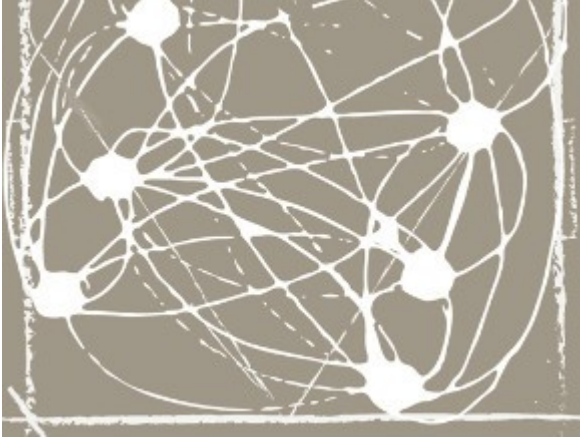


A room of our own

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue



Read the main article, "[Peer power](#)"

The four of us women have a room of our own. One wall is all fireplace and mantle and built-in bookshelves, and another is fitted with clean glass panes overlooking rain falling on mossy woods. Behind me, the open floor plan puts our dirty breakfast dishes on display; to my left, a tapestry covers an impressive portion of the wood paneling. Each of us is curled on a couch with a book or a laptop. Two of us have babies in our laps, having mastered the art of rocking a child while typing a sermon.

Our clergy writing group has been meeting on a mostly monthly basis for the last year, and we are on retreat in a borrowed Lake Michigan cottage. We normally gather in church libraries and for the occasional family potluck, but this time we actually pulled off an overnight retreat—and we're delighted. Our elementary schoolchildren are home with their fathers, and our preschoolers are in another wing of the house being entertained by the babysitter we brought along. We have everything we might possibly require to write: a quiet space, plenty of food, a trustworthy nanny, a wireless connection and, perhaps most important, one another.

In the summer of 2010, not a month into my new ministry call, I was afforded a study leave to participate in a writing program at the Collegeville Institute. The chance to write and to wander amidst the lakes and monks of the St. John's University campus came at a crucial time, as my recent cross-country move had put me behind on my book project. It was a lovely week: peaceful and productive and a

great deal of fun. I knocked out two chapter drafts and a revision, which alone would have been enough to call it a smashing success.

But the most important thing I wrote that week was an e-mail to three clergywomen in the Chicago area, inviting them to participate in a writing group. It was an impulsive move, and a bit of a gamble. We hadn't all met, and the ones I had met I liked enough but certainly didn't know well. There was a chance we might not click, and what pastor wants to squeeze a dysfunctional peer group into her already hectic schedule? But I knew they were great writers and sensed they were also great pastors, and I felt a thrill when their responses came back quickly and enthusiastically: *Yes. I'm in. I need this.*

The group's design and intentions were worked out over coffee. We agreed that what we most needed was the accountability of external deadlines and serious feedback. We would send one another work via e-mail and convene for critique and conversation on the second Wednesday of the month.

The first round went well. The Methodist had a knack for theologically astute social commentary, while the Lutheran's poems were filled with rich language and story and closed with notes of grace. The Presbyterian's whip-smart take on a poignant mission-trip detour demolished the stereotype that youth ministers don't think theologically. And the critiques were equally formidable—I drove away knowing precisely how to heal an ailing essay. I couldn't wait for our next gathering. None of us could.

An e-mail conversation unfolded, slowly at first. It covered compelling online articles, queries for ministry ideas and particularly bad parenting meltdowns. Before long, I opened my inbox to a steady stream of collegial solidarity. By the time we met for our second formal workshop, our common experience as pastors, mothers and writers had bound us into an alliance. We are ambitious but not competitive.

Within months, it seemed that one's byline belonged to all; one's acceptance into an MFA program was not hers alone but ours. Likewise, we helped one another shoulder the inevitable rejections, failures and inadequacies of our personal and professional lives. In the year since we first organized ourselves, we have completed a manuscript and signed a book contract, birthed two babies and sat vigil during a father's operation, left a pastoral call and pondered what comes next. We did these things, in the parlance of the independent study program at the Collegeville

Institute, "apart, and yet a part," each leg of the journey made more bearable on account of the company.

We convene as women who are both pastors and writers. This reminds us that we have been called to a ministry of words, just as we have been called to the ministry of word and sacrament. It would be easy to neglect our literary endeavors, to watch them shrivel on the vine as we attend to more pressing responsibilities. Writing may not be a part of our pastoral job descriptions, but we have each discerned a call to serve Christ by writing for the church. Implicitly and explicitly, we hold one another accountable to this secondary calling.

And, as we discovered recently during a conversation about our future plans together, the writing is indeed secondary. When we asked ourselves what would deeply disappoint us, it wasn't the prospect of struggling as writers. What would devastate us would be if one of us left ministry. We would feel as though we had failed her somehow, having not provided the support she needed to persevere in her ordination vows. We are pastors first—albeit much happier and more faithful and fulfilled pastors with a bit of writing on the side.

I have been and continue to be part of some great clergy groups, as well as a few not so great ones. They are denominational, ecumenical, funded by grants, entirely DIY. I haven't observed a pattern for success. Is it the ones that are arbitrarily assigned that flounder? Does institutional funding guarantee success? Is it enough simply to chat over brunch, or do you need an agenda? How, for the love of God, does a clergy group avoid the poison of clergy groups everywhere: that endless loop of complaining about congregations and co-workers?

There's no formula, but I don't think we would thrive as a group without such a high level of commitment to one another and our common vocations. We also owe some of our success to carbohydrates and caffeine. We break bread (read: chocolate croissants), drink coffee and give thanks for the blessing of a room of our own.