



Metropolitan Chicago Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

THREE PATHWAYS GUIDE

DO NOT REMEMBER THE FORMER THINGS
OR CONSIDER THE THINGS OF OLD.
I AM ABOUT TO DO A NEW THING;
NOW IT SPRINGS FORTH; DO YOU NOT PERCEIVE IT?
I WILL MAKE A WAY IN THE WILDERNESS
AND RIVERS IN THE DESERT.

—ISAIAH 43:18-19 NRSV



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INTRODUCTION

Lutheran theologian and pastor Reinhold Niebuhr wrote this now-famous prayer in 1937:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

In part, it's a prayer of surrender regarding what we have no ability to change. It's also a prayer for empowerment—noting that there are things we can, indeed, be a part of changing. And it's a prayer for insight—for the ability to discern when we should work for change and when we need to accept the inevitable.

Many congregations are struggling with changes these days due to declining membership or worship attendance, lack or weariness of leadership, costs of everything from insurance to salaries to building maintenance, and other modern-day woes of congregational life. It's difficult, in the midst of such challenges, to know whether these changes mean our ministry is at the end of its life cycle, or whether there is opportunity for new life and new ministry directions.

This guide, intended for pastors and lay leaders, is about struggling ways congregations CAN choose to move from at-risk to taking risks for the sake of mission. There are options and tools for discerning where congregations are along their lifespans, and there are ready and worthy companions to accompany you. To paraphrase from Isaiah 43:

“Take heart, for our God, the Redeemer, the One who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, is saying to you: “Do not dwell on the former things, or get hung up on the ways of the past. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, won't you discern it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. I will provide quenching waters to my chosen people, whom I formed so that they might declare my praise.”



You're not done declaring God's praise regardless of the path forward for your congregation! You're not alone in seeking to discern God's new direction for you in the midst of change. And you're not empty-handed as you move into this season of discernment. God's promises don't change, but stand firm: to be with you, to send you partners and provisions for the journey, and to forge a path through your current wilderness.



SYNOD ACCOMPANIMENT

The word “synod” means “walking together.” Members of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod staff are eager to walk with you as you discern the best option for your congregation, and as you live into that option. We encourage you to reach out early in your discernment process, and to expect and accept from us additional resources and wisdom to better equip you for this important work.

Along the way, many decisions will need to be made, many of which will impact not only your congregation, but the larger church and the community around you. Synod staff can assist you in understanding the ramifications of your decisions and help guide your various processes. The life of your ministry matters to us! This walking-with is what we are called to do, and we hope that you will entrust us with the holy work of accompaniment. To reach the synod office, call 773-248-0021 and ask to speak with an Associate to the Bishop.



DEALING WITH GRIEF

Regardless of the direction your congregation decides to go, it's important to recognize that grief will be a factor. Even if you decide on a Continuation or a Community model, but especially if you choose a Closure process, the changes required will involve significant loss, and loss is always accompanied by grief, though it often goes un-named. If you don't acknowledge and attend to grief, it will be difficult to continue in the new direction you have chosen.

Grief is real, complex, and is experienced and expressed by people in a variety of ways. It might take the form of denial about the realities facing your congregation, get masked behind anger, or lay hidden underneath apathy or immobility. By building processes for naming and addressing grief as a community, we pay tribute to our Spirit-led past; we honor each other's God-given emotions, and we pave the way for the prayer-driven choices we've made about our future to occur more effectively.

Once someone in the congregation feels the call of the Spirit to discern alternative pathways for the congregation, the Grief Cycle begins and continues until the fulfillment of the plan is completed. The gift in processing grief throughout this time of change or closure is that we have the opportunity to celebrate, choose how we would like to leave a legacy, and transform hurt and pain into hope and celebration.

In this guide, tending to grief is a recurring theme. Grief's role, and how to address it, will be different depending on the choices a congregation makes about its future. Designating times, spaces, and ways to deal with grief will be important, even as you tend to the other processes outlined in this resource.

Appendix 3 provides several resources for dealing with the grief that inevitably will occur when congregations are going through major transitions. Pastors or leaders tending to the grief process should adapt these materials to meet the specific situation and losses each congregation is facing.



ASSESSING YOUR CONGREGATION'S VITALITY & SUSTAINABILITY

The pastor(s) and elected leaders of the congregation should respond to this preliminary survey when concerns are about whether and how to live out your calling as a community of faith into the future. This can be done together, perhaps at a council meeting, or it can be done individually, with responses being compiled and shared for collective analysis.

Using your congregation's average attendance and financial figures for the past 5 years, respond "yes" or "no" to the following questions as a springboard for further discussion:

YES	NO	QUESTIONS
		Do we have a pattern of growth in attendance?
		Has the congregation grown in the last five years?
		Are we experiencing the presence of first-time visitors on a regular basis?
		Do they return for a second or a third visit?
		Do 20-25% of our first-time visitors eventually join the congregation?
		Do we have sufficient numbers of people to volunteer for ministry within the congregation and outreach into the community?
		Is the same group of people doing all the work of ministry?
		Is the volunteer pool regularly refreshed with new leadership?
		Are there young adults and families active in the church?
		Are new efforts in evangelism and Christian education feasible?
		Is the congregation's main focus on outreach/evangelism?
		Is the congregation striving to do more than survive/keep the doors open?



		Is the congregation willing/able to adapt its ministry and lifestyle in order to develop the ministries that will meet the needs of a changing community?
		Do we have sufficient funds to do ministry within the congregation as well as outreach and evangelism into the community and world?
		Can we survive without some form of life support from bequests, special gifts, etc.?
		Does giving in the congregation enable "Great Commission" work (See Matt: 28:18-20)?
		Does most of the giving go toward maintenance and survival?
		Has the congregation maintained a good level of stewardship, including enough families (10-12) who tithe faithfully to the congregation?
		Is the present facility adequate to meet our ministry needs?
		Is the facility physically adaptable for use? Can we afford the repairs/adaptations needed to use these facilities for ministry?
		TOTALS

If five or more of your responses concern you, we suggest you contact the synod office to discuss with a Bishop's Associate the trends revealed. If eight or more of your responses alarm you, this may suggest a serious condition of decline. It is time to look courageously and honestly at your situation and consider your congregation's options. This guide will assist you.

The following set of short-answer questions provides a more expansive opportunity for pastor(s) and lay leaders to consider the current state and future possibilities for your congregation.

1. What exciting thing has God done in your midst in the last year?
2. Where is your congregation afraid, and what is the evidence of that fear?
3. What are the consequences of catering to these fears?
4. What is your dream for your congregation?
5. What would it take for your dream to become reality?



Formal Assessment Tools

A congregation is thriving when it achieves missional goals (vitality) and is likely to continue doing so into the future (sustainability). Vital congregations are any size or shape that live out God's mission by building relationships with God, each other, and the world.

The Congregational Vitality and Sustainability Assessments (found in Appendices 1 and 2) are field-tested tools that help leaders and members rate where their congregation is along in its life cycle. Using and discussing these tools among leaders and members provide a clearer picture of the realities facing your congregation rather than the "gut sense" or vague forecasting that tend to hold sway when things feel unstable or worrisome. If you have not yet engaged the synod, now is the time to connect for the holy work of accompaniment in the process. To reach the synod office, call 773-248-0021 and ask to speak with an Associate to the Bishop.

In some cases, these tools will provide a more hopeful picture than expected. In other cases, important realities will emerge, indicating that things need to change in a more dramatic direction. Regardless of what these tools reveal, it's likely, given the fact that there was cause to use them, that something new is afoot, requiring of you and other leaders greater discernment and decision-making.

When using these tools, keep in mind that each respondent will answer from their own perspective, and that all perspectives are valid. It is not uncommon for pastors and staff to have a different (often lower) assessment of the congregation. Everyone has different backgrounds, expectations, and experiences of the congregation. When it comes time to discuss people's ratings, make sure to honor each perspective

A Group Discussion on Vitality

After the form in Appendix 1 has been submitted by a key set or significant number of congregational leaders and members, convene a meeting to collectively consider how people are assessing the congregation. Begin by sharing how each person rated each item. This can be done verbally or by having each person make a mark on a common blank survey, flip chart, white board, etc.



Discuss ratings within each category. What are strengths? What are challenges? Where do people see God at work? What do the overall ratings say about the congregation's vitality?

Pick out items where people scored on either side of the 3 (some rating it high and others low). Have people from each perspective talk about what perception motivated their rating.

Come to consensus about which responses best reflect your congregation's reality, or calculate an average based on all the ratings. Decide whether you also want to use the Sustainability Assessment found in Appendix 2. If so, a similar discussion should follow that process.

With these assessment tools clarifying your congregation's reality, you're ready to begin discerning your way forward. The Three Pathways Guide will assist you in that process.



THREE PATHWAYS – WITH VARIATIONS

NOTE: If you've reached this point, where you intend to explore the various Pathways and Variations described in the following pages, this is a good time, if you haven't already, to reach out to the synod office and invite the accompaniment of one of the Associates to the Bishop.

¹For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; ⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Discerning the season of your congregation's life is a crucial step, in terms of both vitality and sustainability. It is important to look at a wide range of options and to prayerfully discern what direction God is calling the congregation. Your ultimate goal is to be faithful to the situation facing your congregation and the unique setting of your ministry.

Each option described in this guide has significant benefits and challenges. As you discern, know that **financial sustainability is not the same as vitality**. Considering your congregation's future, with **vitality as your primary factor**, should be your aim. Congregational vitality is defined as "communities of Jesus that have life-changing relationships with God, each other and the world."



PATHWAY 1: Continuation through Transformation

Making significant internal changes to the current context to connect with God's mission.

Variations include:

- (A) Intentional vitality process
- (B) Re-imagining ministry
- (C) Sale of building

PATHWAY 2: Community Partnership

Engaging in shared ministry with another congregation for the sake of the gospel.

Variations include:

- (A) Yoking
 - (B) Merger
 - (C) Consolidation
 - (D) Anchor church model
- (Variations of the Parish approach can be found in both Yoking and the Adoption version of the Anchor Church Model.)

PATHWAY 3: Closure

Embracing the end with trust in the promise that God is doing a new thing.

Variations include:

- (A) Closing and re-opening
- (B) Word and Service mission post
- (C) Holy closure

All of these pathways and variations require wrestling with questions of finances, property, leadership, mission, worship location and times, grief, legacy, and more. Reflection and choosing a direction can result in such things as changes in worship times, pursuing part-time or new pastoral leadership, or the creation of shared ministries.



As with all discernment, this process should be steeped in prayer and Scripture, staying focused on God's mission and your congregation's part in that unfolding story. Therefore, the description of each option that follows is accompanied by a biblical exploration.

Once the congregational leadership has discerned which of these pathways to follow, the synod can provide a separate, more expansive, guide for that particular pathway.

Keep in mind that options could include engaging with a Full Communion partner. ELCA Full Communion partners are The Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and The United Methodist Church. The synod bishop can assist in identifying potential Full Communion partner.



PATHWAY 1: CONTINUATION THROUGH TRANSFORMATION

The congregation makes significant internal changes to connect with God's mission.

Start with Bible study! This can be done at a church council meeting and/or with a group of members you want to engage in the discernment process for your congregation.

Read Acts 9:1-22 – The Conversion of Paul

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." ⁷The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."



¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus,²⁰ and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.”²¹ All who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?”²² Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.

Prior to moving into the interpretation below, start with a few questions for discussion related to Paul’s experience compared to the situation the congregation finds itself in.

1. What did Saul set out to achieve?
2. What has your congregation been attempting to achieve?
3. Where is God in each story – yours and Saul’s?
4. What did God transform in Saul?

Transformation is a God-driven process that takes something that exists and makes it into something new. We see evidence of God’s transformation throughout creation: in the green leaves that replace winter’s naked branches; in the array of colors that come every autumn as the leaves change. We see it even as those same leaves fall to the ground, resting expectantly in a cycle which includes life and death, growth and rest.

In a similar way, we witness Paul’s transformation. He was passionate for the Lord, steeped in a fight to protect the God he knew – the theology he had embraced. He saw himself as a warrior, defending God by killing Christ’s followers with zeal because he believed it was righteous.

God literally stopped Paul in his tracks with a brilliant light, taking away his sight so that he might see anew. Now that God had his attention, Paul heard Jesus clearly.

God often uses incredible things to help us enter into transformation. In congregations, it looks different every time. God can use the loss of a familiar pastor or the arrival of a



new one; the gift – or the exhaustion – of an endowment; a decrease or increase in attendance; something we categorize as positive or something we categorize as negative. No matter what drives us into transformation, God does the transforming, and we are invited as co-creators.

Scripture does not give us insight on how Paul experienced his three days of blindness. But it had to have been a scary reality, not to mention having to wrestle with the cultural idea that illness meant someone had sinned. Paul may have questioned what he did to receive God's wrath. Congregations have similar experiences of the loss of something they once had: many members, a beloved pastor, a well-maintained building, financial security, etc. They often want to return to a point in time when things were good and ministry was vital.

Through God's transformation, Paul was ready to believe something new – to become someone new. He was no longer the Saul of verse one who was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He was not only becoming a disciple of the Lord; he was making new disciples. A flash from heaven stopped him on the road, where he met Jesus and began his transformation. He had to embrace a new understanding of who God was, who he was meant to be, and what God wanted him to do.

Transformation starts with faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our catalyst for transformation. Paul was ready to become the disciple who would bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world in need of that Gospel truth.

Variation 1: Intentional Vitality Process

An intentional vitality process is grounded in Bible study, prayer, conversation, reflection, and action. Congregations find new energy and direction while clarifying their part in God's mission. This process is most effectively led by an outside facilitator and generally lasts 18 months to two years. An intentional vitality process seeks transformation in the life of the congregation through purposeful and radical change.

The process includes:



- growing spiritually through a renewed emphasis on faith practices that deepen faith, strengthen commitment, and rediscover the purpose of the congregation;
- learning and telling about how God's story is reshaping your community;
- discovering gifts and assets you can use to serve your neighbors and follow Jesus;
- learning how to lead change effectively so that the congregation can grow;
- acknowledging the losses that transformation requires, and dealing with the accompanying grief;
- developing an action plan specific to your congregation;
- building teams into well-formed and effective equippers and encouragers who know where to find support for the action plans they are living out.

The process begins when the congregation council and pastor(s) decide to move in this direction. The congregation council names a vitality team and seeks a coach or mentor who will walk with them during the transformation process. With that person's accompaniment, the team helps the council and congregation create, adopt, and implement changes, address the losses and the grief, and frees the congregation for new movement of the Spirit.

Variation 2: Re-imagining Ministry

Re-imagining the congregation's ministry is a spiritual and structural process.

Transformation takes place when we are connected with Jesus, one another, and the world by aligning the congregation's purpose, identity, and work with God's vision and plan. Re-imagining Ministry is an intentional process that engages the congregation in leadership, structural, and programmatic changes. The process has a heavy focus on re-rooting in your community.

Part of determining whether or not this option is right for your church includes looking at the size of the current congregation, the energy level, and the mission field around the church. Consultation with synod staff will assist in determining whether yours is a viable Re-imagining Ministry congregation.

This process requires:

- the congregation working with the bishop's staff to call a new clergy leader;



- an appointed team to lead the Re-imagining Ministry process that will work with the new clergy leader, the synod, and the congregation;
- a willingness on the part of the congregation to focus on spiritual development and discipleship;
- acknowledging the losses that this form of transformation requires, and dealing with the accompanying grief;
- an outward focus on the community around the church, with the needs of those not yet in church taking priority over the needs of the current congregation; and
- lots of change around church structure, finances, and leadership as the congregation discerns its missional direction, utilizing resources to fulfill it.

Churches that want to consider the Re-imagining Ministry option need lots of support in terms of ongoing mentoring or coaching. It works best when formal covenants are affirmed through congregational vote. A Re-imagining Ministry pastoral leader will spend no less than 50% of their time in the community. This intentional outreach focus often requires that lay leadership help with pastoral care and administration to free up the clergy leader's time. The benefit of a Re-imagining Ministry congregation is that it rekindles its spirit and sense of mission and becomes linked to the community around the congregation.

One deterrent to the Re-imagining model is the time it takes for the process to occur. It typically takes three to five years and requires determination and use of resources. The risk is high, but the payoff is great, as a congregation is reawakened to God's mission, adapts to new mission strategies, and strengthens ministry partnerships. Re-imagining Ministry is not a one-person project; it involves the majority of congregational members actively working together with the new clergy leader toward mutually-discerned goals.

Variation 3: Sell the Building

Are any of these statements true about your congregation?

- The maintenance or repair expenses for the church are no longer affordable.
- Volunteers are scarce.
- The church is not handicap accessible.



- The church has sustained significant storm damage and rebuilding and/or the insurance payout is questionable.
- The church building is the only financial asset.
- Obtaining new space is not an obstacle.

All of these are good reasons to consider continuing the ministry of the congregation from a new location. If the building impedes mission or is the only financial asset, consider selling your building. The synod staff can provide contacts and a clear process regarding the sale of a church building. With those funds and the existing membership, the congregation would find a new place to worship and be in mission.

Explore the idea of moving in with another congregation, sharing their building, negotiating a worship schedule, and other ways to share space. Alternately, consider secular places where you could meet, like schools, social service agencies, or community halls. In rural areas, fire stations often have meeting/community rooms. Consider chapels at colleges, hospitals, or senior living facilities. Make sure the location is handicap accessible. Strive for good visibility and excellent signage. Think about acoustics and aesthetics.

Keep in mind that selling a church building can trigger a real sense of loss for members, especially those who have been a part of the congregation for a long time. The space in which your ministry has been conducted is holy ground! Giving it up – even when a new and promising location replaces it – can be traumatic. Dealing with the accompanying grief is essential.

As with the other options in this category, pay careful attention to God's mission in your new locale. This option works best when it is paired with a commitment to an intentional vitality process when in your new location. New pastoral leadership for the congregation in the new locale should also be considered, in consultation with the bishop's office.

PATHWAY 2: COMMUNITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

The congregation engages in shared ministry with another church for the sake of the gospel.



Start with Bible study! This can be done at a church council meeting and/or with a group of members who you want to engage in the discernment process for your congregation.

Read Nehemiah 1:1 - 2:18 – The Restoration of Jerusalem's Wall

¹The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ²one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.”⁴When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant, Moses. ⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’¹⁰They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!” At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

^{2:1}In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was served him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. ²So the king said to me, “Why is your face sad since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. ³I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors’ graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”⁴Then the king said to me, “What do you request?” So, I prayed to the God



of heaven. ⁵Then I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors’ graves, so that I may rebuild it.” ⁶The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” So, it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date. ⁷Then I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; ⁸and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.” And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me.

⁹Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent officers of the army and cavalry with me. ¹⁰When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. ¹¹So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days.

¹²Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. ¹³I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon’s Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. ¹⁵So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

¹⁶The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work. ¹⁷Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” ¹⁸I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us start building!” So, they committed themselves to the common good.

Prior to moving into the interpretation below, start with a few discussion questions related to Nehemiah’s experience compared to the situation in which the congregation finds itself.



1. What was Nehemiah's reaction when he first learned about Jerusalem?
2. What are your feelings about your congregation's situation?
3. Reread the last paragraph. What do you notice?
4. What does this say about your situation?

Nehemiah had a good thing going. He had the King's favor by serving as his cupbearer. He did not have to worry about food, housing, money, or safety. He could have lived his whole life in comfort and not suffered in the least.

But Nehemiah was part of a community with a common mission: to serve God, love their neighbors, and be a light to the nations. When Nehemiah learned of the wall lying in disrepair, he repented. He recognized the corporate responsibility to be good stewards of God's generosity.

The people of God had been restored to their homeland, yet the iconic wall lay in disrepair. Nehemiah did not seek to blame those who were living in the area, but saw his own holy responsibility. Just as he shared in the confession for leaving the wall in disrepair, he shared in the work of restoring the wall.

Many congregations in this day and time operate as silos. It is easy to focus on one's own mission without considering the work of the neighbor. Congregations feel as if they must rebuild the proverbial wall alone, when in fact God gives us each other.

The very meaning of the word synod defines the relationships of the congregations in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod – we are walking together. It is a powerful thing for a congregation to hear clearly God's call to mission and realize that, to accomplish it, they will need partners.

Nehemiah assessed the wall. Nehemiah prayed and made plans – plans that were risky and could have literally cost him his livelihood or his life. He took those plans to the people – God's chosen people – and the people joined the work, even those who were living in another land.

God wants us to work together for the sake of a broken world, for the sake of God's mission.



Variation 1: Yoking

A yoking occurs when two or more congregations agree to remain in their existing buildings, remain separately incorporated, yet share one pastor (or ministry staff) for the yoked congregations. This option can be helpful in terms of having a full-time pastor (or ministry staff) and offers the opportunity for two or more congregations to, optimally, work cooperatively in ministry or, minimally, afford the services of an ordained pastor or a ministry staff. This is the most viable option for a Full Communion partnership, as the merging of assets and shared ownership does not come into play.

The most challenging question in a yoking generally centers on worship time. There will likely need to be changes to worship times in a yoking situation. Additionally, it is important to consider the realistic compensation-to-time ratio of each partnership (i.e., a yoke with one congregation paying 3/4 time and one congregation paying 1/4 time).

While this option offers flexibility for creative staffing, there are challenges that need to be prayerfully considered as well:

- Congregations will have less time from their pastor or ministry staff, which now serves multiple congregations.
- Congregation members must take on some of the tasks previously done by their pastor or ministry staff when they solely served their one congregation full-time.
- There will be increased travel time and mileage expenses as the pastor or ministry staff goes between congregations.
- When there is a pastoral staff, there is the need to intentionally work on staff dynamics and communication.
- When programs are shared by the congregations, regular and intentional communication should occur well in advance of events.
- What are the real or perceived losses (of a pastor, a worship time, etc.) and how will the accompanying grief be acknowledged and processed?

In considering a yoked situation, it is very important to weigh the benefits and challenges in your particular setting. This option is open to partnerships in which congregations may be served by clergy of Full Communion partner denominations and/or yoked congregations may be Full Communion partners. A Memorandum of



Understanding can clarify expectations of shared staff. It is also helpful for elected leadership groups to meet together several times a year to ensure a strong and trusting partnership.

Variation 2: Merger

A merger is when two or more congregations move together into one of the existing buildings and share resources. In many cases, a merger allows two struggling congregations to share one clergy person and to pool dwindling resources, enabling a continued presence in a community. Challenges of merging into an existing building include:

- turf issues of “whose” congregation it is;
- questions about which clergy person remains as leader of the merged congregations;
- feelings of one congregation winning and the other losing;
- power struggles;
- no new sense of mission or energy;
- grief at the loss of a building, a beloved clergy person, and/or a certain worship time.

It is also important in your reflection to understand Merger Math. If one congregation has 100 members and the other has 50, it does not mean the merged entity will end up with 150 members. Usually, after two or three years, the congregation will be back to the size of the larger congregation.

Merger may be the best option in some settings in which there are limited resources and obvious duplication of buildings and efforts. However, prayerful consideration should be given to the long-range effects on ministry and mission, rather than just the short-term advantages. The congregations need to ask candidly, “Are we fulfilling God’s vision for our mission field or are we simply postponing the inevitable?” Congregations that are considering merger should also be mindful of the advantage of entering that arrangement while they still have the energy and resources to have influence and impact on the mission and priorities of a merged congregation.



This option may work well for Full Communion partnerships as long as all parties are fully informed and aware of issues around pre-existing and shared assets. Federation agreements allow for making distinctions between pre-existing assets and assets that are established as a merged congregation. The synod office can provide guidance for establishing Federation agreements.

Variation 3: Consolidation

A consolidation is when two or more congregations sell their buildings, change their leadership, and move to a new location with a new sense of ministry and usually a new congregation name.

Advantages of a consolidation include:

- elimination of “turf wars;”
- a new location with new pastoral leadership, giving the former congregations a fresh start;
- budgets, buildings and resources consolidated for one mission;
- a new church building or location that helps launch a new sense of ministry and mission.

This option can be very fruitful but does require a lot of prayer and strategizing by two or more congregations, as well as a clear understanding by all involved that, while history will be honored, the past will not be preserved. This is about mission for today and for the future. Unless all involved can adopt this attitude, consolidation is nearly impossible. As with each of the variations, issues of loss and grief need to be taken into account and processed.

Consolidation can also fail if there is turmoil when all financial resources are put into one pot and/or if congregations argue over keeping a former pastor in this new venture. People have to be ready to give up their old sense of identity and accept this consolidation as a new church. If one or more of the congregations views itself as a closed club for their members, with their own needs as paramount, consolidation will not work. However, if this option is done well, there is an opportunity to move to a new mission field or community and for a new venture to blossom.



Consolidation offers possibilities for Full Communion partnerships between congregations that choose to federate or become union congregations for the sake of reaching the mission field with greater emphasis and clarity. Working with judicatories of the denominations involved takes time and energy, but can have powerful long-term benefits that allow for focused resources and greater impact on the mission field. The synod bishop would be a key partner in this scenario.

Variation 4: Anchor Church Models

A growing number of struggling congregations are looking to partner with healthier congregations as a way of leveraging resources for the sake of the Gospel. In any anchor situation, the struggling congregation is the initiator of discernment and conversation. If you discern that an anchor model is the right fit for your congregation, you will need to discern what model is right for your context.

The Accompaniment Model

In this model, both partners remain independent but come alongside to leverage resources. The healthier congregation provides accompaniment in visioning and strategic planning as well as coaching to the leader of the struggling congregation. The goal is to help transfer and create healthy DNA in the struggling congregation. Many struggling congregations possess a rich history and organizational memory of a day and time when they were vibrant and alive.

Thinking of closing or being assimilated into another congregation can be a stumbling block to transformation. The Accompaniment Model allows a struggling congregation to maintain its autonomy while being accompanied by a vital congregation that is also engaging in a visioning and strategic development process of its own. The process includes a covenant for ministry together and supervision/coaching provided by clergy of the healthier congregation. The process also includes:

- a period for relationship and trust building;
- new guiding statements (developed in six-twelve months);
- creating a three-phase strategic plan;
- accompaniment for three to five years.



The Adoption Model

At the core of the Adoption Model is the concept of both/and. This model provides a balance between autonomy and unity. The struggling congregation votes to become an extension of the healthier anchor congregation, turning over all assets. Together they share the same mission, budget, staff, council, resources, and membership, but the arrangement allows for different expressions of worship, programming, and service. This model requires the following:

- The congregation must be located within a reasonable distance of the anchor congregation – less than half an hour.
- The congregation must have a clergy vacancy or be anticipating a vacancy (i.e., retirement is announced and impending).
- To change the culture of the church, new leadership which can embody the culture and values of the anchor congregation will be brought on.

The congregation must be eager to go all in on this model. There is not a turn-back option in this model. The congregation must be willing to pay the price. The price tag includes:

- name and cultural change;
- financial management by the anchor congregation;
- potential change of worship style and time;
- move from a council to a local discernment team;
- a significant sense of loss and its accompanying grief.

PATHWAY 3: CLOSURE

The congregation embraces the end with trust in the promise that God is doing a new thing.

Start with Bible study! This can be done at a church council meeting and/or with a group of members who you want to engage in the discernment process for your congregation.

Read Psalm 23 – God Shepherds Us in All Circumstances



¹*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

²*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;*

³*he restores my soul.*

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;*

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

⁵*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

⁶*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

Prior to moving into the interpretation below, start with a few questions for discussion, having to do with God's promise to be our shepherd and guide us through all situations, including the one in which the congregation currently finds itself.

1. Why is this psalm so comforting?
2. What situations does the shepherd handle?
3. What assurances can you find for you personally and for your congregation?

Often at funerals we read together Psalm 23. We read it as a reminder that the thing that scared us the most, death, has come. And yet, we need not fear it any longer. Instead, we give way to gratefulness for God's welcome into new life. On the brink of congregational closure, we cling to this truth again: "Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we fear no evil; for you are with us; your rod and your staff, they comfort us."

Exploring the closure variations can feel like walking through a dark valley toward death. But take heart! God is your comforter, your shepherd, your close companion, as you discern. If your congregation is being called to close, you can embrace the ending so that God might write a new story through your legacy. Endings and closure are not



failures; they are faithfulness. Choosing one of these variations can be embraced boldly because we are Easter people. Through it all, “surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long.”

Frederick Buechner writes, “Resurrection means that the worst thing is not the last thing.” Jesus’ death and resurrection have sealed the Easter promise that God will create newness out of death. Good Friday was the worst thing, and yet not the last. God was still writing a story in the darkness of the tomb. As Easter dawns, we sing the truth, “Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.”

As Easter people, we too are invited to embrace endings, worst things, even death –believing that God is doing a new thing. Perhaps God is inviting you in this season to embrace an ending, too. As you discern through these variations, do so as Easter people. Death always precedes resurrection. Endings always precede new beginnings.

The end will not be without grief. The grief will be palpable because this congregation has been a place of holy nourishment. It has fed people with Word and sacrament. It has been the embodiment of Christ’s love. Jesus weeps with and accompanies you in your grief. Yet Jesus redeems even grief, writing a new legacy from your story. These variations on holy closure allow your congregation to consider a new story, a new legacy; not with the same building or old ways, but by being caught up in the creative and redeeming work of God.

- What is the “worst thing” for your congregation?
- What is the legacy you would like to leave through this congregation?

“O God, you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” – ELW Evening Prayer

Variation 1: Close and Re-Open as a New Church

When an existing congregation values a presence in the community over its own needs to maintain ministry, this option provides a vital entry point for a new congregation. This



option is best when a congregation's demographics no longer match its surrounding community, but closure makes possible a new mission start in that same community.

In this option, a congregation chooses to bring its current ministry to an end over a period of several months, to then close the doors for 12 to 18 months, and then to re-open as a new mission starts. Existing members are commissioned to join other congregations while the synod staff works to identify the new mission focus, leadership, and potential plan. The Easter promise is seen in the new faith community established for the sake of sharing the Gospel in this new reality.

Key questions for this option:

- Is the area growing or experiencing a new sense of vibrancy?
- Is the congregation willing to redirect its assets for the purpose of establishing a new faith community?

Variation 2: Word & Service Mission Post

Congregations with a significant existing social ministry may choose to close as a Word and Sacrament community and find a future as a Word and Service mission post. Existing members would direct their energies to their social ministry alone, while finding a new church home in another congregation. This option includes holy closure for the Word and Sacrament community and makes space for a vital future for that particular social ministry. Often this includes organizing as an official non-profit organization.

Key questions for this option:

- Is there a vital and sustainable social ministry already a part of the congregation's ministry (i.e. preschool, food pantry)?
- If this social ministry ceased to exist, what would the impact be on the larger community?
- What is the membership's readiness to join another faith community for spiritual nourishment and still maintain a commitment to the current social ministry?
- Are there skills in your current congregation and in the larger community to administer this Word and Service post?



- Are there any funds/endowments/grants that could give the mission post a significant financial head start?

Variation 3: Holy Closure

Good Friday grief becomes Easter joy when congregations live into the promise of death and resurrection. Members of a congregation that has reached holy closure can often find a deep sense of satisfaction and faith in seeing their gifts blossom in new ways. Holy closure provides an opportunity to leave a strong legacy, including paying forward financial resources for the sake of the Gospel.

Holy closure includes sober realization of the existing situation and a period to grieve the loss of the church many people have loved. If there is a clergy vacancy, synod staff will work to provide or assign leadership, walking with the congregation in this time of grief and closing.

For congregations that have cemetery properties, the synodical recommendation is that, once the building is sold, funds would be used to set up a cemetery endowment to care for the cemetery in perpetuity. Remaining funds should be shared for the sake of the Gospel, with the consideration of all or a portion of the funds going to the synod for new ministries.

Key steps for the process include:

- creation of a dissolution council that will oversee the closure process and the work of teams/individuals attending to items of the closure;
- attention to legal requirements, including dissolving state incorporation;
- attention to real estate matters;
- attention to the distribution of financial assets after the disposal of property and meeting of all financial obligations;
- attention to congregational records, preparing them for the ELCA's Region 5 Archives;
- a final worship service to honor the rich legacy of the congregation and give thanks for the legacy the congregation is leaving for the sake of the Gospel.



Now that you've explored the various pathways and variations, it's time to make a choice as to which is appropriate for your congregation. Once you've made that decision through a transparent process involving key leadership and the consent of the congregation, additional materials are available from the synod office to guide you on your way. Hopefully by now you've sought the accompaniment of an Associate to the Bishop. That person can provide you with many of the tools you'll need to continue, and will journey with you.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

When should we contact the synod office? Whenever you are at the point of considering major changes to your ministry, it's a good time to reach out to the synod office and speak with an Associate to the Bishop about these matters. They won't tell you what to do, but they can provide accompaniment, counsel, and resources during the discernment process and after your decisions have been made about which direction to go. Remember, "synod" means "walking together," which is what the staff and bishop desire to do with you and your congregation.

How long should we discern options? There is no right answer to this. As you can read, the options all require change. And change takes time. Guided by the Spirit, discernment should lead you to a place of taking the next right step in one of the options. When you have clarity over the next right step, we invite you to share your decision with the synod staff. We will help you with tools for transformation, contact for potential partners, or clear processes for ending well.

Can the synod staff or bishop choose an option for us? Or close us? Our polity allows congregations to make decisions for their future. Neither the synod staff nor the bishop can choose your option, nor can they close your congregation. Your congregation's constitution makes this clear. It's wise to read your constitution as part of your discernment process. Options like holy closure or sale of building have clear processes in which the synod is a key partner.

Will we have to change our worship time? Maybe. Worship time is one of several things that could be impacted in the various options outlined.



Can we keep our pastor? It depends. When congregations enter into or experience significant transformation, pastors and synod partners need to discern if they have the gifts to lead the congregation into their next season of ministry. Further, congregations need to discern what type of leader they need to accompany them on their transformation journey.

Where do we find a ministry partner? You know your community, and it is often best to identify partners out of those with whom you already have some relationship and trust. Additionally, the synod staff can help draw together partners in yoking, merger, consolidation, and anchor church agreements. If a Full Communion partner is the most natural fit, the bishop will work with the judicatory head of that denomination to coordinate partnership details.

Are there funds to help? The synod and churchwide expressions are committed to helping congregations move into vital futures. At times that commitment does include financial assistance. Funds are given at the recommendation of the bishop and synod staff and in conversation with congregational leadership.



SAMPLE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

All processes are unique. Here is a sample to give an idea of steps that may be included:

1. The pastor and/or council leadership discerns a need to do something different because of dwindling resources, lack of people power, and/or diminished congregational vitality.
2. The staff and congregation council discuss the need for a new ministry approach and alert the synod staff, inviting accompaniment and further conversation.
3. The synod provides the Transitions Guide and directs the council to additional tools to help them in their discernment.
4. The discernment includes time to listen for God's direction in scripture and community, in order to gain a real picture of the congregation's mission and ministry. For example:
 - a. Bible study, such as the examples provided under each Pathway in this Guide;
 - b. Internal listening season – provides opportunity to listen to many congregational members express feelings, thoughts, and ideas about the church's life and ministry;
 - c. Mapping Your Community – engages the congregation in rediscovering and engaging with its surrounding community.
5. The congregation council uses the Transitions Guide for deep conversation and exploration of options. (The congregation can request synod guidance through the steps.) The time it takes will vary – whether it's several weeks or many months – since each discernment process is different. The goal is the same: to clearly hear God's plan for mission.
6. The congregation council completes the discernment process and chooses an option. The congregation council president informs the synod of the decision.
7. The synod provides additional resources for the chosen path forward. The journey of entering into that option is begun with the synod walking alongside.



CONCLUSION

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:3-6)

Each congregation of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod fulfills a sacred ministry, blessed to bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world. But congregations are human institutions, subject to all the challenges and changes that a dynamic world presents.

The fact that your congregation is making the decisions and engaging the processes outlined in this guide indicates that you are open to the good work that God is doing with you and through you. The completion of that work may be near at hand, or it may continue in a new form of ministry. Regardless, be assured that those of us who share in the Gospel with you – in the Synod and beyond – hold you in grateful prayer, confident that God's plans will come to fruition.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)



APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Congregational Vitality Assessment ©						
FILL IN THE VALUE THAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CONGREGATION FOR THE FOLLOWING QUESTION	1 GREATLY	2	3 SOMEWHAT	4	5 GREATLY	= TOTAL NUMBER HERE
EXAMPLE			3			3
SECTION #1 How well do these phrases describe your congregation?						
1. Worship nurtures people's faith						
2. Worship and church life deepen people's relationship with God						
3. There is a clear sense of mission						
4. There is excitement about the congregation's future						
5. We stand ready to try something new						
6. Congregation is a positive force in the community						
7. We advocate and work for social justice						



FILL IN THE VALUE THAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CONGREGATION FOR THE FOLLOWING QUESTION	1 HARDLY AT ALL	2	3 WELL	4	5 VERY WELL	= TOTAL NUMBER HERE
SECTION 2: How well does your congregation do the following:						
8. Incorporate new members into congregational life						
9. Seek out and use gifts of members of all ages						
10. Build strong, healthy relationships among members						
11. Manage disagreements in a healthy, respectful manner						
12. Address social concerns (help those in need)						
13. Equip members to share their faith with others						
14. Interact with the local community						
15. Help members live out their faith in their daily lives						
TOTAL ALL ROWS (QUESTIONS 1-15)						
VITALITY SCORE (DIVIDE VITALITY SCORE BY 15)						



APPENDIX 2

Congregational Sustainability Assessment Developed by Susan Briner, Southwestern Texas Synod, ELCA

Congregations need resources to sustain ministry. The primary resources include the church facility (in which to conduct ministry), money (to pay staff, fund ministries, and maintain facilities) and people (to engage in ministries). Vital congregations that aren't sustainable can't continue God's mission in their setting. Sustainable congregations that are not vital may be out of touch with God's mission for them in this time and place.

BUILDING AND MAINTENANCE	
When was our facility constructed?	
FACILITY	Year of construction / refurbishment
Sanctuary	
Parish Hall	
List Other Building(s)	

Based on our answers above, do we see our **building age and maintenance** as a strength or a weakness for our sustainability as a congregation?

STRENGTH

WEAKNESS



CURRENT BUILDING USAGE

Approximately how many hours each week (outside of Sunday morning) is our building utilized for ministry gatherings and outside community activities?

- 0-5 hours
- 5-20 hours
- 21-40 hours
- 1-60 hours

Overall, our facilities (sanctuary & parish hall) are:

- Under-utilized
- Just right for our needs
- Too small for our needs

Based on our answers above, do we see our **current building usage** as an opportunity or a threat for our sustainability as a congregation?

- OPPORTUNITY
- THREAT

PASTORAL COMPENSATION

Are we able to provide a full-time defined compensation (Salary, Housing and Social Security) to our pastor of at least the minimum amount recommended by synod guidelines? *Current synod compensation guidelines can be obtained from the synod office.*

- YES
- NO

If not, what is the level of defined compensation we are able to provide our pastor (based on our recent actual giving numbers)?

Are we currently able to provide full benefits to our pastor (full family health coverage, disability, retiree support), and at least 10% pension?

- YES
- NO



If **not**, what level of benefits coverage are we able to provide our pastor?

Do we provide sufficient continuing education, professional expenses, and mileage reimbursement to our pastor?

- YES NO

Based on our answers above, do we see **pastoral compensation** as a strength or a weakness for our sustainability as a congregation?

- STRENGTH WEAKNESS

FINANCES & STEWARDSHIP

Our current stewardship education consists of: (check all that apply)

- Adopting a budget at the annual meeting
 - Printing the offering amount in the bulletin each Sunday
 - Including a bulletin appeal when funds are running short
 - A monthly stewardship “temple talk” by a lay leader that focuses on practices of generosity as part of growing in faith
 - An annual stewardship campaign and active encouragement of the Biblical practice of tithing
 - OTHER** (please describe)
-

Does half (or more) of our annual giving come from the 65+ age group?

- YES NO



If our congregation's top one or two giving households left within the next year, would there be a financial crisis within our congregation?

- YES
- NO

Do we have a congregational endowment/memorial fund

- YES
- NO

If not, how much have we withdrawn from it to pay regular ministry expenses within the past 12 months?

\$ _____

We receive financial assets: (check all that apply)

- Through passing plates/baskets in worship
- By providing and promoting online giving, giving at kiosks, etc.
- By providing and promoting gifts through estate planning, trusts, stock gifts, etc.
- OTHER** (please describe)

How much mission support does the congregation provide to/through the Metropolitan Chicago Synod and ELCA?

- Doesn't provide any
- Less than 5% of our budget
- 5-10% of our budget
- More than 10% of our budget

Based on the answers above, does our congregation see **financial stewardship** as an opportunity (the capacity to increase giving) or a threat (maxed out on giving capacity and could be in jeopardy) for sustainability?

- OPPORTUNITY
- THREAT



LEADERSHIP

Do we regularly have enough people to serve on Council?

- YES NO

Do we regularly have enough people to serve on committees?

- YES NO

Do we regularly have enough people to lead our most important ministries?

- YES NO

Based on our answers above, do we see our **leadership** as a strength or a weakness for our sustainability as a congregation?

- STRENGTH WEAKNESS

WORSHIP

Do we have enough people to prepare and provide weekly worship leadership?

- YES NO

What has our average worship attendance been for the last 5 years?

These numbers are submitted to the ELCA by your pastor or a council leader in annual congregational reports. If you are unable to access copies of these reports in your church's files, reach out to the synod office and an Associate to the Bishop can assist you in retrieving these statistics from the ELCA database.

YEAR					
ATTENDANCE					



Is our congregation growing, holding steady, or declining?

- GROWNING
 HOLDING STEADY
 DECLINING

Based on our answers above, do we see our **worship** as a strength or a weakness for our sustainability as a congregation?

- STRENGTH
 WEAKNESS

CONGREGATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT - SUMMARY

Based upon the results of the sustainability assessment, how does the congregation identify the following areas for sustainability as a congregation (choose from “strength,” “weakness,” “opportunity,” or “threat”):

FACILITIES		
Building age and maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/> STRENGTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WEAKNESS
Current building usage	<input type="checkbox"/> STRENGTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WEAKNESS

FINANCES		
Financial Stewardship	<input type="checkbox"/> STRENGTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WEAKNESS
Pastoral Compensation	<input type="checkbox"/> STRENGTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WEAKNESS

PEOPLE		
Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> STRENGTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WEAKNESS
Worship	<input type="checkbox"/> STRENGTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WEAKNESS



Congregations need the resources of facility, finances, and people to sustain ministry. Reflect on what you filled out above; then answer these questions to estimate your sustainability.

Do you have what you need to maintain or expand ministry?

FILL IN THE VALUE THAT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CONGREGATION FOR THE FOLLOWING QUESTION	1 Declining to un-sustainable	2 Declining to sustainable	3 Maintain-ing	4 Growing	= TOTAL NUMBER HERE
Facilities Capacity – maintainability and usage of facilities					
Financial Resources – for facility, staffing, ministries, etc.					
People Power – to provide leadership, and to strengthen and sustain one another					
WRITE THE LOWEST NUMBER* HERE					

*(Since people, financial resources, and facilities are all necessary for sustainability, the lower number represents the “weakest link” in your congregation's sustainability chain.)



APPENDIX 3

Resources for Tending to Grief

This appendix contains resources for tending to grief in congregations going through transformation. While there is more information being prepared, these resources will include:

Group Exercises

- Create a worship service that includes components for dealing with grief communally. Including grief components help the community acknowledge their feelings and process them together, which may give them greater capacity to move forward. Include activities for children if they are a part of your community.
- Acknowledging grief in official, non-worship settings, i.e., council/congregational meetings, etc. This is especially important for the team that is charged with discernment and processing the transition plan; rather than amplifying grief it builds resiliency.

Bible Studies

- If you haven't already, use the Bible studies from each of the pathways.
 - Pathway 1: Where is the grief and regret in this story of transformation?
 - Pathway 2: How does Nehemiah's grief give him energy for renewal?
 - Pathway 3: This psalm speaks of walking in darkest valleys. What assurance are we given on this journey of uncertainty or possible death?

Preaching

- The early church communities experienced both loss and rejection. What stories seem to mirror what your congregation is experiencing?
- Christianity is never situated in a building, but within the spirit of the gathered people.



- What is the history of your congregation? Where did the founding members come from?
- If you are experiencing a population movement that is causing your transition, where are people moving to? Who is moving in?
- Stepping back and looking at the history of Christianity, how does the congregation's transition become a part of this bigger story?
- How is the Holy Spirit moving in the historical transitions?

Individual Pastoral Care Strategies

- What Grief may look like:
 - Denial: avoidance, procrastination, forgetting, busyness
 - Anger: pessimism, sarcasm, irritability
 - Bargaining: overthinking and worrying, assuming the worst, expressing guilt over the past, perfectionism
 - Depression: reduced energy and motivation, reduced connections
 - Acceptance: mindful behaviors, engaging with reality and staying "present", honest, and non-defensive communication, responding skillfully to tasks

Book study

- Embracing God's Future without Forgetting the Past: A Conversation about Loss, Grief, and Nostalgia in Congregational Life by Michael K. Girlinghouse