

A PROCESS FOR CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT



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Introduction

What follows is an outline that your congregation (or a representative, leadership group) can use to help discover where God is leading your church. It uses prayer, scripture study, demographics, and mutual conversation as the tools to help you. It is important that each person participate in two significant ways – in sharing your own thoughts and reflections, and in listening carefully to what others in the group have to say as well. Your goal is to listen for God's voice through the voices of one another, and in such a way that unity and consensus are achieved. The goal is to embrace Jesus' own words,

“Not my will, but Thy will be done.” Many times, this can happen with one significant meeting – a day-long or half-day “retreat” together. However, if consensus is not achieved, don't worry – it just isn't quite the right time yet! In those cases, this process can be repeated at a later time – in a week, a month, in 6 months, or in a year. Be confident that God has gathered you together as a church, and that He does, in fact, have a plan and direction He wishes you to follow. Work together prayerfully and collaboratively to discern it together!

Opening Prayer

Lord God of Heaven and Earth, your Holy Spirit and your Holy Word have brought us saving grace through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We have been “called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified” to be your people in this place. Help us now, we pray, to listen to your voice of guidance. Show us and teach us what you would have us be, and what you would have us do. Help us discover the plans you have for us, that we may put them into words, then plans, then actions. Though we are but common people, we know and believe that we are bound to one another in a strength greater than ourselves. We know and believe that you would have us care for one another. And, though we know not where or how, we know and believe that we are also sent to those who do not yet know you, and that you desire us to be your hands, feet, and voice. Come among us, Lord, and lead us to discover the plans, and embrace the vision, you have set for us, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bible Study: Acts 1:1-11

[1] In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, [2] until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. [3] To them he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God. [4] And while staying with them he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me, [5] for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." [6] So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" [7] He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. [8] But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." [9] And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. [10] And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, [11] and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Questions for Discussion

As Luke begins his "Volume 2" – The Book of Acts – why does Jesus tell the disciples to remain in Jerusalem (verses 4-5)?

Look at verse 6. No doubt the disciples – following the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the forty days – were thinking, "What's next?" How could you "top" those events!? Quite understandably, they expected something. What did they expect?

Look at verse 7. How does Jesus answer their question?

In verse 8 – instead of announcing that the end of the world is about to take place – Jesus tells them they will receive _____ when the _____ comes to them.

But even this is not an "end unto itself." What is the purpose, or reason, for the giving of the Holy Spirit?

Do you – as a church – have "power" too? Discuss together.

If so, what is this "power" for? Discuss this together, too.

Questions for Discussion (cont.)

When the disciples stood there “gazing into heaven as [Jesus] went [up]” (vs. 10), do you think they had any idea of what was in store? That Christianity would spread like it did? That their witness (vs. 8) would indeed have such “power” that the Gospel message spread forth “from Jerusalem, to all Judea, to Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (vs. 8)?

KEY QUESTIONS: Do you, as a church, believe that you have “power” like this, too? What is the same, and what is different, about the disciples experiencing the Ascension, and you in your own setting and circumstances?

KEY QUESTION: Do you, as a church, believe God is guiding you down a path to be “witnesses”? If so, what would that mean, or what would be the implications

Demographics

(This section requires some research of your geographic area, which someone could prepare in advance of your meeting)

What is the population in a five-mile radius of where you are currently meeting for services?

Within that same geographic area, how many churches are there?

What is the average worship attendance in those churches? (That is, how many people are “in church” on any given Sunday?)

How many people, on average, are not in church services within that geographic area?

KEY QUESTION: Think about this hard, and honestly, and share with one another. Do you think and believe that God is calling you to reach out to these people and bring them into your church?

If you had 1/10th of these people in your church, what would your attendance be?

If you had 1/4th of these people in your church, what would your attendance be?

Discerning Together

Theology

The whole Christian Church on earth is like a gorgeous stained-glass window – a mosaic of individual panes of glass. Each pane is important, for it represents a particular expression (or witness) to the Christian faith. This is to say that there is no such thing as “generic” Christianity; every church has identifiable and definable theological commitments that make it unique. Every congregation has theological diversity within it, and generally this makes a congregation stronger. However, strong and vital congregations have a firm and widely embraced theological center; it is the glue that not only unites them, but it is also the catalyst for the “why” and “how” of their mission.

Share with each other:

What do you believe is at the core of Christianity? That is, if you had to state in one sentence about what Christianity is about, what would you say?

If you think about the three articles of the Apostles' Creed (on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), where would your emphasis land?

When you think of “Lutheranism”, what comes to mind? Are these things interesting, preferred, optional, essential, or hindering to “who” you think God is calling your congregation to be? Why?

Recall the Small Catechism's explanation to the Third Article on the Holy Spirit: “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the one true faith.” Do you agree with Martin Luther that faith is not a human decision?

As you discern together where you believe God is leading you, do not underestimate the importance of having a center of core beliefs that bind you to one another, and to your mission. Seek additional study, conversation, and reflection until you obtain a strong consensus for your congregation's theological and missional identity.

Size

Big churches, small churches, medium-sized churches ... is one better than another? No, absolutely not! Each plays an important and significant role within the universal church. Each has benefits and liabilities, strengths and weaknesses. The question before you is “what size” do you think God is calling you to be? It's an important question to ask while you are in a visioning process, because different-sized churches function in different ways, and each size has its own “gravitational pull” that, without intentionally doing so, tends to keep the church at its current size. For example, a small church tends to organize itself and function in ways that keeps it small. People may say, “We want to grow,” but the very way the church operates and functions keeps it from growing.



Further, changing size merely for the sake of changing size is misguided. The central question has to be: How do we become what God wants us to be?

How big of a community of faith do you think God desires you to be 1 year from now?

In 3 years?

In 5 years?

KEY QUESTION: Why?

Assess your Assets

To be “in mission” is like going on a trip. You need resources and provisions. List the resources and provisions you already have in terms of:

People resources:

Spiritual resources:

Material resources:

Do you think that God has given you enough? If not, what else do you need?

Do you know what kind of financial resources you have? How can you find out?

Consider doing this exercise: If you believe, as a church, that God is moving you forward into “ventures as yet unknown” and you catch a vision that God intends to do something significant in and through your church, have everyone write – anonymously – on a piece of paper what amount of financial support (non-binding) they can give either as a lump sum and/or through the end of the current year. Collect them, and share the totals.

Facility Needs

Discuss/reflect together on the three most important spaces: Worship Space, Welcoming/Hospitality Space, and Education (especially Sunday School) Space.

How does your current space both support and hinder where God might be leading you? What kind of facility resources will you need in 1 year?



In 3 years?

In 5 years?

Pastoral and Staffing Needs

Discuss your current staffing arrangements, and decide whether you believe you are staffed for maintenance, decline, or growth.

What kind of staffing resources will you need in 1 year? In 3 years? In 5 years?

Reflect/Discuss together the abilities, gifts and skill-sets, theological convictions, and passions you need from your pastor, and then write them down.

Evaluate

OK. Whew. You have already done a lot of work! Take a breath. Stretch. Get a drink of water. When you reconvene, ask this question:

Does it feel like your Church has a variety of opinions about your future, or are you of “one mind”?

If you have varieties of opinions, this is an indication that you need further discussion, conversation, and Bible study. This only means that the Holy Spirit hasn't yet formed you into being “of one mind” as a community of believers. Take the time you need, and continue to process these questions together. Consider doing an in-depth Bible study together. Strike a balance between sharing what's in your own heart and “gut”, and valuing what's in the heart and “gut” of others around you. Remember that the Holy Spirit could be relying on you to share your perspective *as his own*, or, it could be *your neighbor's* perspective *as his own*. In all likelihood, it is a combination of all members of your group. Allow the Holy Spirit to work in the “give and take” of the thoughts, reflections, and ideas of each other. While we don't always get 100% agreement (and that's ok!), this is the goal you are working for.

If you are of “one mind” together, then it becomes imperative to ask:

What are the next steps? How will you move forward?

One way to move forward might be to write a “Mission Statement” – a short 1 to 3 sentence statement that summarizes your collective thoughts and convictions.

Mission Statement

Can you articulate – and write – a mission statement? It can be as simple as:

“We” [describe who you are, like “As fellow believers in Jesus Christ, called together by the Holy Spirit and through the Word”, or, ?]

“Have been given [or provided with] _____” [list your primary resources. What are they? Faith? Commitment? Each other? The power of the Spirit? A plentiful harvest?]

“In order that we might _____” [What are your means and how will you use them? How will you use the provisions you’ve been given? To bear witness? To make Christ known? To serve those in need? To reach the unchurched? To deepen faith?]

“As we in faith journey toward _____” [What is the goal, the end result? An effective witness? A place to serve God? A vital and vibrant community of faith?]

State Your Objectives (steps to attain the vision)

After you have articulated your vision, list the steps involved in attaining it. The list can be priorities, a timeline, or a combination of both.

Concluding Prayer

Lord gracious God, our heavenly Father, we thank you that you have been with us in this conversation tonight. We thank you for the words that have been spoken, and the thoughts that have been shared – for we know that these are gifts from you. Continue to work on us, Lord, and to mold and fashion us, that we may together as one body and with one voice follow you gladly and courageously. Bind us together, fill us with your Holy Spirit, and send us forth to be your witnesses in the world, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven

