



A SURE FOUNDATION

resources for the relationship
between pastors and congregations

ASSESSMENT OF MINISTRY

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theological grounding

Because ministry never happens in isolation, and because effective ministry is responsive both to the Spirit's prompting and to the needs of the congregation, regular assessment of ministry is a critical element to developing and maintaining healthy, thriving congregations and healthy, growing leaders. "Give instruction to the wise, and they will become wiser still; teach the righteous and they will gain in learning" (Proverbs 9:9).

Assessment provides opportunities for the congregation to deepen their awareness of the ways God is at work within their communities, see the fruits of the Spirit that have been nurtured over time, and to celebrate the faithful leadership of the pastor and other leaders. Without ongoing assessment, congregations often give in to the temptation to listen to the loudest voices.

To speak of "pastoral evaluation" is to examine only one portion of the ministry that takes place in and on behalf of a congregation. "Pastoral evaluation" is necessarily incomplete, because the pastor's ministry does not happen in isolation. It involves the ministry of the congregation: its pastoral leadership, its non-pastoral staff, lay leadership, members and regular participants, community partners, and other settings of the United Church of Christ. The most effective ministry assessments explore all facets of a congregation's life and provide honest feedback in order to improve it.

Effective assessment of ministry is rooted in the congregation's theological understandings of ministry, leadership, and covenant. Regular and consistent assessment should be woven into the practices of the congregation to identify areas of strength and needed growth for ministry projects, programs, and personnel. Establishing regular habits of assessment also helps to lower anxiety about "being put under the microscope" and sets the tone for continuous improvement.

The goal of assessing ministry is to gather insight that can shape plans for the pastor and the congregation – individually and together – to thrive and be responsive to the Spirit’s movement among them. The formality of these practices and the type of feedback gathered will vary based on the size and context of the congregation, as well as the goals and priorities of each church program or job description.

Assessment should not be conducted at moments of great tension in the congregation or when problems with the pastor’s leadership emerge. In such times, the Pastoral Relations Committee and the pastor must find ways to facilitate honest dialogue with the congregation toward the goal of healthy ministry. Additionally, the Conference/Association staff and local Committee on Ministry can assist congregations and clergy in times of conflict or crisis.

In order to facilitate effective ministry assessment, the following items must be in place as part of the congregation’s foundation for evaluation:

- appropriate job descriptions for all staff and volunteer positions: when job responsibilities and annual goals are clear, work can be focused effectively and faithful execution of those positions can be assessed objectively;
- a signed call agreement¹ for the pastor and signed employment contracts for other staff²: clear understanding of the scope of work for each employed person helps those persons set goals and helps the congregation hold reasonable expectations for what work can be accomplished in the allotted weekly time;
- the pastor’s three-way covenant with the congregation and Association: expectations and commitments of the relationships between pastor, congregation, and Association should be an explicit part of ministry assessment;³
- specific goals for the ministry of the congregation, affirmed by congregational leadership: these goals should be grounded in the congregation’s mission and vision statements, which reflect periodic discernment of priorities by the whole church.

Three other tools are invaluable when evaluating ministry.

1. *The Marks of Faithful & Effective Authorized Ministers in the United Church of Christ* are a discernment tool for ministerial preparation and professional growth.⁴ Using the Marks with the *Marks Assessment Rubric* or *Journaling the Journey* can generate rich conversation in the evaluation of the pastor and the congregation’s ministry overall. For example, the staff and

¹ A sample call agreement is available at: http://www.ucc.org/ministers_regional-ministers.

² The Insurance Board resource, “Your Church: Employer and Small Business,” can be found at: https://www.insuranceboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Your_Church_ERandSmallBusiness_2012_12_10.pdf.

³ A sample three-way covenant can be found here: http://www.ucc.org/ministers_regional-ministers.

⁴ Portions of the Marks positively correlate with congregational vitality. The full report can be found here: <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/UCC-Congregational-Vitality-and-Ministerial-Excellence-Report.pdf>.

governing body of the congregation might choose two or three of the Marks to integrate into their goals for the coming year, and then reflect on those Marks throughout the year and during the annual assessment process.

2. The *UCC Ministerial Code* is the professional behavior standard for those who hold ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ, to which they are held accountable through their Associations. This ethical code reminds ministers of their call and covenantal responsibilities to God, self, family and the Church. Regular review of the UCC Ministerial Code can help a pastor and a congregation pay attention to each other's overall well-being and boundaries, to respond quickly to poor habits in ministry, and to set annual goals for holistic health and growth. Discerning what parts of the Code are most appropriate is best done in partnership between the pastors, church leadership, other staff, and key volunteers.
3. *The Local Church in Relation to Its Pastor* is an older resource (from the 1986 Manual on Ministry) to remind congregations of their ethical and covenantal commitments, particularly as it relates to their partnerships with pastors. Reflecting on the congregation's programs, activities, life cycles, and wider church involvement through the lens of *The Local Church in Relation to Its Pastor* can illuminate the assessment of the congregation's ministry and help to inspire annual goals.

The goal of assessing ministry is to affirm ministry and to discern ways for it to thrive. Regular assessment is critical to understand how the church and its leaders are living out their call from God. Done effectively, assessment celebrates areas of ministry vitality, discerns areas in which ministry needs attention, and strengthens the mutual ministry of the pastor and the church.



how to assess

The Personnel Committee, in partnership with the congregation's governing body should plan, lead and interpret the formal assessment process.⁵ While the Pastoral Relations Committee does not lead the assessment process, it should encourage church leadership to practice regular assessment of the ministry of the pastor and congregation. The process includes participation by staff, volunteers, lay leaders, and at times the full congregation. There must be opportunities for

⁵ When a congregation does not have a Personnel Committee, the governing body (Council, Consistory, etc.) takes on the planning, leading, and interpretation of the assessment process.

assessment by those being assessed (self-assessment), by supervisors/supervisees, by participants in ministry programs, and others as needed. Remember that the ministry of the whole church is being assessed, not only the performance of staff and volunteers.

Outcomes of the assessment process should be shared appropriately with all involved – staff, governing body, appropriate volunteers, and the Pastoral Relations Committee – so that the whole community can discern how and where to put its time and attention in the coming year.

Different kinds of feedback serve different purposes in the process of assessment. Personnel Committees and governing bodies should determine which kinds of feedback are needed and useful for different aspects of the church's ministry. The following types of feedback are all appropriate ways of gathering information for the purpose of reviewing and growing ministry.

Descriptive feedback invites people to describe their experience of some aspect of church life. *Describe your experience with X. How often does X happen? How has the minister prepared for/contributed to X? How has the congregation prepared for/contributed to X?*

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

Post-event evaluation can provide immediate feedback that leaders can incorporate into their future planning of events and projects. A simple, three-question evaluation at the end of a meeting or event can gather the feedback needed: *What worked well? What could be improved or done differently next time? What insights did you gain?* Post-event evaluation also helps to develop a culture of continuous improvement.

Feed-forward is a process that invites participants to reflect on past situations and behavior as a way to imagine and plan for future situations. Once a meeting, event, or other situation has taken place and its outcomes realized, conversation turns to the future. *How do you want to handle X in the future? How do you determine what stories best support your message? What changes do we need to make for our ministries to be as robust and faithful as possible?*

Evaluative feedback is most effective to assess objective, concrete tasks of ministry (such as the congregation's financial management systems, its implementation of Safe Conduct policies, its building maintenance, etc.). Ethical conduct in relation to the UCC Ministerial Code can also be assessed using evaluative feedback. *How have we adhered to our Safe Conduct policies? Has our pastor lived and ministered in accordance with the UCC Ministerial Code? Have we implemented financial procedures to safeguard against theft or mismanagement?*

Summative evaluation bears a strong resemblance to evaluative feedback, although its emphasis focuses on job descriptions and/or goals that have been clearly outlined. *Is this staff person doing work consistent with their position description? Are the programs of our faith formation ministry consistent with our goals for spiritual growth? Is the altar guild or worship team completing their assigned tasks?*

If the answers to questions related to **evaluative feedback** or **summative evaluation** are “No,” additional follow-up is needed. *Are other tasks, expectations, or priorities preventing certain work from being done? Is it hard to find volunteers for a particular ministry?* In other words, evaluative feedback and summative evaluation are not sufficient by themselves; they require descriptive feedback and formative evaluation to paint a fuller picture of ministry.

Since the goal of ministry assessment is to improve the practice of ministry and to increase vitality in the congregation, it is essential for the assessment process to model healthy communication practices. Feedback (written or verbal) should never be anonymous, it should provide personal reflection (e.g. “I have experienced...” not “some people say...”), and all participants should engage in speaking their truth and listening to others speak their truths. As feedback is received, pastors, staff, and volunteers have a right to know who offered feedback when it is relevant to their work or area of programming. Not all persons need to read or hear every piece of feedback.

Feedback is designed to affirm ministry by identifying strengths of programs and pastors, events and volunteers, and to encourage a shared commitment to growth and vitality. Negative feedback and constructive criticism are important to hear and consider, although they should not dominate the assessment process unnecessarily. To catastrophize two areas of concern to the exclusion of ten things going well can damage the congregation, the pastor, and the relationship between the two. If it is genuinely impossible to affirm several areas of ministry in the congregation or with the pastor, consultation with Association/Conference staff and the Committee on Ministry is appropriate.



relationship to compensation

A holistic understanding of ministry assessment, encompassing the life of the entire congregation as well as the pastoral leadership, makes clear that the aim of assessments is not to inform

compensation decisions but to shape the shared ministry of pastor and congregation. Connecting assessment processes only or foremost to compensation is not recommended. Pastors and staff should be paid fairly and justly for the work they do, with attention to conference compensation guidelines and local costs of living, and adjustments that correspond to increased or decreased responsibilities, trusting in the congregation's ability to meet its financial commitments.



resources

Be the Church is an assessment tool to aid congregations as they seek to embody the values of the United Church of Christ. A *Be the Church* planning guide with assessment resources can be found at <http://www.ucc.org/bethechurch>.

Discernment Travelogue, available through UCC Resources.

Evaluating Ministry by Jill M. Hudson (Rowman and Littlefield; Lanham, MD: 1992).

When Better Isn't Enough: Evaluation Tools for the 21st Century Church by Jill M. Hudson (Rowman and Littlefield; Lanham, MD: 2004).

Supervising and Supporting Ministry Staff by Kevin E. Lawson and Mick Boersma (Rowman and Littlefield; Lanham, MD: 2017).

Completing the Circle by David McMahill (Rowman and Littlefield; Lanham, MD: 2003).

User-Friendly Evaluation: Improving the Work of Pastors, Programs and Laity, by Jeff Woods (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; Lanham, MD: 1995).

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