.
- 1.15% were sectional committee members.

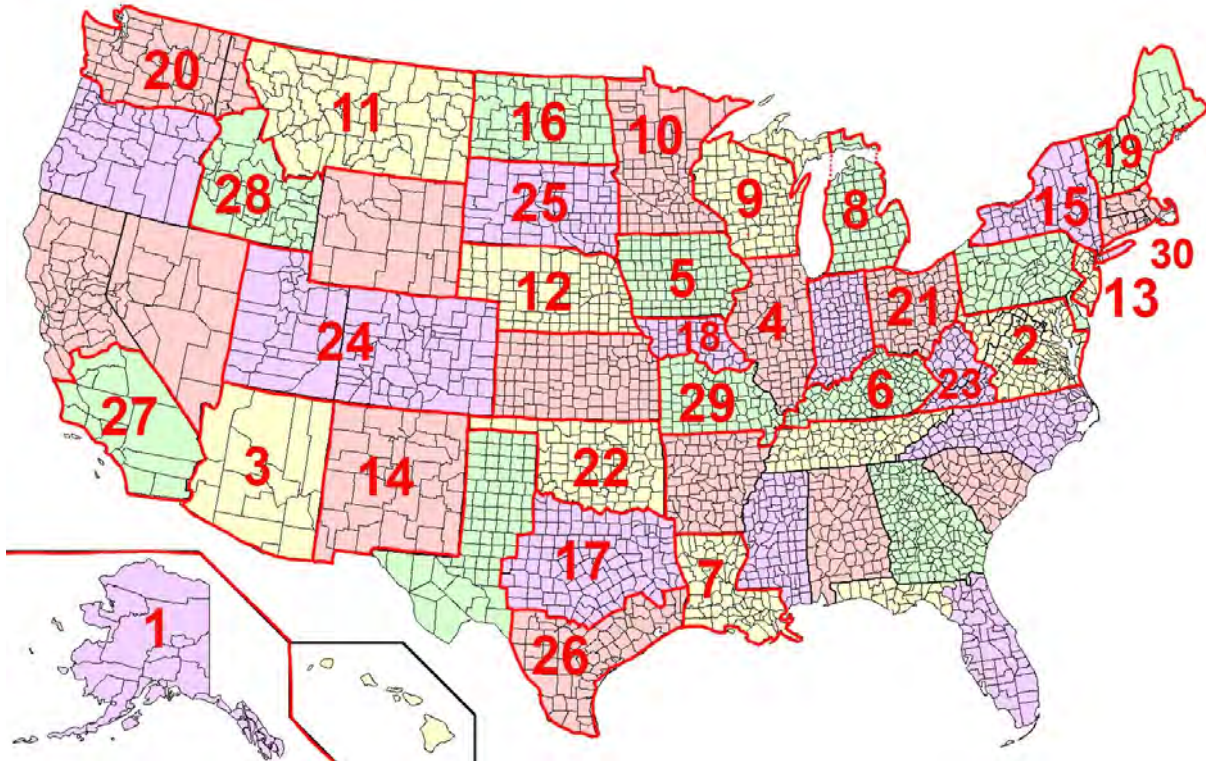


Ultimately, we ended up receiving feedback from 176 presbyters representing 30 districts around the nation. Considering there are only 700 sections in the nation, I was more than pleased to hear back from over 25% of them. When the individual surveys were combined and printed, they consisted of over 700 pages of data.

C. Participating Districts. The following 30 districts had at least one presbyter participate in the survey. They are listed in alphabetical order.

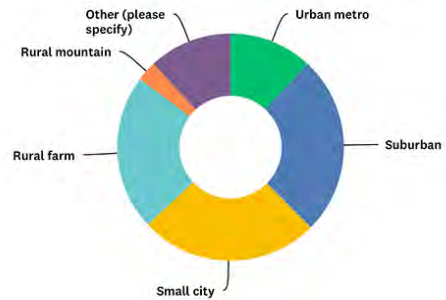
1	Alaska	5	presbyters
2	Appalachian	1	presbyter
3	Arizona	8	presbyters
4	Illinois	12	presbyters
5	Iowa	4	presbyters
6	Kentucky	3	presbyters
7	Louisiana	1	presbyter
8	Michigan	10	presbyters
9	Midwest Latin	1	presbyter
10	Minnesota	7	presbyters
11	Montana	5	presbyters
12	Nebraska	8	presbyters
13	New Jersey	4	presbyters
14	New Mexico	1	presbyter
15	New York	6	presbyters
16	North Dakota	6	presbyters
17	North Texas	9	presbyters
18	Northern Missouri	1	presbyter
19	Northern New England	2	presbyters
20	Northwest	19	presbyters
21	Ohio	14	presbyters
22	Oklahoma	5	presbyters
23	Potomac	8	presbyters

24	Rocky Mountain	11	presbyters
25	South Dakota	3	presbyters
26	South Texas	3	presbyters
27	Southern California	2	presbyters
28	Southern Idaho	2	presbyters
29	Southern Missouri	9	presbyters
30	Southern New England	6	presbyters
	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	176	presbyters



D. Ministry Context. Participants identified the following ministry contexts as the community type for the majority of churches in their section:

- 12% Urban metro
- 26% Suburban
- 26% Small city/town
- 22% Rural farm
- 3% Rural mountain
- 11% Other (combination of above, forest, lake)



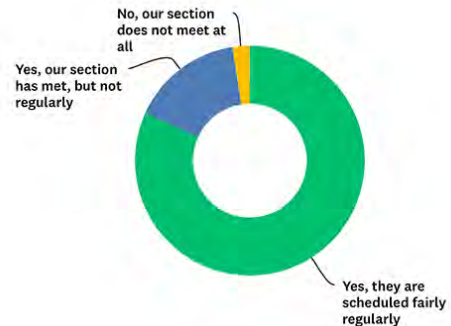
MEETING CHARACTERISTICS

A. Regularity. Question 9 asked, “Does your section have regular meetings or not? (These meetings might be formal sectional meetings or other more informal relational or community-building events).” There were three response options:

82% responded, “Yes, they are scheduled fairly regularly.”

16% responded, “Yes, our section has met but not regularly.”

2% responded, “No, our section does not meet.”



B. Frequency. Question 10 asked, “About how many times a year does your section have some kind of sectional, relational or community-building meeting?” There were 13 response options; 93% of responders answered this question, and 7% chose not to answer (skipped) it. Of those who responded:

2% had 0 meetings a year.

2% had 1 meeting a year.

8% had 2 meetings a year.

6% had 3 meetings a year.

10% had 4 meetings a year.

9% had 5 meetings a year.

11% had 6 meetings a year.

4% had 7 meetings a year.

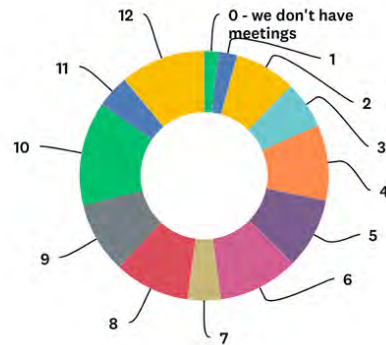
10% had 8 meetings a year.

9% had 9 meetings a year.

14% had 10 meetings a year.

4% had 11 meetings a year.

11% had 12 meetings a year.



12% of sections meet less than two times a year, 63% of sections meet at least every other month, and only 11% of sections meet monthly.

C. Reasons for Irregularity. Question 11 was directed towards those who said they did not meet regularly. They were asked to indicate the main reason why they do not. There were 7 response options.

6% said they were “too busy to plan or run the meetings.”

6% said “the meetings are not beneficial or productive.”

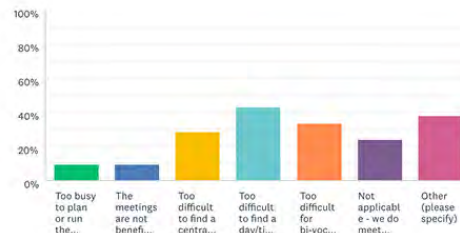
17% said it was “too difficult to find a central/convenient location.”

26% said it was “too difficult to find a day/time that works for everyone.”

21% said it was “too difficult for bivocational pastors to attend.”

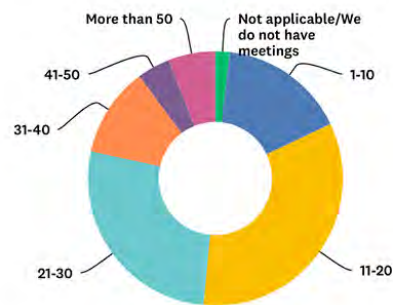
24% said “other” (people will not travel to other communities, pastors are too busy, the network seems to lack interest in regular meetings, restaurants require financial deposits and guaranteed numbers, our presbyter chooses not to have them, churches are too far apart).

It is also worth mentioning that those who chose not to meet seemed to lack the ability or willingness or overcome the obstacles to do so. Question 12 asked presbyters who do not plan regular meetings, “What would need to happen that would make planning or holding sectional/community meetings worth the effort?” The sampling of responses seemed to indicate that these presbyters felt unprepared to come up with a solution or expected someone else to do so. When asked what would need to change to make meetings possible they gave the following responses.



- “I do not know.”
- “Greater participation from full-time pastors and bivocational pastors.”
- “More relational connections.”
- “Making the meetings worthwhile, practical, and relevant instead of just meeting to meet.”
- “Younger ministers do not show an interest or loyalty to the organization.”
- “Our meetings feel obligatory and offer little.”

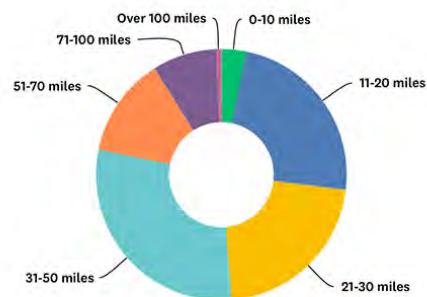
D. Average Attendance. Question 13 asked, “On average, about how many people attend your meetings?” Answer options were: not applicable as we do not meet, 1-10, 11-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, and more than 50. Responses were:



- 2% said 0, we do not have meetings.
- 16% said 1-10.
- 34% said 11-20.
- 27% said 21-30.
- 11% said 31-40.
- 4% said 41-50.
- 6% said more than 50.

16% of sectional meetings have less than 10 people in attendance, 38% have over 20 and less than 50 in attendance, 21% have more than 30 people in attendance, and 6% have more than 50 people in attendance.

E. Commute Times. Question 14 asked, “How long is the average commute for the attendees of your section?” Answer options were: 0-10 miles, 11-20 miles, 21-30 miles, 31-50 miles, 51-70 miles, 71-100 miles, and more than 100 miles.



- 3% said 0-10 miles.
- 24% said 11-20 miles.
- 22% said 21-30 miles.
- 29% said 31-50 miles.
- 13% said 51-70 miles.
- 8% said 71-100 miles.
- 1% said more than 100 miles.

One of the most interesting observations of this study resulted from the relationship between attendance, distance traveled, and best practices. Interestingly, people seemed very willing to travel 30 miles or more if there was a draw. For the groups that had excellent attendance, many people drove lengthy distances so it is not necessarily that distance is a barrier to meeting as much as a feeling that the meeting was helpful and worthwhile.

For example, Joe Berry is a presbyter who serves isolated churches on Colorado’s eastern plains. He pastors 16 miles from the Kansas border and works hard to build a sense of community in his section. Excited after one of his meetings, Joe said in an email, “We had 20 at our meeting which was 100% of the active ministers in our section. Sharilyn and I invested 10 hours and about 300 miles in driving to make it happen. What we lack in numbers, we make up for in geography!” Joe’s meetings are rewarding so the other ministers are willing to make the drive. This seems to prove that not only do people crave community, but they also are willing to be inconvenienced if it is provided in a fulfilling way.

F. Location of Meetings. Question 15 asked, “Does the location of your meetings vary or stay the same?” Answer options were: varies or stays the same.

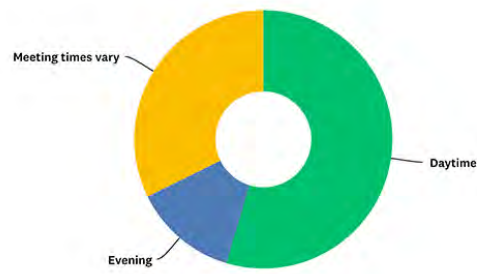
- 84% said their meeting location varies.
- 16% said their meeting location stays the same.

Sections with the largest participation and frequency of meetings were those whose meeting locations changed or moved around the section.

G. Meeting Times. Question 16 asked, “Which of the following best describes your meeting times?”

Answer options were: daytime, evening, or meeting times vary.

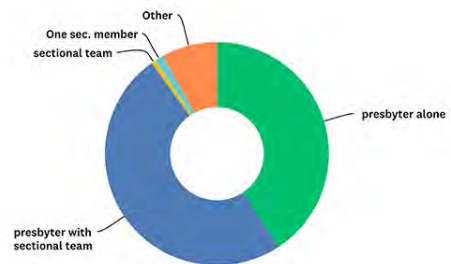
- 55% said their meeting times occur during the daytime.
- 13% said their meeting times occur during the evening.
- 32% said their meeting times vary.



It is interesting to note that 55% of sectional meetings occur during a time that working spouses, stay-at-home mothers, and bivocational pastors are unable to attend.

H. Meeting Planning. Question 17 asked, “Who most often plans and administrates the details of your meetings?” Answer options were: the presbyter alone, the presbyter with the sectional team, the sectional team alone, or one sectional member given that responsibility.

- 41% said the presbyter alone.
- 49% said the presbyter with the sectional team.
- 1% said the sectional team alone.
- 1% said one sectional member given that responsibility.



8% said other with responses being: presbyter and host pastor, presbyter and secretary/treasurer, planning team that meets two times a year, regional executive presbyter and presbyters, presbyter's wife, team of presbyters, presbyter and local church staff.

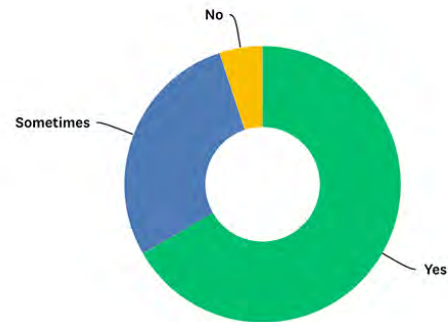
Sections with the largest participation and frequency of meetings were those whose meeting planning involved a collaborative process of either a team or section-wide survey. It is interesting to note that the planning of 41% of sectional meetings is not intentionally collaborative and planned by the presbyter alone.

I. Meal Inclusion. Question 18 asked, “Does your meeting usually involve a meal?” Answer options were: yes, sometimes, or no.

67% said yes, their regular meetings involve a meal.

28% said sometimes their regular meetings involve a meal.

5% said no, their regular meetings do not involve a meal.



J. Spousal Involvement. Question 19 asked, “Out of the average attendance, about what percentage of attendees bring their spouse?” Answer options were: none/spouses are not invited, 25% or less, between 25-50%, between 50-75%, 75% or more, or not sure.

5% said no spouses come as they are not invited.

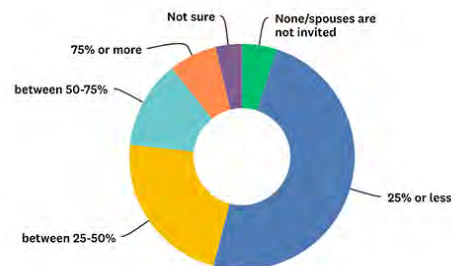
49% said 25% or less of their attendance is spouses.

23% said between 25-50% of their attendance is spouses.

13% said between 50-75% of their spouses attend.

7% said 75% or more of their attendance are spouses.

4% said they were not sure what percentage of attendance are spouses.

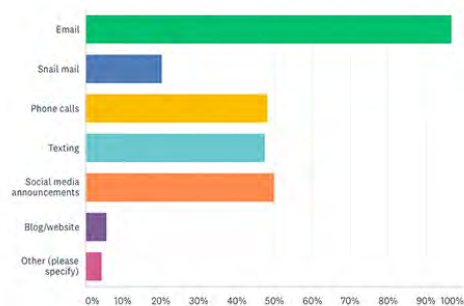


The participation of spouses is a huge opportunity to increase a sense of community, inclusion, and meaningful relationships on the sectional level. It is also an opportunity to decrease isolation, burnout, and organizational dissatisfaction. However, the survey revealed that very few sections are intentional about including spouses in sectional meetings.

K. Promotion and Advertising. Question 20 asked, “Which of the following methods do you use to promote the meetings and maintain interest and attendance? Check all that apply.” Answer options were: email, snail mail, phone calls, texting, social media announcements, blog/website, or other (please specify).

97% use email to promote meetings and community building.

20% use snail mail to promote meetings and community building.



- 48% use phone calls to promote meetings and community building.
- 47% use texting to promote meetings and community building.
- 50% use social media to promote meetings and community building.
- 6% use blog/website to promote meetings and community building.

Those listing “other” consisted of a few combinations of the above. It is interesting to note that 50% of all meetings are promoted in nonpersonal or electronic ways. Sections with larger participation rates were those whose promotion was more personal and in the form of an invitation (phone call, personal invite, or even individual email as opposed to a group blast). Best practice presbyters used something other than email and texting to invite people to meetings. Some of the presbyters and committee members even saw their role as pastoral care teams for the ministers of their section.

L. Meeting Agendas (10 most common). Question 21 asked participants to briefly describe the agenda or program order for a typical meeting. Participating presbyters submitted a total of 157 different meeting agendas in the survey. Although many of them use different formats depending on the meeting’s goal, most submissions could be summarized in the following categories:

1. Unstructured format. The only structure these meetings have is a date, location, and start time. They are very informal and do not have an agenda. They usually take place in coffee shops or restaurants, and the discussion topics are fluid and unplanned. It should be noted that although this format takes the least amount of time to plan, it is not appealing to those who place a high value on time and intentionality. This structure has a time and place, but our survey seemed to reveal that those who use it regularly have the smallest participation levels.

2. Spotlight format. This format uses the meeting to help pastors get to know the person behind the host ministry. It is a “hands-on” and “boots on the ground” type of approach. Presbyter Sam Scalf of the Rocky Mountain Ministry Network pioneered this model and breathed new life into their sectional meetings. When asked what motivated him to create this format, Sam said, “We meet monthly in a location picked by a host minister. This might be at their church or at their favorite coffee shop in their neighborhood. But we like it to be near their actual ministry setting. During the meeting, we highlight the host minister’s ministry in that area. We celebrate the work of that minister. We find out how we can pray for them and their family, and we hear what is unique about their context. I believe stories matter. We have unsung ministry heroes in every context, and these meetings are the only place to tell those stories.” Sam’s meetings have grown significantly, and he has yet to bring in an outside speaker. His agenda is as follows:



- People introduce themselves.
- Presbyter introduces the host.
- Guided conversation about the ministry life of the host minister.
- Q&A. Sam asks the host pastor questions like, “What is your favorite thing about your ministry? What makes your area of ministry unique? What are the unique challenges of

your ministry context? How can we pray for you? What is your biggest need right now?"

- Closing prayer.
- Dismissal.

Sam is a quiet, soft spoken and unassuming guy. Although he hates the spotlight, Sam has some strong opinions about sectional meetings saying, "Our time together is not for advertising your latest thing. We gather to share in the journey of ministry." The theme of Sam's section is "Better Together," and he believes these times must have less self-promotion and more listening and genuine vulnerability.

3. Chapel format. These meetings are very similar to a chapel or vesper service. Although they may differ, most seem to have the following components:

- Informal fellowship.
- Opening prayer.
- Worship.
- Announcements.
- Sermon/devotional.
- Prayer and altar time.
- Dismissal.

Other components may include testimonies, choirs, and extended worship times. This format most resembles the old "sectional fellowship meetings" or a church service and tends to be the least popular. It has a time and place but, when overused, can limit momentum. In the words of presbyter Scott Collins from the Northwest Ministry Network, "Sectional meetings are a relational time, not a time to preach at preachers."

4. Round table format. These meetings consist of a larger group being broken down into different tables with 6-8 people at each. The agenda is then designed to support table talk or group discussion concerning the topic at hand.

- Informal fellowship with coffee and snacks.
- Prayer.
- Introduce topic and/or guest.
- Presentation of topic (sometimes alternating with discussion).
- Table discussions (sometimes alternating with presentation).
- Possible Q&A or table reports.
- Prayer.
- Dismissal.

5. Presentation format. These meetings center around a knowledgeable or expert presenter. This individual then presents a topic or the facts, trends, application, challenges, and solutions surrounding that issue.

- Pray.
- Meal or snacks.
- Introduce new members.
- Announcements.

- Speaker.
- Group interaction.
- Prayer.
- Dismissal.

6. **Meal format.** Although these meetings involve several different components, they revolve around a shared meal (breakfast, lunch, or dinner) with the following agenda:

- Prayer.
- Meal.
- Announcements.
- Speaker.
- Prayer requests and prayer.
- Dismissal.



7. **Resource format.** This format's purpose is to introduce participants to one or more new resources and answer questions concerning its application. Examples of resources may be a new book, curriculum, website, podcast, conference, Vlog, or research project.

- Informal fellowship with coffee and snacks.
- Icebreaker.
- Introduce guest.
- Present pros and cons about resource.
- Q&A.
- Prayer.
- Dismissal.

8. **Organizational format.** The purpose of this format is to focus on the resources, ministries or leadership of the Assemblies of God on any level.

- Informal fellowship with coffee and snacks.
- Prayer.
- Announcements (current or coming sectional, district, or General Council events).
- Resource window introducing a new denominational resource.
- Introduce topic and/or guest (sectional, district, or national personnel).
- Presentation of topic.
- Q&A.
- Prayer.
- Dismissal.

Speakers for this format could be sectional or executive presbyters in the district, district staff, district department heads, district officials, home and foreign missionaries, General Council department heads or officials. The format can also feature things like new curriculum, books by denominational authors, district departmental resources, or coming events such as conferences, retreats, council meetings, or seminars.

9. Prayer table format. This format consists of the larger group being broken down into different tables with 6-8 people at each. The agenda is designed to develop relationships and pray WITH and FOR one another.

- Informal fellowship with coffee and snacks.
- Prayer.
- Devotional concerning the need for prayer and community.
- Prayer requests. Each person at the table writes on a card and shares with the others three things they would like others to pray with them about:
 - a. Personal.
 - b. Spouse.
 - c. Family or ministry.
- Table members then pray with and for each other while soft background music is playing.
- Closing comments.
- Dismissal.

10. Electoral format. This meeting format is used when a section must elect a sectional presbyter, committee person or make nominations.

- Informal fellowship with coffee and snacks.
- Greeting and introduction of new members from the presbyter.
- Explanation of:
 - a. Positions to be filled.
 - b. Qualifications required.
 - c. Responsibilities to the section and district from the bylaws by district personnel.
- Announcing the names of potential candidates.
- Elections chaired by someone other than those being voted on (preferably district officer).
- Results of elections.
- Prayer time for and over those elected.
- Dismissal.

It is important to note that presbyters should consult their district bylaws and district superintendent/network pastor before finalizing these plans. Meeting parliamentary requirements may require district help, a district official chairing the meeting, or specific procedures for counting votes and reporting results.

M. Resources. Question 22 asked, “What kinds of resources are made available for those who attend your meetings?” The following is a list of resources 149 presbyters gave in response to this open-ended question. They are listed in order of frequency mentioned with the number of reoccurrences in parenthesis.

Speaker handouts (48)

Books (47)

Websites (22)

District Events and Resources (18)

Training opportunities (11)

Missionary information (7)

Articles of interest (6)

Idea information (5)

Resource cooperative (4)

Gift packages (4)

Ministers contact info update (3)

Video/CD (3)

Recommended speakers (3)
 Retreat info (2)
 Gas cards/travel expense (2)
 Flash drives (2)

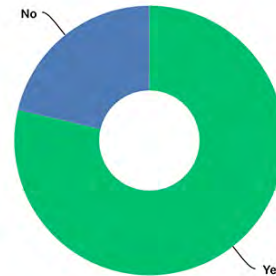
Personal spirituality (1)
 Demographic info for cities (1)
 Ministry opportunities (1)

The survey uncovered a surprising observation concerning the use of resources. Resources provided at meetings do not seem to, in and of themselves, influence attendance since groups who meet often and those who rarely meet had very similar comments about resources. As a matter of fact, some of the groups with excellent attendance do not provide resources or only provide them if the speaker brings them. There is so much available online these days that people can access resources on just about any topic through the internet without going to the meetings. The only time resources seemed to make a significant contribution to increased attendance was when they were combined with the presentation of an extremely qualified and gifted presenter (recognized expert).

N. Guest Speakers. Questions 23-26 asked presbyters about practices concerning guest speakers. The following data summarizes their responses.

1. **Use.** When asked, “Have you ever brought in a guest speaker for your meetings?”

- 79% said yes.
- 21% said no.



2. **Topics.** When asked, “What speaker topics have been most well-received or most interesting?” 121 presbyters responded to this open-ended question.

The following is a list of popular speaker topics listed in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned (with the number of reoccurrences in parenthesis). Remember, these are not suggested topics by ministers or presbyters as much as topics presbyters remembered as being popular and well-received.

Leadership (23)
 Missions-related topics (19)
 Anxiety and discouragement (17)
 Personal finances (11)
 Marriage and family (10)
 Personal spirituality (10)
 Self-care (10)
 Sexuality and the church (10)
 Sermon prep (9)
 Local outreach (8)
 Technology and social media (8)
 Staff and team (7)
 Church finances (6)
 Limiting legal liability (6)
 Church security and safety (5)
 Loneliness in ministry (5)

Politics and the church (5)
 Spirit-filled faith (5)
 Apologetics (4)
 Church growth (4)
 Disciple making (4)
 Conflict management (3)
 Dinner church model (3)
 Managing scandal (3)
 Vision (3)
 Board relationships (2)
 Healing wounds from ministry (2)
 Longevity in ministry (2)
 Ministry helps (2)
 Personal health (2)
 Raising money (2)
 Retirement planning (2)

Systems thinking (2)
 Understanding millennials (2)
 Avoiding burnout (1)
 Challenges (1)
 Chaplaincy (1)
 Church law (1)
 Church planting (1)
 Evangelism (1)
 Failure, rejection, and ineffectiveness (1)
 Goals and strategy (1)
 Graphic resources (1)
 How to handle criticism (1)
 Insecurity, jealousy, and competition (1)
 Intergenerational church (1)
 Leading change (1)

Managing stress (1)
 Ministry to Muslims (1)
 Multicultural ministry (1)
 Music styles (1)
 Pastoral care (1)
 Personal evangelism (1)
 Prayer trips (1)
 Prodigals in the parsonage (1)
 Prophecy (1)
 Rural church ministry (1)
 Seasons of ministry (1)
 Small groups (1)
 Succession planning (1)
 Time management (1)
 Visitor reception (1)

3. Honorarium. When asked, “If you have speakers, what is the typical/average amount of honorarium you give them?” 123 presbyters responded. Answer options were: \$0 we do not give honorariums, \$25 or less, \$26-\$50, \$51-\$100, \$101-150, or over \$150.

- 39% provide no honorarium.
- 1% provide an honorarium of \$25 or less.
- 2% provide an honorarium between \$26-\$50.
- 22% provide an honorarium between \$51-\$100.
- 18% provide an honorarium between \$101-\$150.
- 18% provide an honorarium over \$150.



4. External speakers. When asked, “Have you ever brought in speakers from outside the section or Fellowship?” the answer options were: yes or no.

- 78% said they brought in speakers from outside the section.
- 22% said they did not bring in speakers from outside the section.

O. Bivocational Inclusion. Question 27 asked, “How do you accommodate bivocational ministers?” If there was one question on the survey where responses swung from the two extremes of “I have no idea” to “This is what I have found to be effective,” it was this question. 153 presbyters chose to answer this open-ended question. Following is a summary of repeated best practices from those responses:

1. Lead with intentional empathy. Many presbyters made it a point to mention the compassion and sensitivity they had towards ministers who have to work secular jobs because their churches are unable to support them. Some even sympathetically referred to their own experiences as a bivocational pastor in their early years of ministry. Presbyters with the highest percentage of involvement from this group possessed an intentional awareness of the needs and limitations of

bi-vocation pastors. This awareness often shaped their decision to provide a few evening meetings, extra pastoral support, and a “bring ministry to them” kind of approach. These evening meetings were able to include bivocational staff members, retired ministers, and even key volunteers in smaller churches who served as “staff” by donating many hours of weekly service. It is important to mention that these presbyters also were aware that the events, resourcing, and community-building opportunities of the entire section cannot be driven by the needs of bivocational pastors alone. They were able to mitigate this tension by seeking a healthy balance. These presbyters seemed to understand that bivocational ministers face a different form of isolation that can be more debilitating than vast geographical distance.

2. **Plan a few evening meetings.** Best practice presbyters made sure that some of their annual meetings were scheduled in the evenings so bivocational pastors and staff members could attend. Some practical things presbyters mentioned that helped on this front are:
 - Publish your annual calendar in January of each year and stick with it! Do not cancel or change dates. This kind of reliability gives bivocational pastors and their spouse the ability to plan ahead and maybe change their work schedules once or twice a year to attend your normal meeting time. Few things suck the life out of enthusiasm more than a pastor’s changing his work schedule only to find out the sectional meeting was moved or canceled.
 - Rotate your meetings and be sure to publish the evening meeting date, time, and location well in advance so others can attend.
 - Take time in your meetings to cast vision and explain why “we” plan a few evening meetings. This will help full-time ministers understand the rationale and sense of community behind this kind of accommodation. Others will be more likely to support evening meetings if they understand how much it blesses bivocational pastors.

It should also be mentioned that several presbyters expressed disappointment that holding a few evening meetings did not result in increased participation from bivocational pastors and at times resulted in decreased attendance of vocational ministers. The only time this did not take place seemed to be in instances where presbyters maintained personal contact with bivocational ministers in between meetings and took time in day meetings to explain the importance of inclusion to vocational pastors. This seemed to result in more engagement from both bivocational and vocational pastors at evening meetings.

3. **Maintain personal contact.** Best practice presbyters were willing to make an extra effort and be inconvenienced to meet with bivocational pastors one-on-one at a time convenient for them. Most presbyters say these meetings occurred once or twice a year in person (lunch or dinner) but more often over the phone and through email. One presbyter even makes a point to meet them at a location near their secular employment. We did notice that presbyters who maintained personal contact had more engagement from bivocational pastors even if they did not offer many evening opportunities.
4. **Initiate an honest discussion about expectations.** Realistic presbyters leveraged their relationships to have an honest conversation with bivocational pastors about the need for both sides to maintain communication. It is easy for bivocational pastors to expect the section or district to make the initiative every time, but relationships are a lot like bridge building in that they require a cable to be sent down from both sides of the gorge. That means bivocational pastors must also take the initiative to check in and communicate. Best practice presbyters

meet one-on-one with bivocational pastors to set reasonable expectations and remind them to take responsibility for relationships by reaching out through phone calls and emails whenever possible.

5. **Broker small support groups.** Best practice presbyters use their leverage as a leader to introduce the bivocational pastor and their spouse to a team of three other ministry couples in the section. They explain the kind of isolation bivocational pastors and their spouses face and ask that group to become a support system for the bivocational pastor and their spouse. If the presbyter's spouse can be involved setting up these teams, it is a plus because if the bivocational minister faces isolation, their spouse will face it even more. Examples of these support groups mentioned in the survey ranged from regularly scheduled dinner appointments to evening book clubs to quarterly get-togethers.
6. **Mobilize your section to bless them.** The very fact that a minister is bivocational tells us three things:
 - **They have limited finances.** Their church has yet to establish the financial strength to afford a full-time pastor.
 - **They are more likely for burnout.** No matter how gifted they may be, that ministry couple is burning the candle at both ends. Their lives have very little margin for rest and self-care.
 - **They lack a support base.** They have few peer relationships and a limited support structure.

These unfortunate realities make them exciting opportunities for your section to bless them as part of the community. Thankfully, several presbyters provided practical examples of ways they do this that included:

- Sending them away for a weekend getaway while providing preaching and worship for their church while they are gone.
 - Giving them gas money, gift cards for restaurants, and scholarships for their kids to attend youth or kids camp.
 - Taking them out to dinner with two other ministry couples they may not know. This gives them the ability to establish new relationships.
 - Giving them financial and logistic assistance to attend district council.
 - Having the section make a monthly pledge to get them one step closer to full-time ministry.
7. **Pair them with larger sister churches.** One of the most inspirational responses to this question came from presbyter Ric Freeman from Oklahoma. Ric showed the size of his spirit when he said, "Our church is the largest in the section, and God has blessed us with both the finances and the interest of our board to reach out and help some of these struggling churches. We help with citywide events—take our inflatables, provide hamburgers, and use our people to help create a big day. We have bought sound systems, projectors, screens, computers—all to try and keep our rural churches alive. During Christmas, we make sure rural pastors in struggling churches are taken care of because we're all in this together."

There are few things as inspiring as seeing the pastor of a larger church committed to community, recognizing his need for others, and initiating compassionate togetherness. May Ric's tribe increase.

P. Creative Applications. The following creative ideas were given by participants as ways they keep their meeting agendas fresh and different:

1. **Balance.** The best sectional meeting calendars have a balance of three things:

- Educating the mind (new and relevant knowledge).
- Motivating the heart (encouragement and inspiration).
- Activating the will (opportunities for action).

When the annual calendar hits all three of these in several ways, people come back.

2. **Overlapping connectedness.** Presbyterian Timothy Hazen from Nebraska reported a unique way of intentionally connecting meetings to each other. Tim accomplishes this by overlapping meeting participation. The pastor who hosted the last meeting becomes the one responsible to give a devotional at the next meeting in a new location. Speech writers call this a “through-line,” and it is a powerful way to prolong a theme.

3. **Pray “with” not just “for”.** Most presbyters found a creative way to incorporate prayer for each other in their meetings. Presbyters who found a way to do this in a noncompetitive and nonchurched way also had higher participation rates than those who did not. The key seems to be finding ways for ministers to pray WITH and not just FOR each other. This is one of the ways sectional meetings can provide what megaconferences, seminars, Facebook groups, district councils, or podcasts cannot. It provides spiritual support to “water carriers” (local pastors) who are often overlooked in their own local context.

4. **Celebrate wins.** Each person shares a ministry or personal victory that occurred since the last meeting. This should be presented as a way to celebrate team and not encourage competition or jealousy. It facilitates balance between the challenging and often discouraging components of ministry with the positive ones.

5. **Recognizing what pastors value.** Successful presbyters recognize three things that are important to most pastors:

- Intentionality and purpose for meetings.
- Wise use of meeting times.
- Relational interaction.

When overused, loose hangouts, lack of planning, long meetings and impersonal infomercials can suck the life and momentum out of a section.



6. **Field trips.** One the most creative ideas one section utilized was taking their meeting on the road. Literally. They rented a large bus and held their meeting and training while in route to tour district ministries.

7. **Relational meeting starters.** Start your meetings on a fun and relational tone by placing question cards on the chairs that people have to answer. Examples could be:

- How did you meet your spouse?
- What is the most fun vacation you have ever been on together?
- What is the most embarrassing thing you have accidentally said while preaching?
- If you could wave a magic wand and make anything happen, what would it be?
- Tell me about the most exciting project you are working on.
- What is new in your family?
- If you had not been born in this century, when and where would you have fit in best?
- What are your hobbies and passions outside of ministry?
- What is a secret talent or skill of yours that few people know?
- What is your favorite aisle at the grocery store?
- Other than coming to this meeting, what is the stupidest, craziest, most regretful, most fun thing you have ever agreed to do?
- What is on your “Bucket List”?
- If you were not a minister what would you be?
- If God were to give you one extra day a week, how would you spend it?
- What do you do to relax?
- What is your favorite team, and who do you enjoy beating the most?
- I am guessing you do not play the lottery; but if you ever won the lottery, what would you do with the money?
- What books, magazines, websites, or journals do you enjoy the most?
- What travel experience changed your life?



Even if this takes a good amount of time, you will have managed to help everyone know more about each other. It could also be a great segue into a prayer time for needs.

8. **Rewarding what you want repeated.** To recognize accomplishment and encourage credential advancement, presbyter Erny McDonough from the South Texas District makes it a point to publicly recognize newly elected pastors and recently ordained ministers in attendance and allows them to present one of the sectional devotionals.

9. **Catered Food.** Several presbyters made mention that catering in food for their meetings allows the host church to be more engaged and allows for a diversity of food.

Q. Obtaining Feedback. Many of the presbyters who enjoyed higher rates of participation were not only collaborative in the planning of the meetings but also used open-ended surveys to help them know what “itch to scratch”. These were made available through online surveys (Facebook or Survey Monkey), handouts or questions emailed to local ministers in the section. Following is a template of a possible survey:

Name _____
 Church _____ City _____

1. Role in church (select one): Lead pastor, youth pastor, children’s pastor, associate pastor
2. How effective are our sectional meetings on a scale of 1-10? _____ What would need to happen to make this number an 8 or 9? Please give specific examples.
3. How many times in the past 12 months have you attended our sectional meetings?

4. What do you like most about our sectional meetings?
5. What do you like least about our sectional meetings?
6. What opportunities do you feel we are missing as a section?
7. If you were to pick your first, second, and third preference for the day of the week sectional meetings occur, what would they be? 1st _____ 2nd _____
 _____ 3rd _____

* HINT: Sorting the responses to this question three separate times according to each individual’s preferences promises to be enlightening. For example, see what day was everyone’s most popular first choice. Then see what day was everyone’s most popular second choice, and then which day was their third most popular choice. This is called preferential voting and helps to take into consideration people’s second most desired outcome.

8. What time of day works best for you in the following categories: morning, lunch, or evenings. Please number them in prioritized order. 1st _____ 2nd _____
 _____ 3rd _____

* HINT: Sorting the responses to this question three separate times according to each individual’s preferences promises to be enlightening. For example, see what time was everyone’s most popular first choice. Then see what time was everyone’s most popular second choice, and then which time was their third most popular choice. This is called preferential voting and helps to take into consideration people’s second most desired outcome.

9. What suggestions or ideas would you have to make our meetings more relational in nature?

10. What three areas of ministry require the most of your time?

- _____
- _____
- _____

11. What topics for the above areas would you most enjoy discussing, presenting or hearing about in future meetings?

12. What fun and nonministry related social activities would you recommend we do as a section?

13. What giftings, knowledge, or availability do you have that might contribute to the success of our meetings in the next year?

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

The following practices were listed by participants answering questions 7 and 8 concerning effective things that create community.

A. Annual Events. Annual family picnic (cater food and make it a big deal with a lot of fun, prizes, rock-climbing wall, bounce house, and time for games and bonding), Christmas party, Thanksgiving gathering, district council social, camping trip, fishing excursion, marathon, and others.



B. Idea Sharing. Pick five topics and have each member share one creative idea for each area. Examples of topics for idea sharing might be sermon series, local outreach, board training, staff socials, worker appreciation, day-off preference and why, or date night possibilities.

C. Fun and Laughter Events. Escape room, clean comedy night, BBQ and lawn games, skeet shooting, bowling, professional sports events, evening bonfire, and more.



D. The Community Speaks. Invite a small panel of community leaders to the meeting and ask them to share what opportunities they feel churches are missing to make an impact in their city. End with a Q&A session. Guests could be police chiefs, fire chiefs, mental health experts, local mayors, city council members, state assembly representatives, school superintendents, Chamber of Commerce representatives, police and firemen, school principals, and more.

E. Resource Window. Have different pastors assigned to give a 5-minute review on 3 different resource topics. Topics could include things like latest books, small group curriculum, websites, podcasts, usher/greeter training, nursery resources, student ministry resources, emotional health, and more.

F. Day Trips. The section hits the road together on a field trip to an exciting destination. Destinations may be professional sporting events, inner-city works, Teen Challenge, local food bank, inner-city outreach, and a visit to one of their peers (even in a different section) who ministers in a very remote area or a visit to an AG chaplain's ministry at a hospital or military base.



G. Sectional Women's Night Out. A small team of ministry wives plan an event for pastors' wives to fellowship, have fun, and develop relationships with each other.

H. Spotlight. Move the monthly sectional meeting around so that each pastor can host in their own location. Then the presbyter interviews them, and they tell their story.

I. Prayer WITH and FOR Each Other. Several sectional presbyters recognized that most pastors are not able to enjoy a time of worship and prayer on Sundays because they are leading the service. They created informal times and retreats for worship and mutual prayer that had a deep and memorable impact on those who attended. Debbie Gillispie, a presbyter in Baltimore, Maryland, has mobilized the ministers in her section to pray with and for each other every Sunday prior to their church services via Facebook messenger, email, and video conferencing.

J. Book and Article Discussions. The section selects a very relevant book or journal article, assigns chapter numbers to specific meetings, and selects a different moderator for each meeting who leads in discussing the theme or application to ministry after a meal.

K. Live Facebook Events. Live Facebook events that give good news about things that happen through community and relationships. This feature also allows the host to pull in one of the viewers on the screen so others can hear their comments and interact. More info at: <https://youtu.be/VqcqciQu700>.

L. Better Together Work Day. The ministers of a section mobilize the resources, skills, and funds within their combined churches to bless a small church or ministry (Teen Challenge or inner-city ministry) with small-to-medium sized projects, renovation needs, or improvements.

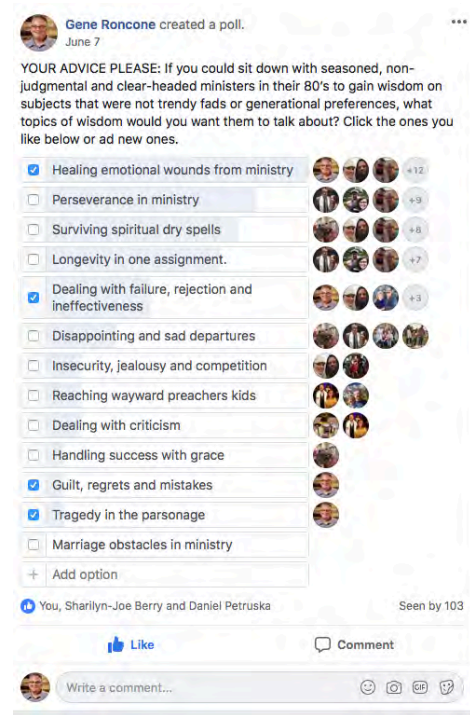


M. Electronic Presence. The section creates an electronic presence through the use of interactive social media (Facebook Groups), microblogging (Twitter and Tumblr), photo sharing (Instagram, Snapshot, Pinterest), video sharing (YouTube, Facebook Live, Periscope, and Vimeo), surveys (Survey Monkey, Typeform, Google Forms, Client Heartbeat, Zoho Survey, Survey Gizmo, Survey Planet), and email broadcasting (Mail Chimp, Mail Monkey, Constant Contact, Church Community Builder, and Sendlane).

N. Convenient Meeting Times. Be sure to schedule meetings on days and times that are the most inclusive. Mondays and Fridays are usually not good because they are the two most popular days pastors take their day off or study for Sunday. Larger churches tend to have staff meetings Tuesday mornings. Also remember to schedule some evening meetings so spouses, bivocational pastors, and part-time ministry staff can attend. Poll your section and get them involved in the selection of meetings times.

O. Dynamic Facebook Groups. While many sections have Facebook group pages, best practice presbyters utilize the following methods to keep the page dynamic, engaging, and active.

- **Groom participation.** Post short thoughts on important topics; but before you post it, send an email to 4-5 members giving them the text of what you plan to post and ask them to prepare and post comments when it does post. For example, one presbyter wrote a few paragraphs about why he needs community, and then asked others to post their own reasons in the comment thread. This created momentum that others followed.
- **Activity.** Post two interactive posts a week encouraging others to post responses, participate in the discussion, or post humorous pictures.
- **Resourcing.** Post links to helpful resources, sectional and district events, books on Amazon, and restaurants and meeting places. Make it easy for people to participate.
- **Call to prayer.** Create a graphic that is only used to call the section to prayer. Post it with a brief description of those facing a crisis or sickness. Be sure to include the contact info of those in need so others can respond. Only use this graphic for posting situations of need so when members see it, they associate it with a call to action.
- **“Blast Zone”.** Once a month, post a “Blast Zone” image and a short description of a person in the section who has experienced a win or milestone in their ministry. Then give their cell number and ask everyone in the group to “blast” them with text messages of encouragement and appreciation.
- **Surveys.** Use the Facebook survey feature to identify personal needs or topics for future meetings, fun things to do, or desired guest speakers.
- **Celebrate.** Ask each member to post one good thing that happened in their life, family, or ministry that month.



UNIQUE PRACTICES

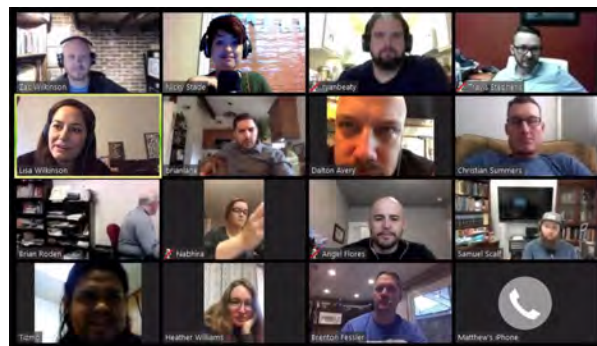
The following practices were listed by participants as being a “standout” or creative community building tools used on the sectional level.

- A. Prayer Relay.** The presbyter creates a list of ministers and their cell numbers. He calls the first name on the list and asks, “What are three things I can pray with you about?” The presbyter then prays for those things over the phone and emails the list to that person so they can do the same thing for the next person on the list. The prayer relay continues until they get to the last person.
- B. Podcasting.** Record a podcast that interviews one of the ministers and their spouse in the section or region to build a sense of community. Gene Roncone, an executive presbyter in Colorado, does a weekly podcast highlighting the people behind the ministries of Colorado’s East Slope. The podcast does not focus on the ministries these people lead as much as it does getting to know the people behind those ministries (passions, hobbies, story, and interests). It also features interviews with experts regarding extremely relevant topics the listeners identified through a Facebook survey. The podcast is recorded in a state of the art podcast studio at the executive presbyter’s church or a mobile studio that is taken on location for interviews. An example of one of these dealing with “Healing 5 Common Wounds From Ministry” can be heard at www.loveaurora.org/c9.mp3. Text the word “COMMUNITY” to 74574 to view the podcast table of contents.



- C. Evening Recharge Events.** Have several of your meetings in the evening with a great meal, fun ice breakers, and a great topic so ministry spouses can interact, bivocational pastors, part-time staff, and key volunteers can attend. One presbyter achieved this by dividing his section into three areas with a dinner in a pastor’s home in each of these locations. It allowed for more intimate interaction, sharing, and prayer for each other.

- D. Wisdom of the Crowd.** Hold a mass brainstorming meeting in November where you take a survey asking ministers what topics, guests, fun activities, and schedule they prefer for the next year.



- E. Facetime an Expert.** Set up a large screen where the group can use video meeting capabilities (Facetime, Skype, Go-to-Meeting, Zoom, Google Hangouts) to interact with a

guest the group would not otherwise have access to. Have them present their material and a Q&A session. Guests might include a ministry tax specialist, authors, counselors, state officials, Christian philosophers, theologians, apologists, bible college professors, podcasters, or bloggers.

- F. Red-Hot Topics.** Host a symposium on red-hot relevant topics by having a pastor, licensed counselor, or knowledgeable person spend 25 minutes addressing a topic and then allow the group to work through discussion questions around tables. Examples of potential topics might be isolation in ministry, increase in pastoral suicide, human sexuality, faith and science, causes of moral meltdown, ministry marriage killers, how to deal with prodigals in the parsonage, homosexuality and the church, ministering to millennials, introduction to Islam, or how to keep romance in the marriage.
- G. Compassionate Generosity.** Create an “Area Benevolence Fund” to help with financial needs of credential holders and churches in your section. Churches and individuals are invited to contribute to this fund, and the sectional team ensures accountability by managing the fund and voting on expenses.
- H. “TED Talk” Style of Presentation.** Each sectional meeting has time dedicated to a meal and prayer for one another. Then there is a 15-minute (never to exceed that time) well-researched synopsis of a new ministry concept presented in a “TED Talk” style with a handout for those wanting additional information. The section selects the topics through a survey, and the presbyter selects presenters. More info at <https://hvsummit.com>.
- I. Sectional Excursions.** The section plans a group trip that is totally unrelated to ministry. This may be a one-night dinner cruise, trip to a vacation destination, cruise ship, camping trip, sightseeing adventure, jeep adventure, road trip, sky diving, or others.



- J. Group Outreach.** The sectional ministers as a group (not church members) select a non-faith-based cause or organization to serve for half a day. The section gathers together to roll up their sleeves and do something positive together.

K. Text Blast. The presbyter creates a group text and then selects one minister in the section to whom EVERYONE texts an encouraging message or prayer.



L. Financial Empowerment. Empower your sectional team to be more creative, caring, and beneficial by giving them a small budget. This is easily achieved by asking each church (not minister) in the section to support the section with \$30-50 a month. The sectional committee then votes on how the funds are used. In and of itself, this may not seem overly unique or creative; but the practice seemed to be common in sections that leaned towards innovation.

M. Sectional Retreat. Sectional retreats are the perfect way to build community in a smaller context. Presbyter Keith Howard from Arizona found sectional retreats to be a powerful community builder. Keith said, “When we were on the west slope of Colorado, we did an annual sectional retreat at a three-level cabin at 10,000 feet up on Trout Lake. There is something about sharing meals together, fireplaces and riding snowmobiles with space for meaningful conversation that goes a long way.”



N. Alternative and Supporting Structures. Some districts have sought to be more intentional about creating community by either replacing, redesigning, or supporting their sectional structure. Following are examples of different ways that was achieved:

- 1. SALT Groups in the Kansas District.** The Kansas District’s strategy for building spiritual communities was to create SALT GPOUPS. SALT is an acronym that stands for Supportive relationships, Authentic accountability, Leadership development, and Team work. Each group is a voluntary association of 6-8 pastors committed to community and ministry growth in a structure designed to eliminate isolation and foster high levels of encouragement and missional living. They achieve this by:
 - Supportive relationships. Supporting each other through prayer and intentionally relational activity.
 - Accountability. Holding each other accountable for community, personal goals, and action plans, as well as providing a safe place for transparency and confession.
 - Leadership development. Utilizing different leadership development resources and discussing their application in a small group setting.
 - Team work. Collaborating together on organizational and community projects.

The groups provide support, accountability, transparency, and laughter and consist of members in close geographical proximity. Presbyter Steve Rains of Kansas said, “We do not hold sectional meetings here in Kansas anymore. We do have SALT groups that provide quarterly connections with pastors. They are typically regionally based, but its pastors can connect in another region if it is a better fit. We love our group and look forward to our time together. Typically, we gather over a meal, share with one another about the season of life we are in, and

pray. Not every pastor in Kansas participates in them, but a majority does.” The district superintendent’s wife, Karen Yancey, works part-time to administrate the program. SALT leaders have not replaced presbyters, and the Kansas District still has geographic presbyters whose primary responsibilities are to deal with governance issues, assist with district affiliated churches, and serve as the district’s board of directors.

- 2. Circles program in the Potomac District.** In an effort to create community, the Potomac District adopted a different paradigm for the presbytery. They no longer are divided into sections but have 36 circles and 36 presbyters. In May 2016, they divided the Network into four major regions. Each region elects an executive presbyter who, in consultation with the district superintendent, appoints presbyters to give leadership to geographic “circles” within their area. The presbyters are then responsible to build relationships within their circle which consists of 8-10 churches by making contact once a month (text, email, phone, face-to-face, notes, etc.). Others choose to achieve this by meeting face-to-face with each pastor annually, providing an all-expenses paid fellowship night or a gathering for pastors, spouses, and ministry staff. Circle leaders are required to submit a monthly report of their contacts with those in their circle. This report is submitted to the superintendent and the executive presbyter. All Circle presbyters, executive presbyters and Network Ministry executive officers meet once a year to go over new plans and updates, hear vision, and share best practices.

The Potomac Ministry Network is also willing to put its money where its mouth is to empower the leaders of this structure. The district gives each region \$5,000 a year to determine and provide their own training for all areas of church ministry. They also give each circle leader/presbyter a stipend of \$250 a month (providing they file an online monthly report of the care and contacts they have made). The Network also gives each circle \$2,400 a year (\$200 a month) to help make care, interaction, and fellowship happen. Additionally, the network gives a \$.55 a mile reimbursement ministry-related travel, as well as a Christmas bonus.

The Presbyters who participated in the survey were passionately convinced the model is working for them. Presbyter Don Cox said, “In my opinion, this realignment has been a tremendous success.” Presbyter Paul Drost said, “The Circle Presbyter model has benefited the district and credential holders by better care and increased community of its pastors and spouses. It appears to have lowered the district’s cost of care and community, and it has benefited the district organizationally by providing more on-ramps for pastors who want to make a difference. Finally, the accountability piece has been huge; it is measurable, attainable, and accountable.”

- 3. CADRE in the Minnesota District.** The Minnesota District has created “Cadre” to help provide mentoring, community, and connectedness among churches of similar size and context. As a whole, the program does not function along sectional lines, but some do. Cadre meetings involve a book study, a guest speaker, and time with the superintendent and assistant superintendent. Those happen twice a year in each location. According to presbyter Michael Stevens, “They have been very well-attended and very well-received.”

Cadre is not a replacement for the presbytery or sectional meetings but an additional program to complement the district’s existing structure. Presbyter Derrick Ross says, “Most sections continue to meet once a month while Cadre meets twice a year and is with a very different set of people.”

4. **Ministry groups in the Indiana District.** The Indiana District restructured nearly two decades ago to streamline governance and to facilitate a deeper sense of community. They replaced their previous structure of 13 sections with “ministry groups” that are led by appointed presbyters. This allows the Presbytery to focus on relationships and care instead of being overwhelmed with additional governance responsibilities. They use a smaller Executive Presbytery for governance. Lead pastors are in small groups called “ministry groups” of 8-10 pastors and spouses led by an appointed presbyter (ministry group leader) whose primary function is to facilitate ministry, community, and care for ministers in their group. They now have 28 pastors’ small groups that meet 8-10 times a year and average between 8-10 couples. They also have 10-12 small groups consisting of youth pastors. It is even common for groups to work together to help a church overcome significant challenges like putting on a new roof or paying down a mortgage. District Superintendent Don Gifford is thrilled with the results saying, “I love this relationship and team approach to do ministry together. I would never want to go back to the sectional structure.”
5. **Small tweaks with a big impact in the Northwest District.** Instead of trying to recreate the wheel, the Northwest Ministry Network increased their capacity for community by making three small changes to their existing structure. This provided more people to care for ministers, narrowed the governance community, and allowed more mature and seasoned ministers to make an impact.
- **Enlargement and repurposing of traditional presbytery.** The network added more members to their presbytery by dividing up larger sections. They also added additional members to represent diversity in gender, ethnicity, language and culture. Presbyters are now called “area leaders” and give leadership to “areas” (sections). Those area leaders then work with a “area leadership team” that is free to develop their own touchpoints, events, and systems to fit their culture, demographic, and geographic dynamics. That group is basically a connecting, training, and pastoral care team serving the ministers in their area.
 - **Narrowing the focus of the executive presbyter.** The executive presbyters are now called “regional leaders” who function more as the board of directors and deal with governance issues between the two annual meetings of the entire presbytery.
 - **Dispatching elders to provide critical care.** The Elders are located in each region and assist both area and regional leaders with more complex cases of ministerial care. They visit sick ministers and assess the need for professional counseling, benevolence, and any unique care that may be needed.

Perhaps one of the most unique thing about the Northwest Ministry Network’s efforts to provide community and care is their ability to wisely utilize older ministers. So often our efforts to be creative focus entirely on the “new”—new ideas, new technology, new trends, new structures, and much more. However, this Network has found a way to make the “old” a significant part of the “new”.

Elders are credentialed, ordained AG ministers who agree to serve (along with their spouse) in this role. The Network pays their expenses to take ministers out to meals/coffee, their mileage, and their expenses to attend the Network Conference (district council). The elders are given the clergy/penitent privilege so they are not required to report on things confessed to them (with exceptions as normal, harm to self or others, pedophilia, or other abuse of a minor, etc.) although they are trained to coach the minister in doing the right thing to make a confession,

and healing becomes healthy. They are often retired ministers, but there are some in their 50s. Part of the agreement to become an elder is that they cannot serve in a governance role (presbyter or executive presbyter) while serving as an elder. They also have a single widow who is an elder who works with other widows or single female ministers. The elders assist and attend funerals and other events when the executive officers are unable to do so. Their appointments are ratified by the Executive Presbytery, and the elders are asked to renew each year if they are willing to do so and are doing an effective job.

BEST PRACTICES

The following practices were identified by comparing the relationships between average attendance, stated obstacles and outcomes, and the degree of general optimism communicated by presbyters. Some of those with the highest attendance, momentum, excitement, and effectiveness were contacted personally to get more information and answers to questions. They had the following characteristics in common:

A. People Focused. After reading through all the responses, it became evident that the presbyters who built a strong sense of community had a laser-targeted focus on ministers as people. Presbyters with higher participation levels made it clear that they work hard to keep their meetings from being organizational infomercials, promotion platforms for fund raising, or competitive grandstanding. While these presbyters possessed an unquestionable loyalty towards their district’s initiatives and ministry departments, they had a keen sense of “time and place”. They made their sectional meetings about the welfare, health, and inclusion of the people behind the churches/ministries—not the churches/ministries themselves. Presbyterian David McLain from the North Texas District sets the example by modeling this value. He said, “I have two nights a year when I open my home to all ministers and spouses who are able to come for dinner. We provide the meal at no cost, and the only structure of the evening is relationship building.”



Furthermore, there seems to be a relationship between a personal invite, appreciation, and affirmation. Obviously, personal relationships and contact are key to encouraging attendance and building a feeling of a “team.” People need to know that their attendance is valued and will be more likely to attend if they receive personal contact and encouragement to do so. The presbyters who found creative ways to personally invite, thank, or affirm participation seemed to have higher attendance averages than those who did not.

B. Pre-Planning. The sections with the highest participation published an annual calendar at the beginning of each year and stuck with the dates, times, and locations. They also had a promotional plan to remind others of the meetings, dates, times, locations and meeting themes. In contrast, however, the presbyters who planned each meeting separately or a few weeks before had lower rates of participation and expressed less optimism concerning the meetings.

South Metro Denver Section of the RMMN 2019 Schedule of Sectional Events

- January 14 - Sectional Family Social
- February 7 - Sectional Tour
- March 11 - Sectional Lunch/Coffee
- April 23-24 - Network Council
- May 20 - Sectional Family Social
- June - YOUTH CAMPS
- July 8 - Sectional Lunch/Coffee
- September 9 - Sectional Family Social
- November 11 - Sectional Lunch/Coffee

Sectional Family Socials - We know it's not just the "pastor" who does ministry. It's a family thing! Let's get together as families to get to know each other better, support one another, and play! Activities may include things like Barbecues, Bowling Nights, etc.

Sectional Lunch/Coffee - This is for the minister (but spouses are always welcome). These occur during the day. Please make every effort to put it on your schedule! We are better together!

Sectional Tour - This is an important Sectional Tour! We will be casting a nominating ballot for Network Pastor (a.k.a., District Superintendent).

C. Consistency. The meetings were kept on an easily memorable day like the “first Monday” of each month or the “third Thursday” of each month. This consistency is practiced in both planning and execution. Because these meetings are perceived by this group as important community building tools, they are not interrupted, canceled, or postponed.



D. Mobility. The meetings were not held in a location that was convenient for the few that plan the meetings, but moved around the section. Even if they were on the same day of each month, the location moved to get everyone involved and to pull in those “living on the edge” of community. The presbyters who kept the meeting in the same location or city almost always were among those with the smallest average attendance.

E. Intentionality. The meetings had a specific purpose and prioritized relational community building. Presbyterian Sam Scalf in Denver, Colorado, has become a pro at this. He has busy metropolitan pastors prioritizing and anticipating sectional meetings. Sam holds each meeting at a different place, and the host pastor is interviewed to tell their personal story. When I interviewed Sam, he said, “We meet monthly in a location picked by a host minister. This might be at their church or at their favorite coffee shop in their neighborhood. During the meeting, we highlight the host minister’s ministry in that area. We celebrate the work of that minister. We find out how we can pray. We hear what is hard about their context.” But Sam is not alone in this approach. Others used sectional meetings to broker new relationships and resource people’s personal needs—not just vocational training. The ones who had loose “hangouts” without structure or purpose had a much smaller average attendance, fewer meetings, and more “no shows.”

F. Commitment. Comparing the relationship between the question about average attendance (question 13) with the responses concerning frequency of meetings (question 9), the reason for not meeting (question 11), and what would need to happen to plan more meetings (question 12) revealed what may be the greatest indicator of success. The sections with large attendance were led by teams that were optimistic, committed to community, and unwilling to accept excuses. In contrast, presbyters who spoke of their obstacles in a more pessimistic, doubtful, or yielding way seemed to experience a self-fulfilling prophecy. No one came.



Presbyter Phil Price from Southeast New Mexico is an example of someone who believes building community deserves his best effort.

As a result, Phil transformed the section and got what he was going after—results, participation, and a powerful sense of community. Phil’s section is located in an area with less than 30,000 people, but his sectional meeting attendance is consistently between 50 and 60. Phil asked his

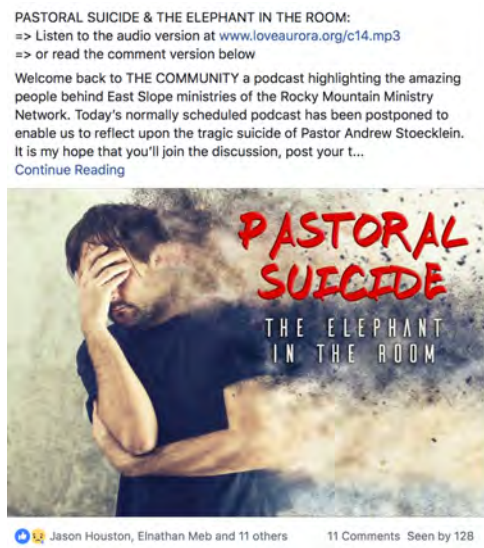
section what they wanted and needed to be successful. The group created the list together, and Phil made it his action plan. He moved the meetings to the evenings so spouses, part-time staff, and bivocational leaders could attend. They share a meal together, provide child care and meet for two hours before they make the 70-80-mile drive home. I interviewed Phil after reading his survey results, and the prevailing reason for his success became clear. Phil is willing to be inconvenienced for the “betterment of us.” He is unwilling to accept excuses and takes being a presbyter seriously. It is not surprising that his church is growing even though he invests considerable time in being a presbyter. Presbyters with standout commitment levels also seemed to view the time they give as a ministry offering to the Lord instead of a distraction from their local church. What is the takeaway? A section’s sense of community reflects the commitment of its presbyter.

G. Creative Collaboration. Best practice presbyters do not get in a rut. They employ a diverse array of topics, resources, speakers, handouts, formats, and even venues to keep things interesting. This causes participants to anticipate, prioritize, and even regret missing meetings. Because of this, participants believed these meetings were worthwhile and even felt like they might miss some very important tips, training, or discussions if they did not attend. The fact that these presbyters either took surveys, conducted brainstorming sessions, or had a diverse team of people helping them plan the meetings months before seemed to contribute to their success in this area.

When comparing the sections that do not meet or have the lowest attendance with sections that excel in participation and frequency, one difference cannot be ignored—creative collaboration. Sections that enjoy higher levels of community and participation are both creative and collaborative in nature. Although that creativity was not always the product of the presbyter, it was at least a result of the sectional committee, group brainstorming, or informal surveys. Presbyter Kevin Crow from Ohio communicated this trend best: “Usually, our best ideas come out of the conversations we have before the planning begins.”

H. Relational Leadership. In nearly every case, the sections that excel in participation and community building are led by presbyters who are relational leaders. They call pastors on the phone out of the blue, pray with them for their needs, give hope in times of discouragement, and broker relationships between ministers. Jeremy Davis of Alaska gets it. In one of his responses, he said, “As a presbyter, I try to connect with each of the senior pastors on a regular basis (in person, phone call or text) at least once a month. I try to be relational, and I believe that encourages the other ministers to also be relational.”

There were also many other examples of relational leadership among the presbyter responses. One that sticks out was a comment by presbyter Wade Heimer of Illinois who said, “I’ve also reserved



an open spot on my calendar for the first Thursday of every month for free coffee to any minister in our section.” Another executive presbyter and his wife decided to give one day a week to the region and use that time to travel to those serving in remote ministry locations to enjoy a meal and fellowship. Presbyter Timothy Kruzan of Illinois divides his section into three small groups and plans fellowship dinners hosted by pastors in their homes. Presbyter Ric Lewellen from the Potomac District involves his wife saying, “My wife and I also have dinner with ministers and their spouses on a frequent basis.” What makes these presbyters successful is not the specific model of relational ministry as much as the fact that they create margin, space, and time to be intentional about relationships.

- I. Brokers of Relationship.** The dictionary defines the word “broker” as one who functions as an intermediary to negotiate and facilitate agreement between two or more parties, but relational presbyters are brokers of something more than agreements. They are skilled at brokering relationships between others through initiative, intentionality, and collaboration. Presbyter Joe Berry from Burlington, Colorado, explained it this way: “I intentionally encourage relationship among our pastors.”

Rocky Mountain District’s East Slope executive presbyter, Gene Roncone, believes brokering relationships is one of the primary roles of a presbyter and has developed training so presbyters in his region can become skilled in this area. Gene identified eight different kinds of relational brokering and encourages presbyters to develop those skills. However, this level of leadership also requires advanced spiritual maturity and not just skill and networking mastery. It requires releasing deep emotional reserves in the following four areas:

- 1. Kingdom perspective.** Presbyters must broker relationships when they have nothing to gain and even time to lose. It requires leaders to accept that it is not about them or how they may benefit, but about others connecting with others.
- 2. Selfless generosity.** Presbyters must release their time, resources, knowledge, network, and relationships to help others connect.
- 3. Sweat equity.** Presbyters must put in sweat equity and be willing to be inconvenienced for the benefit of others. In the words of presbyter Ron Enget from North Dakota: “Being a good presbyter takes a significant commitment and a good amount of time.”
- 4. Value community.** One must value community and be convinced that the sum is greater than the parts.

- J. Spiritual Energy.** Another observation that the data revealed is that community was the result of presbyters who had a spiritual focus. They did this by creating opportunities to pray with and for their ministers. However, this prayer was one-on-one, not just a formality in group settings. Following are a few quotes from presbyters who were able to energize their sections spiritually:

- “When we pray together, it unites us supernaturally.”
- “We get together to pray.”
- “I have my ministers in my home and take time to pray with them and their spouses.”
- “We always pray for the host pastor and staff in the meetings.”



- “Every Sunday we pray for one another prior to our services via Facebook messenger and email.”
- “We create ‘secret prayer partners.’”
- “We post a call to prayer on our Facebook page when one of our ministers is facing a crisis.”
- “I keep a personal prayer list for the ministers’ confidential requests.”
- “I make our meetings more about mutual prayer and support than simply updating them on network events.”
- “I find that as the group gets closer, those moments, especially prayer, are immeasurably valuable.”
- “We have a 45-minute prayer meeting via Zoom.”
- “We call and pray for every minister in our area twice a year.”

Just as the most successful kings in the Old Testament were those who focused on spiritual reform nationwide instead of expansion limited to Jerusalem, effective presbyters brought spiritual energy to the individual lives of their ministers.

K. Champions of Community. Presbyters who are successful at creating a culture of community are not quiet about it. In meetings and in person, they regularly talk about and cast vision for a deeper sense of community. Presbyterian Phil Roop of the Southern Missouri District does not shy away from the topic. In our survey, he said, “I give straight talk about community at fellowship meetings.” Presbyterian Brad McAtee, also from the Southern Missouri District, said, “I spend a lot of our meetings reminding them that we need each other and that we need to help each other.” Presbyterian Scott Collins of the Northwest Ministry Network said, “Pastors want and need friends and friendship. Sectional meetings are a relational time, not a time to preach at preachers. It must be a time of friendship building”. Donny Flippo from of the South Texas District echoed the need to champion community saying, “Ministers need fellowship with each other more than anything else.”

Others find eloquent and creative ways to speak about the benefits of community and the dangers of isolation. A team of podcasters in Colorado’s East Slope accomplished this through a PODumentary (documentary in podcast form) entitled, “Isolation in Ministry.” The five-part series was then syndicated on their regional podcast called THE COMMUNITY. The PODumentary featured pastors, theologians, and male and female counselors who addressed the following subjects in an NPR style format:

- Part 1 – Is Isolation in Ministry Real? (9 minutes) www.loveaurora.org/c29.mp3
- Part 2 – Lonely Losers: The Cost of Isolation (18 minutes) www.loveaurora.org/c30.mp3
- Part 3 – Epic Fails: Why We Choose Isolation (36 minutes) www.loveaurora.org/c31.mp3
- Part 4 – Why We Need Community (20 minutes) www.loveaurora.org/c32.mp3
- Part 5 – Jail Break: Escaping Isolation (27 minutes) www.loveaurora.org/c33.mp3

It proved an effective tool in that it was grounded in months of research and exposed where the road to isolation leads. The PODumentary’s endnotes, bibliography, and resources can be viewed at www.loveaurora.org/CA_9.pdf.

THE “TAKEAWAY”

In the introduction of this report, I said, “Leaders, not programs, create community!” If you believe that to be true, then the next logical question is, “What kind of leaders do we need in this age of isolation?” The data seems to show that in addition to our existing organizational qualifications, every section should strive to elect and every presbyter should strive to be:

- A. Spiritually Passionate.** If they are to care for the “water carriers” of their sections, they must be people who live in the Word. They must possess more than book knowledge, longevity, or pithy leadership quotes. The Word must have matured them enough to meet the demands of hurting, discouraged, depressed, and at times suicidal colleagues. They must be a well of authentic spirituality to serve weary colleagues.
- B. Genuinely Relational.** Being laid-back, fearful of large crowds, or an introvert does not make one relational; nor does being fun-loving, extroverted or attractational. Relational leaders overlap every temperament and personality. They are intentional brokers of relationship because at their core, they love people, bringing people together, and creating a culture of community.
- C. Intentionally Inclusive.** It kills them to see people left out, isolated, or marginalized. They have large umbrellas, are slow to offense, and are bridge builders for all generations. They can lead outside of their preferences and see good in the egotist, potential in the novice, and value in both young and old. They are slow to take offense, quick to include, and champions of community.
- D. Kingdom Generous.** They are willing to give of their time, talents, and resources. They are givers who pastor giving churches and create a culture of sharing.
- E. Curious Listeners.** They have more questions than opinions. They are masters of inquiry; facilitators of dialogue; and sincerely curious about the lives, families, stories, passions, and disappointments of others.
- F. Ambidextrous Leaders.** Their ego allows them to be supportive followers and decisive leaders all at the same time. They are skilled at following the vision of their district superintendent/network pastor, but also able to lead leaders and facilitate collaborators.
- G. Broken Collaborators.** Pain has purged them of selfish ambition and given them a need to serve something greater than themselves. They are humble lovers of people who inspire others to dream, work, finance, sacrifice, and cooperate for no other reason than the fact that we are better together.
- H. Seekers of Excellence.** They despise mediocrity, desire greatness, and value competence and ingenuity. They call people farther, longer, wider, and higher because they see beyond what “we” are now and focus on what “we” can become.

In this day of isolation, narcissism, and disengagement, we need leaders—not curators of tradition, guardians of the status quo, or title collectors, but servant leaders who are willing to be inconvenienced for the “betterment of us.”