

WHAT'S NEXT?

A Discernment Guide for United Methodist Churches to Serve Future Generations



GREAT PLAINS UNITED METHODIST CONFERENCE

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INTRO & OVERVIEW

“Now to God who can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power who is at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Jesus Christ throughout all generations for ever and ever.” -Ephesians 3:21

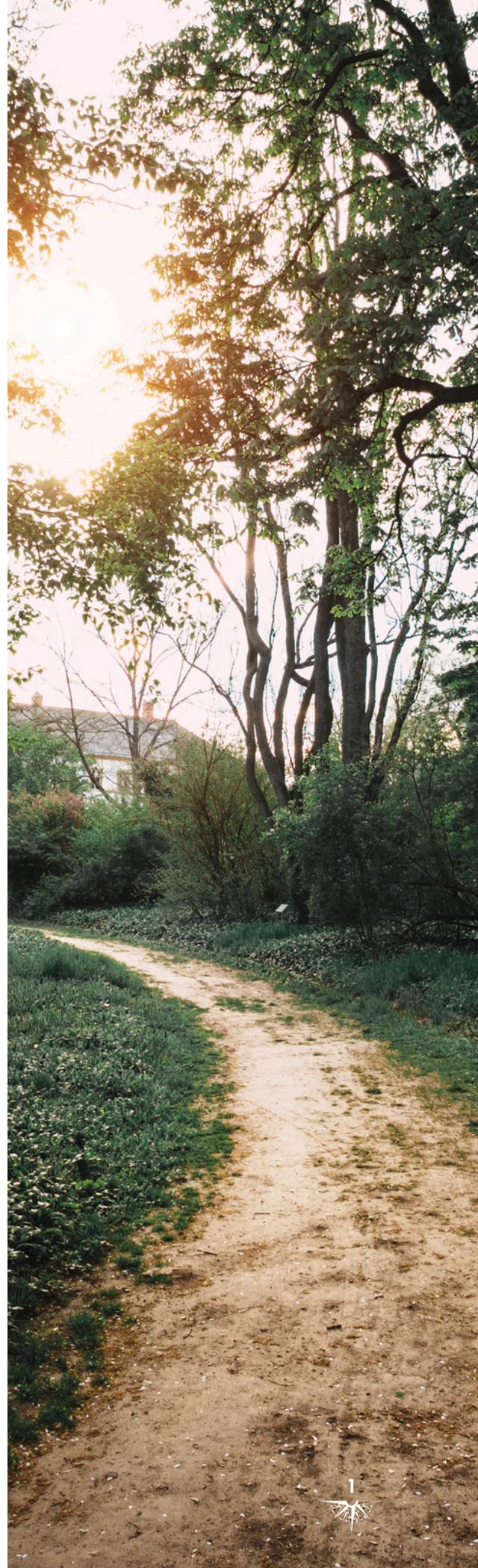
In a constantly changing world, United Methodist congregations have the unique opportunity and responsibility to adapt their service to Christ and the world. This guide is designed to frame collaborative conversations amongst leaders in a local church to answer the question, “what is the most faithful next step to which God is calling us as a community of faith?”

This guide begins with the underlying assumption that God is calling all churches to help people grow in their love of God, neighbor, and self.

This guide is not meant to simply slow down decline or prolong death in congregations who have ceased to point people (inside and outside of the walls of a building) toward the transformative love of God. Congregations are invited to think about next steps to help people who are already and not yet connected to the church grow in these ways.

The guide can be modified or adapted to fit the context of your congregation as you see fit. It could be completed in as little as five meetings over five weeks, but getting it done *quickly* is not the ultimate goal. The process should be intentional, rooted and filled with prayer, and dedicated to listening – to each other, to God, and to the community around the church.

This process is best co-led by a pastor and a key lay leader in the congregation working in close consultation with each other. Together they should outline and organize the work to be done and communicate clear expectations to participants and the congregation.





SCOPE AND SEQUENCE



Five sessions will help congregations respond to where God is leading them. For each session, your team will spend time in prayer before moving to the activities described in this guide. You will also brainstorm, discuss, reflect, and identify pre-work to be done prior to your next gathering. Be sure to keep all notes from previous sessions, as you will want to refer back to them as you progress through this process.

Session	Title	Scripture	Theme	Supplies Needed
Session 1	Recollecting	Psalms 90:1-2	God's Faithfulness through All Generations	large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper; markers; "Looking in the Mirror" worksheet (Appendix 1)
Session 2	Reflecting	1 Corinthians 13:12	Our Offering to the Lord	completed "Looking in the Mirror" worksheet; pens; paper
Session 3	Realizing	Matthew 22:37-39	The Great Commandment	large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper; markers; pens; paper
Session 4	Dreaming	Matthew 28:19-20	The Great Commission	large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper; notes from session 3; pens; paper; "Possible Next Steps" (Appendices 2, 3, & 4)
Session 5	Discerning	Ephesians 4:1-6	Equipped by the Holy Spirit	large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper; markers; notes from session 1; notes from session 3; "Possible Next Steps" (Appendices 2, 3, & 4); notes from all previous sessions

LET'S GET STARTED



01

PRAY!

Be attentive to actively seeking guidance from God. Everyone involved is encouraged to engage in prayer, scripture, silence and stillness. Pray without ceasing and to invite as many folks as possible to join in. Invite the entire congregation, other area United Methodist Congregations, your District Superintendent, and other people of faith you know to pray for this process and for those involved in it.



02

GATHER YOUR TEAM

Put together a team by invitation, not through the open solicitation of volunteers. A local church team consisting of 5-8 people works best. In congregations with an average worship attendance of less than 25, 3-5 people are recommended. Multiple perspectives should be intentionally included. The pastor and lay leader or chair of the governing body are encouraged to work together to nominate the team. It is best practice to have the team formally approved by the governing body of the congregation.



03

DEFINE YOUR TIMELINE

Be clear about when meetings will be held, for how long, what group members will be asked to do during and between meetings, and how the group will know when the work of this discernment process is complete.



04

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CONGREGATION

Use the customary communication rhythms of your congregation: worship announcements, newsletter, bulletin, etc. At the very least it needs to be mentioned on a Sunday or two and included in any print or digital materials shared those days.



05

INVITE FEEDBACK AND PARTICIPATION

For transparency, provide an update after each session and ask for ongoing prayer. Consider the following:

- a congregation-wide kickoff event related to session 1
- a gathering to share and collect discernment from the congregation between sessions 4 and 5
- developing a feedback system where people in the congregation are invited to share their input/thoughts



PREPARE TO GATHER

TIPS FOR PREPPING PRIOR TO EVERY SESSION



READ THE SESSION MATERIAL

Prior to your gathering, read the session you will facilitate. What sticks out to you? What might you need to learn more about? What surprises you? Anything that makes you uneasy? Why?



CONSIDER YOUR PEOPLE

Who do you anticipate to be present? What do you know about them? Do they have any special needs for accommodation? What can you anticipate for the group dynamic? How will you prepare to lead this particular group?



GATHER SUPPLIES AND SET UP

Each session, you will find a sidebar with a list of supplies needed. Be sure to print any necessary activities from the appendix. What will your gathering space look like? How will you need to set up prior to the gathering (tables, chairs, etc.)? Is it easily accessible?



PRAY

To set the tone that all of this work and these conversations are to be steeped in prayer and framed by a posture of openness to God's leading, you are encouraged to think about designing some kind of small worship or altar space where you'll be meeting. This space could include a cross, a candle, and/or some tokens of how your community experiences God at work. At every session, you will spend time in prayer together.



SESSION ONE

RECOLLECTING: GOD'S FAITHFULNESS THROUGH ALL GENERATIONS



“Lord you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” -Psalm 90:1-2

SESSION PURPOSE

Let’s take an honest look at our past as a congregation, as part of a broader community, and as part of the world by developing three timelines connected to the life of our congregation. As we do this, we’ll spend time reflecting on how God has been faithful to our congregation and community in the past as well as how our congregation has been faithful to God and God’s call.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper
- markers
- “Looking in the Mirror” worksheet (Appendix 1)

OPEN WITH PRAYER

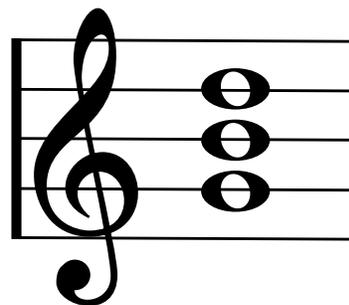
As participants settle in for this first session, it is recommended that the group take a few minutes to intentionally center on God’s presence. Have someone slowly and deliberately read the scripture for this session. Spend 2-3 minutes of silence together, inviting people to sit comfortably in their chairs, closing their eyes, and breathing deeply and slowly. After the scripture and silence, have a volunteer open with prayer, specifically asking for God’s guidance through this time of discernment.

OVERLAPPING TIMELINES EXERCISE

Together, you will build three independent, but connected, timelines: your congregation, your community, and a global/cultural timeline. It is best to write these on a wall where everyone can see them, either on a large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper. Picture these timelines stacked, like notes in a chord on a musical staff or hymn lyrics in a hymnal.

Your Congregation’s Timeline

Develop a timeline for the life of your congregation. This is the foundational timeline you’ll be thinking about. It is best to start at your founding and run through the current day. Indicate the reason for your founding, pastoral changes, significant programs started/stopped, building projects, significant trauma, significant milestones/celebrations.





SESSION ONE

RECOLLECTING: GOD'S FAITHFULNESS THROUGH ALL GENERATIONS



Your Community's Timeline

Develop a community timeline (and use a different color to record this information on the paper/board). This timeline should span the same time as your congregational timeline (but can begin earlier if there are specific things to note in the community that impact the launching of your congregation). Here you would indicate things like when your community was founded as well as significant events, changes in schools, significant growth or decline, natural disasters, significant businesses opening or closing, diversity increasing or decreasing, significant demographic shifts that have happened (or are projected).

A Global/Cultural Timeline

Develop a global/cultural Timeline (and use a third distinct color to record this information on the paper/board). The timeline should include significant political events, inventions, breakthroughs in technology/communication, cultural shifts, etc.

REFLECTING TOGETHER

After completing the timelines, spend time reflecting together on the following questions. Make sure someone records notes from the reflections.

- What on the timelines exhibits God's faithfulness to our congregation and community?
- What on the timelines exhibits our congregation's faithfulness to God?
- In what ways has the congregation benefited from things happening in the broader community?
- In what ways has the broader community benefited from things happening in the life of the congregation?
- What do the timelines reveal about who our congregation has been in God in the past?
- What do the timelines reveal about who our congregation is in God in the present?

ASSIGN PRE-WORK FOR SESSION 2

- Determine how, if at all, information from the timelines and reflections will be shared with the broader congregation. Who will be responsible for this? By when will it be done?
- Assign someone (or a team of people) to complete the "Looking in the Mirror" worksheet (Appendix 1) prior to when the group will meet next.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Share joys and concerns for yourselves, your community, and this process. Have someone other than the person that opened in prayer close in prayer.



SESSION TWO

REFLECTING: OUR OFFERING TO THE LORD



“For now in this time of imperfection, we see (in) the mirror dimly but then when the time of perfection comes, we will see reality face to face.”
– 1 Corinthians 13:12

SESSION PURPOSE

Let’s now take an honest look at who we currently are as a congregation, the gifts we currently have and the ways in which we’re using those gifts. As we look at the information collected for this session, we are expanding our reflections started in the timeline(s) exercise from Session 1.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- completed “Looking in the Mirror” worksheet
- pens and paper

OPEN WITH PRAYER

As participants return for this second session, it is recommended that the group take a few minutes to intentionally center on God’s presence. Have someone slowly and deliberately read the scripture for this session. Spend 2-3 minutes of silence together, inviting people to sit comfortably in their chairs, closing their eyes, and breathing deeply and slowly. After the scripture and silence, have a volunteer open with prayer, specifically asking for God’s guidance through this time of discernment.

SESSION ONE REFLECTION

Spend a few minutes reflecting together on each of the following questions:

- What from the “Recollecting” session have you found yourself thinking about the most since we last met?
- With whom have you talked about our learnings?
- What were their responses?

MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL...

Invite the people who completed the “Looking in the Mirror” worksheet to present the findings to the group. Give plenty of space and time for questions and processing, then provide 3-5 minutes of silence for everyone to write a few thoughts out in response to the questions below, then open up for time a sharing.

- What surprised you the most about the information collected in the “Looking in the Mirror” worksheet?
- How do you feel about information collected and shared?
- What does this information tell us about God’s faithfulness to us as a congregation?
- What does this information tell us about our faithfulness as a congregation to God?



SESSION TWO

REFLECTING: OUR OFFERING TO THE LORD



ASSIGN PRE-WORK FOR SESSION 3

- Have one or two conversations with others in the congregation about things you have learned in the process so far. What has surprised you the most? What do you think they might be most interested in?
- Assign someone to research basic demographic data for your community. Is the population increasing or decreasing? Is the population getting older or younger? Is the population getting more diverse or less diverse?

A few web searches can help you find some of this information in general. A Quick Insite report from Mission Insite can provide fascinating data and analysis. Your Pastor or a member of your congregation might be familiar with Mission Insite and able to easily access this. If not, a member of the congregational excellence staff in the conference office can provide this for you upon request.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Share joys and concerns for yourselves, your community, and this process. Have someone other than the person that opened in prayer close in prayer.



SESSION THREE

REALIZING: THE GREAT COMMANDMENT



*Jesus replied, “Love your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: **‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’**” -Matthew 22:37-39*

SESSION PURPOSE

Jesus was clear that one of the most important things we are called to do as his followers is love our neighbors as our selves. As obvious as it sounds, we can't love our neighbors unless we know our neighbors. In this session we'll take an honest look at the degree to which our congregation knows and loves our neighbors outside the walls of the congregation.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper
- markers
- pens and paper

OPEN WITH PRAYER

This third session is the midway point of the process. As participants return for this session, it is recommended that the group again take a few minutes to intentionally center on God's presence. Have someone slowly and deliberately read the scripture for this session. Spend 2-3 minutes of silence together, inviting people to sit comfortably in their chairs, closing their eyes, and breathing deeply and slowly. After the scripture and silence, have a volunteer open with prayer, specifically thanking God for God's faithfulness thus far in the process and asking for God's continued guidance through this time of discernment.

SESSION TWO REFLECTION

Spend a few minutes reflecting together on each of the following questions:

- What from the “Reflecting” session have you found yourself thinking about the most since we last met?
- With whom have you talked about our learnings?
- What were their responses?

OUR DEMOGRAPHICS

Begin by having the people who completed the demographic research present the findings to the group. Give plenty of space and time for questions and processing. Discuss the following questions related to your learnings:

- How do (or don't) the demographics of your congregation match the broader community in terms of:
 - Age
 - Education and Career
 - Community Diversity (Racial/Ethnic make-up)
 - Socio-economic level



SESSION THREE

REALIZING: THE GREAT COMMANDMENT



Our Demographics Continued

- How aligned do you imagine these things were when your congregation was founded? The 1950s? How aligned do you imagine these will be in 2050?

After the information has been presented, provide 2-3 minutes of silence for everyone to write a few thoughts out in response to the following questions.

- What surprised you the most about the information collected and shared?
- How do you feel about the information collected and shared?
- What does this information tell us about God's faithfulness to us as a congregation?
- What does this information tell us about our faithfulness as a congregation to God?

After the time for silent reflection, spend time reflecting together as a whole group on the above questions. Make sure someone records notes from the reflections.

NAMING COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND ALLIES

Spend a few minutes brainstorming partners and allies that your congregation has in the broader community when it comes to helping people love God, love their neighbors, and love themselves. These can be individuals or organizations. Have somebody record things shared during the brainstorm on a large sticky note or a whiteboard for everyone to see.

ASSIGN PRE-WORK FOR SESSION 4

- Continue to be intentionally praying for this process and these conversations!
- Have one or two conversations with others in the congregation about things you have learned in these conversations to date. What has surprised you the most? What do you think they might be most interested in? Make notes of the conversations had to share together in session 4.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Share joys and concerns for yourselves, your community, and this process. Have someone other than the person that opened in prayer close in prayer.



SESSION FOUR

DREAMING: THE GREAT COMMISSION



Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age. -Matthew 28:19-20

SESSION PURPOSE

This session is designed to give space for processing all that has been learned/experienced so far, to provide an introductory overview of possible next steps, and to begin dreaming about the most faithful next step(s) for the congregation to take.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- whiteboard or big butcher paper
- notes from session 3
- pens and paper
- “Possible Next Steps” (Appendices 2, 3, & 4)

OPEN WITH PRAYER

Session four introduces participants to a great variety of possible next steps for their congregation. While gathering for this session, it is recommended that the group again take a few minutes to intentionally center on God’s presence. Have someone slowly and deliberately read the scripture for this session. Spend 2-3 minutes of silence together, inviting people to sit comfortably in their chairs, closing their eyes, and breathing deeply and slowly. After the scripture and silence, have a volunteer open with prayer, specifically thanking God for God’s continued faithfulness, and asking for God to provide energy and enthusiasm in this session’s explorations.

SESSION THREE REFLECTION

Give each member of the team an opportunity to share brief reflections about conversations they have had with other members of the congregation about this process thus far.

EXPLORE POSSIBILITIES

There are a number of possible next steps that a congregation can take as they seek to be faithful to God’s call. This conversation is intended to provide a brief overview of what some of those next steps might entail. Provide everyone a copy of Appendix 2. Take turns reading the possibilities out loud. Invite people to highlight, underline, write question marks, etc. as they listen to the possibilities.

Remember, this guide is framed with the underlying assumption that God is calling all churches to help people grow in their love of God, neighbor, and self. As you brainstorm next steps, think about helping people who are already and not yet connected to the church grow in these ways. We are not talking about slowing down decline or prolong death in congregations who have ceased to point people toward the transformative love of God.



SESSION FOUR

DREAMING: THE GREAT COMMISSION



Explore Possibilities Continued

After reviewing the various options, give 3-5 minutes of time for silent reflection. Invite each member of the team to prayerfully consider which of the options they sense God calling their church to. As they feel a sense of clarity about *which*, invite them to think about how/what/why/who.

After allowing time to silent processing, invite people to share reflections and thoughts together as a team regarding potential next steps. This is simply a brainstorm, so give everyone a chance to share. Have somebody record notes for everyone to see.

After everyone has shared, reflect on what patterns and common themes are emerging. Are there specific options that capture the imagination of the group as a whole?

Resist the urge to rush to finality/closure at this point, this fourth session is intended to end with a sense of openness to 1) let the Spirit continue to work, 2) receive input from the rest of the congregation if desired.

ASSIGN PRE-WORK FOR SESSION 5

- Determine how (or if) input from the congregation will be solicited before plans are finalized for next steps.
- Continue to be intentionally praying for this process and these conversations!

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Share joys and concerns for yourselves, your community, and this process. Have someone other than the person that opened in prayer close in prayer.



SESSION FIVE

DISCERNING: EQUIPPED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT



As a prisoner of the Lord, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. -Ephesians 4:1-6

*O God, our Help in ages past, our Hope for years to come.
Our Shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal Home.
Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,
from everlasting Thou art God, to endless years the same.
A thousand ages in Thy sight are like an evening gone,
short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.
O God, our Help in ages past, our Hope for years to come,
be Thou our Guard while life shall last, and our eternal Home!
-O God, Our Help in Ages Past, Issac Watts*

SESSION PURPOSE

The purpose of this session is to synthesize the conversations had so far and finalize a recommendation to the congregation regarding the most faithful next step(s). The goal here is concrete next steps. Even if they seem like simple or small next steps, concrete next steps are the key to moving toward a new future.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

- large whiteboard or large pieces of butcher paper
- markers
- notes from all prior sessions
- “Possible Next Steps” (Appendices 2, 3, & 4)

OPEN WITH PRAYER

As the group gathers for the final session of this discernment process, it is again recommended that the group take a few minutes to intentionally center on God’s presence. Have someone slowly and deliberately read the scripture for this session. Read or sing together “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” Spend 2-3 minutes of silence together, inviting people to sit comfortably in their chairs, closing their eyes, and breathing deeply and slowly. After the silence, have a volunteer open with prayer, specifically thanking God for God’s continued faithfulness, and asking for God to provide clarity for naming and courage for taking the congregation’s next steps.

Don’t rush. Pray. Wait. Pray. Invite outside help to facilitate the conversation if you feel stuck.





SESSION FIVE

DISCERNING: EQUIPPED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT



REVIEW AND REFLECT

Spend a few minutes reviewing each of the four conversations had so far, giving particular attention to what they tell us about how God has been faithful to our congregation and how our congregation has been faithful to God.

- **Session 1: Recollecting** – what do you remember most from this conversation, what feels most significant now?
- **Session 2: Reflecting** – what do you remember most from this conversation, what feels most significant now?
- **Session 3: Realizing** – what do you remember most from this conversation, what feels most significant now?
- **Session 4: Dreaming** – what do you feel the Spirit leading you toward as an extension of this conversation?

BRAINSTORM NEXT STEPS

This brainstorm is not intended to name all possible next steps, but to finalize and agree upon a small number of next steps (no more than 2-3) that team members believe God is calling the church to take next. This conversation is a continuation of the conversation had at the close of session 4 (and maybe carried on with the congregation in some form since).

Start with a brainstorm using the following question as a prompt. Have someone record responses for the whole group to see. **“Given everything we have learned and shared through this process, I believe the most important next step to which God is calling us as a church is...”**

After everyone has had a chance to respond to the prompt, pause and look at the list of possibilities. Pause to pray for God’s guidance and clarity in bringing this season of discernment to a close.

DECIDE ON THE NEXT STEP(S)

Identify as clearly as possible the next step that it feels most important for your congregation to take. If 2-3 things seem equally important, they can all be named as next steps, but it is recommended that no more than 3 be carried forward as the immediate work. If there is a lot of energy around doing several different things, one possibility is to identify “waves” or “tiers” of focus. No more than 2-3 things should be in the first wave/tier. For each next step recommended, answer these questions:

- What is the next step that needs to be taken?
- By when does it need to be taken
- Who is primarily responsible for making sure the step is taken?
- What help will they need to take it?



SESSION FIVE

DISCERNING: EQUIPPED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT



Decide on the Next Steps Continued

Clarify whether there needs to be any final approval given by the congregation's governing body. Once approval is finalized, think through how you will clearly communicate the next step(s) to be taken with the congregation as a whole.

CLOSE IN PRAYER

Share joys and concerns for yourselves, your community, and this process. Have someone other than the person that opened in prayer close in prayer. Give thanks to God for the guidance provided through this process. Pray with a sense of hopefulness for how God will continue to act as you take these next steps as a congregation.

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LOOKING IN THE MIRROR



APPENDIX ONE

MVPS

What is your congregation's stated mission, vision, and purpose? Gather your current MVP and any from the past.

CURRENT MINISTRIES

As you seek to live and grow as disciples of Jesus, list the following ministries that currently exist.

BEYOND WORSHIP	FELLOWSHIP	SPIRITUAL GROWTH	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
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BY THE NUMBERS

Current Membership:	Membership for previous years on record:
Current Average Worship Attendance:	AWA for previous years on record:
People Serving Weekly:	Percentage of current membership that serves weekly:



LOOKING IN THE MIRROR



APPENDIX ONE

BY THE NUMBERS

Age Decade	# Connected to the Church	% of Giving Coming from this Decade
0-10		
11-20		
21-30		
31-40		
41-50		
51-60		
61-70		
71-80		
81-90		
91-100		
100+		



LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

APPENDIX ONE



BUILDING ASSESSMENT

Identify a person or two on the team who will analyze the building. Walk around the building (inside and outside) as if you were a guest. Take pictures of things that are welcoming and

hospitable, and take pictures of things that are dirty, broken, confusing, or out of place.

Area of Focus	Notes
External Building	
External Signage (consider newcomers, pedestrians, and public transit visitors)	
External Accessibility Barriers	
Internal Building (consider every room and hallway, not just the sanctuary)	
Internal Signage (consider newcomers - will they know where to go?)	
Internal Accessibility Barriers	
Major Projects that Need to be Addressed in the Next 10 Years	
Cost Estimate of Major Projects	
Utility and Building Upkeep Spent Annually	

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POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

APPENDIX TWO



Below is an extensive, though not exhaustive, list of potential next steps a congregation could be called to take in terms of their life together. When using this as part of Session 4 – Looking to the Future in the discernment guide, take turns reading the possibilities out loud. Invite people to highlight, underline, write question marks, etc. as they listen to the possibilities.

CLARIFY OR REFINE MISSION, VISION, PURPOSE

If the ministry of the congregation contains much activity, but little clarity about why those activities are done, engaging in an intentional, congregation-wide process to clarify mission, vision, and/or purpose could be a good next step. This can be led by the Pastor, by a consultant, by a coach, or by a member of the Great Plains annual conference’s Congregational Excellence Team. Often having clarity around “who we are and what we believe God is calling us to do” is important in laying the groundwork for future next steps.

TEND TO THE INNER SOUL LIFE OF THE CONGREGATION

If congregations have experienced significant conflict in the past, and that conflict hasn’t been addressed, it can remain a barrier to growth. If congregations have experienced significant loss in the past, and that loss hasn’t been honestly grieved, it can remain a barrier to growth. Sometimes honest conversations about conflict and grief and acts of reconciliation, grieving, lament, or healing, can be important steps when thinking about who God is calling the congregation to be moving forward.

KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS

If the congregation feels like they have a clear sense of who they are and why they exist, but doesn’t know their neighbors well, taking a deeper dive into neighboring could be a good next step. This could include participating in an intentional program to know their neighbors, or to engage in a deeper study of the data available through Mission Insite.

STRENGTHEN EXISTING SYSTEMS

Identify one or more (no more than 2-3) of your existing systems that can be strengthened. The “right” systems for you to address first are the ones that your team discerns would make an important impact in the congregation and the community *and* the ones where you have people with gifts, interests, skills, and passions who would want to help make progress. Systems should be strengthened to help people who are already and not yet connected to the church grow in their love of God, neighbor and self. Strengthening systems to slow decline or prolong death in a congregation is not what we’re talking about. See Appendix Three for additional information.

SOMETHING RADICAL OR BOLD

After walking through the process, your congregation might discern that it is time to explore possibilities that are more radical or bold. Any of these conversations should include your District Superintendent and will require a further process of congregational discernment and planning. Sometimes exploring one of these possibilities can be done while also doing something else like strengthening existing systems or better getting to know neighbors. See Appendix Four for additional information

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CHURCH SYSTEMS

Identify one or more (no more than 2-3) of your existing systems that can be strengthened. The “right” systems for you to address first are the ones that your team discerns would make an important impact in the congregation and the community and the ones where you have people with gifts, interests, skills, and passions who would want to help make progress. Systems should be strengthened to help people who are already and not yet connected to the church grow in their love of God, neighbor and self. Strengthening systems to slow decline or prolong death in a congregation is not what we’re talking about. Consider the following questions when discerning which systems to strengthen:

Invitation

- How are people invited to join your congregation for worship?
- How are people in the community invited to join your congregation for other activities?
- What tools do members of your congregation have (and what intentional encouragement do they receive) to invite their friends, family, and neighbors?
- How is invitation talked about in your congregation as a part of following Jesus?

Hospitality

When guests visit for the first time...

- is it clear where they’re supposed to park?
- is it clear where they’re supposed to enter as they approach the building?
- is it clear where they’re supposed to go after they enter the building?
- are they acknowledged? Given a gift?
- is there a concrete invitation extended regarding a next step they can take in connecting to God or the congregation?
- is the building accessible for people with mobility restrictions?

Follow-Up

- When guests visit for the first time, how is their contact information collected for future follow-up?
- How is follow-up done...
 - after guests visit for the first time?
 - after guests visit for the second time?
 - after guests visit for the third time?
 - if guests have been attending with some regularity, and then become much less frequent in their attendance?
 - if members shift their pattern of activity (suddenly attend less, serve less, or give less)?

Worship

- Is it clear when and where worship is when a person...
 - visits your church website?
 - visits any social media for the church?
 - calls the church and gets a recorded message?
 - looks at exterior building signage?
- Are things that happen in worship explained in clear language for any guests who might not have experience in church?
- What barriers in worship create an us/them inside/outside dynamic?
- In what ways are people intentionally encouraged to listen to and respond to God in worship?



STRENGTHEN EXISTING SYSTEMS



APPENDIX THREE

Communication

- How do we share information about our life as a congregation internally with people already connected to our body? Externally with people not yet connected to our body?
- If someone is invited to an event at our building, do we have a web presence that clearly answers questions about how to find our building, the right door of our building, and where to go when arriving to our building?
- Does our communication, spoken and written, contain insider jargon?

Leadership Structure

- Does it feel like there are as many committees as people in the life of the church?
- Do too many hoops for approval keep good and new ideas from being implemented in a timely manner?

Giving/Stewardship

- Is there a regular rhythm for teaching about stewardship and generosity as a part of the Christian life in our congregation?
- Do we talk intentionally during our worship gatherings about why and how people might contribute financially?

Mercy/Justice

- Does our congregation have clarity about the difference (and relationship) between mercy and justice?
- Does our congregation have clear systems for people to engage in mercy ministry?
- Does our congregation have clear systems for people to engage in justice ministry?

Kids/Youth/Families

- Is our physical space prepared to welcome kids in worship?
- Do we offer hospitality for kids and families beyond worship? Nursery? Sunday School?
- Are the places where those connections happen clean and safe?

Community/Outreach

- Do our neighbors know who we are in the community?
- Do we take intentional steps to know and love our neighbors?
- When we do community events, do we provide clear invitations to connect with the congregation in further ways?

Discipleship

- Does our congregation have a clear understanding of what discipleship is?
- Does our congregation have a clear sense of next steps that people are invited to take as disciples?
- Does our congregation provide opportunities for new people to engage in the process of discipleship?



CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING OPTIONS:

Any of these conversations should include your District Superintendent and will require a further process of congregational discernment and planning. Sometimes exploring one of these possibilities can be done while also doing something else like strengthening existing systems or better getting to know neighbors.

Re-Start – The church discontinues, takes a short hiatus (a minimum of six-months) and then restarts in the existing building or at another location. The church restarts with a different missional focus.

New Worship Service – It might be time to launch a new gathering of people on a regular basis for worship. This could be at any time of day on any day of the week. This could be in the current church building, a different space in the community, or even online.

New Campus – For healthy and strong congregations it may be time to launch a new campus. This would allow for multiplication of healthy ministries to reach new people in new places.

House Church or Class Meeting – This option can be especially helpful for congregations that no longer have the critical mass to make a more comprehensive service of worship sustainable. Some congregations may choose to sell their building, and shift to meeting in someone's home or a local community center or coffee shop.

Merger, vital or otherwise – With a more traditional merger, two congregations come together into one of the existing buildings. With a vital merger, all congregations sell their buildings and merge at a new location.

Cooperative Parish Ministry – When multiple congregations in a mission field or a region are exploring new possibilities, joining to be a cooperative parish can be a good option. Each church retains an independent identity, but resources are shared for ministry.

Close to intentionally leave a legacy – Some congregations realize they could stay open, sometimes even for years, by spending down current resources (investments or savings), yet decide to close in order to invest resources in the start of a new ministry or church.

Offer Part of Your Building – When no longer needing as much space for ministry as they once did, some congregations are able to offer part of their building to another non-profit who can use the space to serve the community. These arrangements can be mutually beneficial.

Sell Your Building – In some instances a congregation determines that it is in their best interest to sell their building and to do life and ministry in a different physical space. Sometimes that is in partnership with another congregation. Sometimes that is as a small group like a house church or a class meeting.

Creatively Meet Community Needs – This possibility often happens through the partnership of several churches in a community – town, city, or county. When several congregations find they have older buildings, with increasing maintenance and upkeep costs, they can find that coming together to do something new can bring new life on a number of levels. This could include several of the themes listed above, but might also include selling several existing properties to invest in building what the community most needs (early childhood, space for community or mental health resources, affordable housing, etc.) Sometimes these builds can even include common areas like a community room or an auditorium where the church can still hold Sunday worship gatherings.