

Pastors In Covenant

Excerpts from “Pastors in Covenant (PIC): A Model of Community” from Dan Davis’ book *A Church for a City*. Used by permission.

Something extraordinary has been happening in Austin. Over the past ten years the division among the pastors of our city has diminished. In fact, close friendships have been formed and nurtured between pastors of different movements, denominations, races and cultures.

Our Beginning:

Pastors in Covenant had its beginning through the experience of two pastors, Gary Kinnaman³⁰ in Mesa, Arizona and myself (Dan Davis) in Austin, Texas. Gary and I have shared a friendship for almost three decades. During our time of pastoring in our own cities we each had developed a small group of pastors with whom we met monthly. We both were aware that the Holy Spirit’s presence was evident in our small groups. We realized also that our time together in our groups nurtured our souls.

Gary convened a retreat in the Phoenix area where a small group of pastors from both cities explored what made these groups so valuable and how they could be reproduced. In Phoenix, we discussed the immense value that our small groups in Austin and Phoenix had served in restoring our souls in the midst of on-going ministry. We had all experienced the safety of being part of a non-hierarchical, committed small group of men who shared and understood the joy, the trauma, the pain, and sometimes the isolation of the pastoral calling. We understood that our bond was relational, not organizational and that all members of the group were mutually committed to the group. Thus emerged the idea of a covenant bond among the members of a group small enough to provide time for each member to share.

Returning to Austin, our group began to prayerfully take steps to implement what had been decided in Phoenix. All the guys in the group started planning to develop their own new groups.

How The PIC Groups Work

We adopted that Apostles Creed and agreed to govern ourselves according to the Pastoral Epistles. It was our desire that each group reflect doctrinal, ethnic, and class diversity, but we would let each group determine their own composition. A significant guideline that we find important is to strive for intentional diversity in the groups. Ironically, we find that the greater diversity provides greater safety. When you have denominational peers in the same group, there is reluctance for the members to share as openly because, despite the best of intentions, denominational structures have a degree of competitiveness. There is another problem that occurs that I call “the tyranny of close differences.” It seems that the closer you are to someone in your mutual beliefs, the more heat is engendered in the minor areas

where you disagree. Also, we avoid having pastoral associates in the same group as senior pastors. Who typically causes the most grief for an associate pastor? His boss, the senior pastor! There needs to be a place for that associate to open his/her heart without risking undermining a senior pastor.

Our first priority of business is always to provide the opportunity to each member to share their victories, failures, and sorrows. We invite further questioning by the other members of the group so that we can understand more fully the issues involved. It is not the purpose of the groups to be therapy sessions, instead, we gather around the individual pastor and pray as we sense the Holy Spirit leading us. Inevitably the Holy Spirit is present in our prayers and we find that person who prayed just before us clarified and gave further insight to the person who prays next.

Only after we've done the personal work do we open up for "shop talk." We are open to questions and discussions of doctrinal differences, but the guidelines are that we do so to better understand, not to convince others of the rightness or wrongness of those differences.

These groups do not meet to discuss a book, to strategize, or even as prayer meetings, although prayer powerfully marks most of our meetings. These groups meet to provide a safe place for pastors to deepen their trust in each other and to provide a safe place where they can tell the truth about themselves. The groups do not have behavioral checklists that we use to grill each other regarding the sins we may have committed. Rather, we trust the Holy Spirit, in the context of love and safety, to give us courage to really open our lives to one another.