

Clergy Mental Health Task Force Facilitator's Guide for Case Studies

General guidelines for discussing these case studies:

For facilitator:

1. Assign each table a different case study to discuss, but give each group all three for reference during the large group discussion.
2. Remind the group that there is no one correct answer, but some answers may be better than others.

For the groups (*present these to attendees to guide their discussion*):

If you encounter a situation like this in your own church, make sure to do the following:

1. Treat the information you receive as confidential, and involve as few people as possible to avoid gossip and stigmatizing.
2. Empower the pastor to have control of what is shared and when.
3. Involve the pastor in the process as much as possible, or consult with the pastor frequently. Carefully think through a process that is respectful and honest and minimizes stigma and gossip. How you handle this will set the tone for how other people manage their own struggles with mental health.

Case Study 1: Pastor Dave

Pastor Dave is the sole pastor in an average-size church in a rural area. He has been in the ministry for fifteen years, and this is his second congregation. He has been with your church for the past five years. You are a recognized leader in the church, have been a member for most of your life, and currently serve as an elder. Several members of the congregation have approached you about the pastor and have asked you to do something about his sermons and lack of visiting, especially to elderly members. These complaints have increased over the past few months, and you are uncertain what to do. You recently tried approaching Pastor Dave just to have a talk and were told he didn't have the time and would check in with you later. You had never received that kind of response before, and lately you have noticed more irritability and anger from the pastor in your team meetings. Last week he stormed out of a team meeting when you raised some of your concerns. You attempted to follow him and talk, but he asked you to back off.

The following day Pastor Dave called and asked to meet with you alone, and as you met together, he expressed his frustration and anger over how he was being treated. As you talked further, you asked about his health and whether he had seen his doctor lately. You wondered about his stress level and what would be helpful. He agreed to see his doctor after you made a firm request and said you would like to meet with him again after the doctor appointment.

When you approached him after the appointment, he said it was a waste of time—the doctor wanted to send him to a psychiatrist and had made a referral. As you probed a bit further, Pastor Dave said the doctor was concerned about his stress level and thought he might need some time off.

In the meantime, through the grapevine you've been hearing comments that the pastor "is burned out," "has some mental illness," "is going off the deep end," etc.

1. *What is an appropriate way to handle the information about Pastor Dave?*

This is a difficult situation. A preventive measure for this kind of situation is for the pastor to report each month on the visits he/she has made, and for the elders to regularly discuss the sermons over the past month. This creates a healthy atmosphere for dialogue.

Be firm about setting up a meeting with the pastor, yourself, and another person. It is important not to do this alone. You might take this step before addressing it formally with the elders so that you are coming alongside the pastor, rather than putting the pastor in a defensive position. Work not to be confrontational, but to address the concerns that are being expressed. Inquire what might be behind some of the pastor's recent irritable behavior. Explore options for addressing pastoral concerns that have been expressed. If the pastor denies or states lack of awareness about the concerns, you will need to be more specific with your information and more confrontational. The matter will need to be discussed again at the next elders' meeting. Be sure you have concrete information on church members who have not been visited, and accurate feedback on sermons.

2. *What are some possible ways to deal with the gossip/grapevine that will not increase gossip and will maintain privacy for the pastor?*

Ask people to be specific with their comments about pastoral care and sermons so that you have adequate information. Thank people for their concern and tell them the elders will address the situation. You will also need to explore whether the congregation's impressions are accurate.

3. *Whom will you involve in the process of determining next steps?*

The important thing is to maintain a relationship with the pastor and to establish trust; at the same time be honest and concrete. Involve the elders and/or administrative team first, and then the council/consistory.

4. *What could be next steps in the process?*

Meet with the pastor. Address the issue in the next elders' meeting. Discuss ways to remedy the situation. Inform the council/consistory.

Case Study 2: Pastor Jane

Pastor Jane has been the pastor of your congregation for the past eight years. She is married and has two teenage boys. You are the chair of the leadership team at your church. Lately you have noticed some changes and lapses in her work. More recently she missed a meeting and a planned visit to a congregant who is struggling with grief. Jane apologized and said she was sorry but has been so tired lately that she forgot.

During a break in a leadership team meeting, you privately ask her how things are going. She responds, "OK, but I am still not feeling well and am so tired." As you ask more

questions, you learn that she is spending most of her free time sleeping or resting, she is struggling to keep up with her schedule, and in fact she has missed several other appointments and meetings lately. Realizing the time that has passed in your conversation, you need to call everyone back into the meeting.

- 1. *How do you respond to the information you have just received from Pastor Jane?***
You need time to think this through and to get more information from her. It would be inappropriate to share with others right now. Have a follow-up meeting with the pastor soon to learn more about the situation and to discuss options.
- 2. *What are the possible steps that you and the leadership team should take?***
It sounds as if the pastor is not functioning well and may need some immediate relief. After consulting further with the pastor, meet with her and a few other leaders to discuss options. Possibly arrange for pulpit supply soon. At some point soon, confer with the larger body of leadership.
- 3. *Whom will you involve in the process?***
The pastor is primary. (In some situations the pastor might not be able to be as involved, but at least consult with her.) Begin with a few leaders and then move to a larger group of leaders. Perhaps consult with a mental health professional. Encourage the pastor to see a mental health professional.
- 4. *What will you tell the congregation?***
Be honest but discreet. Use language that is approved by the pastor because you might not understand the perspective of what the pastor is experiencing. Use words like: "The council/consistory is giving the pastor a (determine length) leave of absence for reasons of mental health."

Case Study 3: Pastor Ricardo

Even though he had no previous ministry experience, Pastor Ricardo knew something was wrong after serving his current congregation for only a few years. He had expected there would be difficulties, but he had not been prepared for the personalities that drained him of so much energy, of for the demands on his time that robbed him of opportunities to live into his own life. Initially finding deep satisfaction in ministry, he despaired over the resentment that he found rising within him and the sense of obligation that drove him.

When invited to explore what bothered him most, Ricardo stated that he didn't feel connected to the people he served. His sermons had become dry and lifeless and a drudgery to prepare, and he delivered them dispassionately. He expressed a deep sense of loss that this wasn't the ministry he envisioned. Especially disconcerting was his lack of caring about the people he served, and he described his feelings in terms of apathy. He also reported that he wasn't eating or sleeping well and that it was hard to get up in the morning to face the heaviness of his life. Though married, he felt desperately alone while at the same time not wanting to talk to anyone. When asked who might know of his darkness, he said, "No one." He believed God heard his prayers, but he didn't trust God to answer them.

Spiraling down, Ricardo was blessed with the insight to know he needed help, but he was unsure where to turn next.

1. *As a friend and fellow pastor of Ricardo, what would you say to him?*

You have listened to Ricardo, and you have asked good exploratory questions so that he has shared his heart with you. That is the important first and best step. Rarely attempt to give answers. Explore with him the possibility of seeing a mental health professional. Assure him of your concern and your prayers. Pray with him now.

2. *What would you suggest he do next?*

See a mental health professional.

3. *How might you ensure some safety and confidentiality for Ricardo?*

Set up a time to follow up with him. Assure him that you will keep in confidence what he has shared. It is not your place to share this with anyone in his congregation. Let him be in control.

4. *Whom would you involve in the process of determining next steps?*

Involve Ricardo. Suggest that he also share his situation with the regional pastor (or, in the RCA, the appropriate church or pastoral supervision committee within your classis).

5. *How would you follow up with Ricardo in this process?*

Establish regular times for communication. He has trusted with you matters close to his heart.