

Peer groups, coaching, and thriving in theological education

BY SARAH F. ERICKSON

Decades of research attest to the benefits of peer group participation among clergy and church leaders as they serve the evolving institutional church. Program staff and faculty at ATS schools can derive similar benefits. As theological institutions imagine their futures, encouraging the use of and engagement of faculty and program staff in coach-facilitated peer groups can enhance, enliven, encourage, and extend the vocational arc of those who participate and strengthen theological education practices.

I recently retired as director of lifelong learning at Columbia Theological Seminary where I served among gifted colleagues there, across the United States and Canada, and eventually around the globe for another 20 years. With my MDiv degree in hand, I was initially hired as project coordinator/associate director of lifelong learning for the seminary's S3 Project—part of Lilly Endowment Inc.'s *Sustaining Pastoral Excellence* (SPE) initiative that launched in the early 2000s. My prior experience with peer support led me to begin my career facilitating peer groups among clergy and other church leaders. I also began to build my new network, making connections at grant gatherings convened in Indianapolis, and later as part of the "Southern Cluster." The remarkable cluster was a regional group of project staff from several denominations and institutions that eventually produced the book *So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive* (Chalice Press, 2013), among other books



and articles referenced on Faith & Leadership's [website](#). Some of us were more seasoned in this work than others, but we all learned from one another along the way.

The Association of Leaders of Lifelong Learning for Ministry (ALLLM)—formerly known as SACEM—is another organization that enriched, enlivened, and encouraged my work in lifelong learning and theological education. It involved many of the same people who were part of the SPE initiative and other grant-funded projects. Along the way, I completed a DEdMin based on a cohort model and completed the *Foundations in Christian Leadership* program of Leadership Education at Duke University Divinity School. By the time the SPE project concluded, I was serving both as an officer on the executive committee of ALLLM and as director of lifelong learning. I had a multifaceted network of peers to whom I turned for professional advice, problem-solving, mutual support, and encouragement. The links were strong and, while some of us have retired or transitioned out of our original roles, we remained committed to the concept of peer groups to support not only pastoral leaders, but leaders involved throughout the ecosystem of theological education.

Notice a trend here? It's why, in my final year before retirement, a grant from the Foundations of Christian Leadership Program helped ALLLM pilot a peer group coach cohort model for leaders of lifelong learning—a new option for us. That project featured two cohorts (19 total participants), one of early career (one to four years in the field of lifelong learning) and mid-career (more than four years' experience) of leaders in various theological institutions and related organizations. Each cohort was led by a coach who was certified by the International Coaching Federation and was scheduled for five, 90-minute group coaching sessions. The cohorts were intended to help participants develop goals, nurture skills, and build their professional networks.

The project evaluations, submitted by the two coaches and participants, attested to the value of the cohorts and the merits of the model. The focus of participants coalesced around the topics of vocational identity, program innovation, and sustainability—all topics in which ALLLM has long been invested. Feedback was generally positive, including comments like:

- “The sessions were especially useful for networking, relationship building, and gaining insights about the field of lifelong learning as a whole—the challenges and joys others in the field experienced.”
- “The coach gave us space to take the conversation where we wanted it to go; she was a coach, not a director or problem-solver.”
- “Coaching returned me to questions of agency—where do I have it, and what am I doing with what agency I have?”

Evaluations from the pilot are helping future coaches envision ways to respond to needs for “content-rich” coaching that addresses topics of mutual interest more effectively. We learned that, despite the possibility for collaboration among participants from the same institution in the same cohort, the basic variables of individual needs and goals were often disparate enough to make collaboration difficult and unrealistic within the scope of the cohort.

Coach-facilitated peer groups allow for agency in learning. Adults are most highly motivated to learn and apply what they learn when they need to learn something, and not before. We generally also have a pretty good idea of what we need to do. What we need is dedicated support, encouragement, and the time to figure out how to make that happen. According to Elaine Cox's chapter in the *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* journal, “Coaching that includes application of the adult learning theories of andragogy and transformative learning is especially powerful, a trio of constructivist approaches that allow participants to build upon their experience and emerging needs (Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 2015).

Whether or not your title includes “lifelong learning,” if you serve in an institutional provider of theological education, you are part of the ecosystem of lifelong learning for ministry. Ready to develop your goals, nurture your skills, and build your network? Find a coach cohort and see for yourself what's in store.



Sarah F. Erickson serves as Coach Cohort Coordinator on the executive committee of ALLLM. She recently retired as Director of Lifelong Learning at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

ALLLM is partnering with the ATS Pathways for Tomorrow Coordination Program to offer peer coaching cohorts for Phases 2 and 3 grant program staff and affiliated faculty in 2024. Two cohorts of up to ten participants each will convene four times between January and April. Project participants will have the opportunity to network among colleagues with more and less experienced leaders in each cohort and widen the scope of their networks.

Apply for a cohort before November 15, 2023!