



*Mission Statement and Signature Phrase  
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:*

**Marked with the cross of Christ forever,  
we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world.**

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*Vision Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:*

**Claimed** by God's grace for the sake of the world, we are a new creation through God's living Word by the power of the Holy Spirit;

**Gathered** by God's grace for the sake of the world, we will live among God's faithful people, hear God's Word, and share Christ's supper;

**Sent** by God's grace for the sake of the world, we will proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus, and strive for justice and peace in all the world.

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
New England Synod

## God's Abundance: Live It!

Jesus said:

**“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”**

John 10:10

As Stewards of the Gospel in a world filled with death  
We joyfully embrace our baptismal call by:

✦ PRAYING UNCEASINGLY ✦

✦ GIVING EXTRAVAGANTLY ✦

✦ INSISTING ON JUSTICE ✦

✦ TRUSTING IN PARTNERSHIP ✦

Walking together, we will:

*Invite* 20,000 more people to worship each Sunday

*Double* what we now give away

*Strengthen* our ties with and support the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan & the Holy Land

*Link* every seeker and youth, every pastor and congregation with partners in faith and mission

**This is our abundant life to share.**

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
New England Synod  
2002**

**VISION LITANY**

Leader: Jesus said: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Living God's abundance the saints of New England say,

**All: This Is Our Abundant Life To Share.**

Leader: As stewards of the gospel in a world filled with death we joyfully embrace our baptismal call by

**All: Praying Unceasingly**

Leader: Extend through us your invitation that 20,000 more people will worship each Sunday.

**All: Giving Extravagantly**

Leader: Loosen our purse holds to double what we now give away

**All: Insisting On Justice**

Leader: Open our hearts and minds to strengthen our ties with and support of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and Palestine

**All: Trusting In Partnership**

Leader: Stretch our arms and imaginations to link every seeker and youth, every pastor and congregation with partners in faith and mission

**All: As Stewards of The Gospel In A World Filled With Death We Joyfully Embrace Our Baptismal Call**

Leader: Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Living God's abundance the saints of New England say,

**All: This Is Our Abundant Life To Share.**

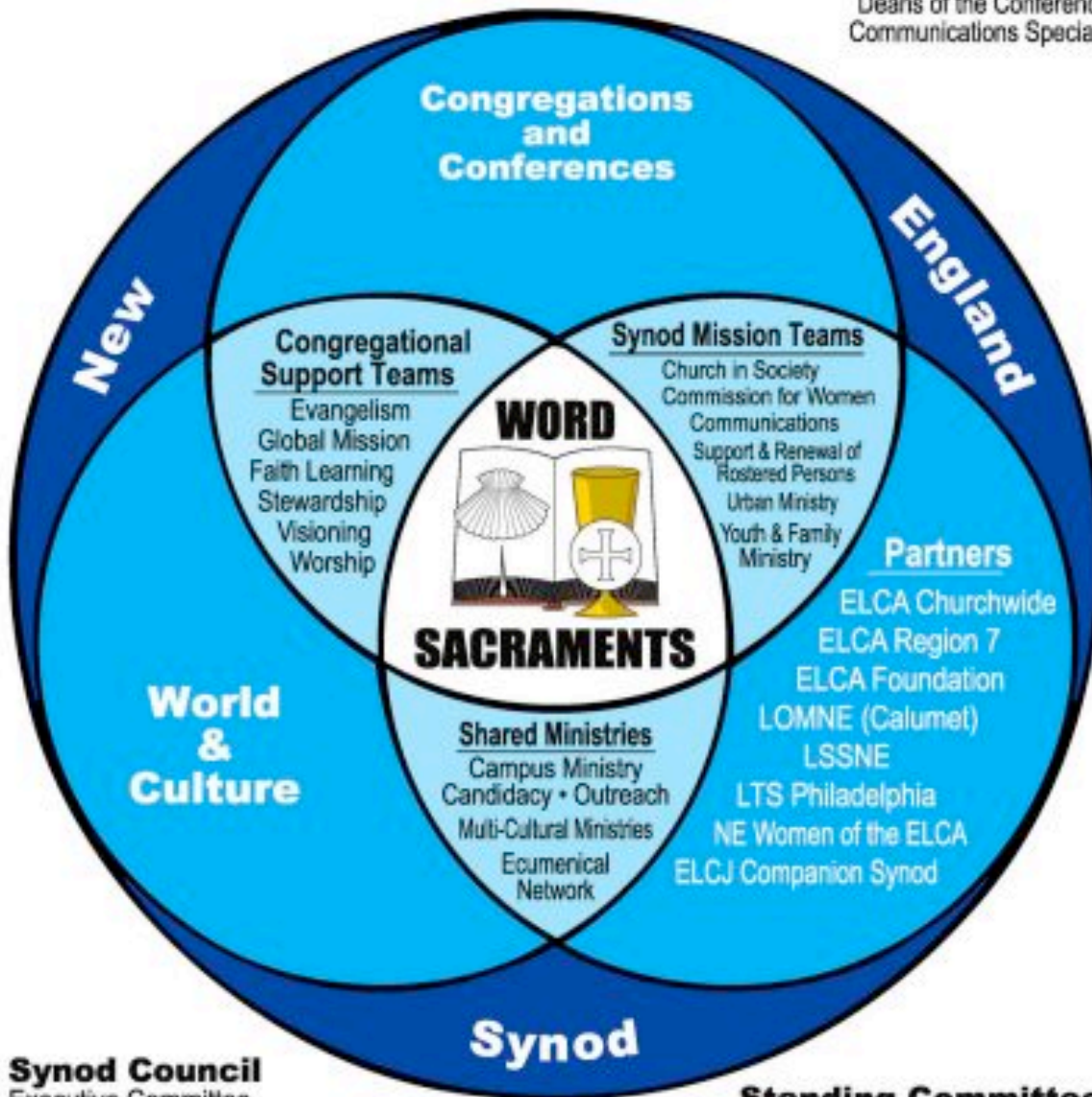
# New England Synod, ELCA

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# Overview

## Rooted for Life: The Work of the People

### To the Visioning Mentor:

This workbook was developed as a tool, a resource for use in congregations seeking to be faithful witnesses in an ever-changing world. Experience suggests that there are some critical elements and principles common to any sound process of visioning:

- ✘ An emphasis on *God's claim* on the congregation rather than the congregation's desires for the future, and thus the importance of attentiveness to God's voice;
- ✘ The role of history and tradition in shaping the congregation's present identity;
- ✘ The principle of inclusion—that the broader the congregation's participation, the more holistic the vision that is discerned;
- ✘ The significance of community context in determining the congregation's vision;
- ✘ The necessity of providing for a plan of action (response);
- ✘ The value of celebrating God's constancy, the congregation's faithfulness, and the future's hope and promise.

As you begin the process, it is suggested that you meet with the responsible leadership group (usually the congregation council) for an hour or more to become acquainted with the leadership team, learn what other key leaders make things happen in this congregation, tease out mutual hopes and expectations for the process, discern the level of commitment (whose idea it is, what occasions the process, how much time is anticipated, etc.), decide how to assemble a leadership team, ascertain where you, as outside leader, will find ongoing support, determine how accountability will be built into the process, and what kind of check-up would be helpful after it is concluded. This will also be an opportunity to begin to introduce or underscore the importance of listening for God, build leaders' confidence that God *will* speak, and—in light of that confidence—reduce anxiety about the outcome.

It may be helpful to shape the process around a construct or metaphor. The course of visioning might be understood in a variety of ways:

- ✘ A musical composition in several movements...
- ✘ The life cycle of a tree, from seed, to seedling, to mature tree, to fruit...
- ✘ A liturgical progression, from gathering, to hearing the Word, interceding for the world, sharing the Meal, and sending...
- ✘ The construction of a building, from drawing a blueprint, to clearing and excavating, to laying a foundation, to erecting the structure with its walls, windows, doors, etc...
- ✘ The composition of a story, from "Once upon a time..." to the hope of "happily ever after."

The character and sensibilities of the congregation might suggest one of these, or another of your conception. Select or develop one that suits the faith community with whom you are working.

Along the way, several concerns will require some attention. Because God's Spirit works within the entire community, you'll want to encourage the inclusion of as many people as possible in the process. Not everyone can participate in conventional ways such as attending a retreat or a series of weekly evening meetings; but efforts should be made, whenever possible, to offer a number of means of participation, including some that can take place on a Sunday or from home. Among core participants, care should be taken to the appointment of gifted leaders to facilitate small groups, serve as "scribes," lead group-building activities, and so on. In every congregation there is at least one person who is known for faithfulness in prayer. Some might be commissioned to offer prayers throughout the process.

Another concern is regular—and creative—communication with the congregation. Those who cannot or choose not to participate actively in the process will nonetheless sense more connection with it when kept informed. Be imaginative!

- ✘ Sunday bulletin notices and newsletter articles will be familiar avenues of communication for some.
- ✘ Postings on your website may reach those who are e-inclined.
- ✘ Adult forum updates and Sunday morning oral announcements will be better received by auditory learners.
- ✘ Let bulletin boards, walls, and the church narthex be the canvas for artistic expression and communicate to visual learners. Young people might be enlisted to take on this task.
- ✘ Sing new verses to an old song!

The greater the variety of media employed, the more widely news will be broadcast. Let people know that something is afoot!

Discernment calls for active work, but "fallow" intervals as well, with ample time for reflective, prayerful silence. In addition to all of the activity connected with this work, set aside time for silence—sabbath—reflection. In our outcome-oriented culture, most congregations need encouragement for creative rest. A guided meditation provides a framework that helps some ease into a reflective mode. Quiet music may invite the same. Participants may be invited to sit in silence as a group, or to take some time apart to sit with God.

Similarly, bear in mind the importance of *not* being earnest—at least not always! Provide for elements of fun and surprise: fitting jokes, cartoons, or silly games for breaks from more intense activities. Over lunch, invite participants to share the funniest moment they ever experienced in church. Offer goofy prizes for the most outrageous. Let God enter in through laughter!

### **To the Congregation: When and How to Use This Resource**

The Church's mission in the world may be said to be unchanging: we are always and everywhere to live out our baptismal identity by inviting people to Christian fellowship and discipleship, baptizing new children of God, and teaching one another to grow in faithfulness. These are at the

core of our ministry and life together. Yet, as a living entity, a congregation is in a continual cycle of change as to the *specific shape* of its ministry, in order to be most responsive to the love of God in Christ, and effective in sharing it with the world.

*“Congregations are where people come together, gathered by God to serve God’s intentions of redeeming and renewing the whole world in love...we must understand the underlying strengths of congregations that are most relevant to the enduring needs of our times. The precise way those strengths and needs intersect will constantly shift; and the precise activities, events, persons, and physical structures will shift with them. But if we understand our underlying strengths, and move in faith toward our deepest sense of God’s hope, we can move in confidence.”* –Jimmy Carter, Sources of Strength

At various points it is essential to a church’s health and mission to engage in an intentional, prayerful process of re-visioning—that is, discerning God’s need and purpose for the church in that time and place. These occasions may include:

- ✘ A pastoral transition;
- ✘ Deliberation about building or moving;
- ✘ The possibility of merging or closing;
- ✘ Consideration of reconfiguration of or additions to staff;
- ✘ Exploration of new expressions of ecumenical partnerships; recognition that the congregation’s demographic context has changed;
- ✘ A major upheaval in the community;
- ✘ Other significant transitions.

Even apart from such threshold events, healthy congregations find that periodic attention to these matters is essential to lasting vitality.

This resource is intended to help you find ways to discern God’s vision for you by:

- 1) Telling your congregation’s story;
- 2) Listening to the stories of God and God’s people (*the Story*, of which we are all a part);
- 3) Listening to the larger community; and
- 4) Finding ways to respond and serve.

Although it is imperative to include opportunities for each of these movements, they may not always be discrete events or activities, but may overlap and intermingle. Neither do these exercises always fit neatly into one category; thus, one included as an avenue for “listening to the congregation” may serve equally well in your setting as a means to listen to the wider community (“those beyond the congregation”). The objective is that all four elements be included. Choose from several modules that will work well in your congregation, and with the theme you and your mentor have decided on, and use them accordingly.

## **I. Listening to God’s Story: Hearing the Spirit’s Call**

(I and II may be undertaken in reverse order, according to local sensibilities.)

As a community of God’s people, we affirm that it is God’s Spirit who gathers the congregation with its particular gifts, strengths, and opportunities. It is therefore crucial that God be clearly invited to take the lead in guiding you into a renewed vision for ministry. These modules are intended to create space for hearing God speak to you in this process.

- A. Engagement with the Word (This may be used in a variety of ways.)
- B. Lambeth/African Bible Study

## **II. Telling the Congregation’s Story: Listening to Each Other**

Like individuals, congregations have histories filled with events and dynamics that have shaped their present identities. The congregation’s story will surely reveal times when God has clearly been at work, while at others it will seem the congregation has frustrated God’s intention for the faith community. The former needs to be celebrated, and the latter acknowledged and set aside.

- A. Telling the Congregation’s Story; Our Story, God’s Story
- B. Tree
- C. The Peace of Christ
- D. Timeline
- E. Cottage Meetings

## **III. Listening to Our Neighbors: Hearing From Those Beyond Our Congregation**

Listening to the community is probably not fundamentally different from listening to God, for our neighbors can be God’s voice, calling us to care for the corner of creation where we have been planted. These modules intend to aid the congregation in hearing how God summons a response in the particularities of *this* time and place.

- A. Being a Listening Presence
  - 1. One-to-One Conversations
  - 2. Community Needs Survey
  - 3. Community Town Meeting
  - 4. Listening to the Numbers: What Do the Demographics of Our Place Tell Us?
- B. Lurk, Listen, Pray
- C. Intercessions

## **IV. Discerning God’s Call**

One of the challenges of concluding your visioning work will be to draw together your learnings from the modules you have completed. You will have heard your congregation’s story told in a number of voices, listened to the stories of God and God’s people in Scripture, and trained your ear to the voice of God in the larger community of which you are a part. As you seek to “put it all together,” pay attention to those strands of conversation that repeatedly called for reflection,

shaped your conversation, and would not go away! Patterns will begin to emerge. In a culture that is decidedly verbal, you will finally describe these patterns—the vision that has taken shape—in words. But other forms of expression will allow the “right brain” to contribute to this discernment as well. These modules suggest multi-sensory methods of beginning to put it all together.

- A. Sculpting: Lincoln Logs, Tinker Toys, modeling clay or “edible art”
- B. Mural
- C. Drama
- D. Writing a new hymn or verses to a familiar one
- E. Journaling

## **V. Responding to God’s Call**

Prayerfully consider all that you have summarized so far. Take time individually, in teams, and collectively to pray for God’s vision to further take shape among you, directing you toward specific actions.

Consider:

Which three areas of community need seem most pressing for our congregation to develop ministries, opportunities, emphases, programs, etc.?

What “big ideas” might God be planting as you consider how the congregation might respond to the pressing needs identified in your community and impressed upon your hearts?

What “little ideas” might God be planting as you consider how the congregation might respond to the pressing needs identified in your community and impressed upon your hearts?

Which ideas resonate most with the group?

What might be a realistic time frame for the resonant “big ideas”?

What might be a realistic time frame for the resonant “little ideas”?

Is there *one* aspect of your unfolding sense of God’s call that feels most urgent or compelling—that you simply **must** do together for Christ’s sake?

## **VI. Affirming and Celebrating a New Vision**

When you have prayed deeply, listened attentively, and worked hard for a new vision to guide you into a new season of ministry, it is time to celebrate all that God has accomplished and is ready to accomplish through your congregation. Trusting that this has, indeed, been a Spirit-led endeavor, rather than voting on the new vision, the church receives and celebrates it.

Have some fun with this! Your congregation's celebration may occur in the context of a festive meal—perhaps a pot-luck or progressive dinner; it may be presented as an offering during regular worship; a special Eucharist might be planned around it; a tree could be planted in the churchyard; seedlings or bumper stickers (“How’s Your Vision?”) might be presented as remembrances and tokens of encouragement...Use your collective imagination!

The service of Tenebrae in the United Church of Christ includes this fitting prayer:

*Free us from a past that we cannot change; and open us to a future in which we can be changed.  
Amen.*

## Request for Visioning Process

Name and Address of Congregation:

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What is the average weekend worship attendance? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the congregation's annual operating budget? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the date of the congregation's founding? \_\_\_\_\_

When did the congregation last complete a visioning process? \_\_\_\_\_

Please list all paid staff members' names, positions, and whether they serve part- or full-time:

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When do you hope to begin the process? \_\_\_\_\_ to complete it? \_\_\_\_\_

What has been the most pressing concern in the last 2-3 years?

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Who will be the key contact person in the congregation for the process? (Please give name and contact information.)

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Pastor's signature      date

\_\_\_\_\_  
chief lay leader's signature      date

## Remuneration for Visioning Mentors

### **One-Day Event** (typically a full Saturday)\*

Congregations with average weekend attendance to 99: \$350 plus expenses\*\*

Congregations with average attendance 100+: \$500 plus expenses\*\*

### **Overnight Event** (typically Friday evening plus full day Saturday)\*

Congregations with average weekend attendance to 99: \$500 plus expenses\*\*

Congregations with average attendance of 100+: \$650 plus expenses\*\*

### **Other Formats** (e.g. several weeknights)\*

Congregations with average weekend attendance to 99: \$100 per diem plus expenses\*\*

Congregations with average weekend attendance of 100+: \$150 per diem plus expenses\*\*

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\*includes travel time

\*\*includes mileage @ IRS rate, phone calls, supplies, other as agreed

Congregations for which a member of the synod staff serves as visioning mentor (facilitator) are expected to contribute the appropriate amount to the New England Synod, designated “visioning.” Congregations for which these amounts represent a hardship may request assistance from the New England Synod.

# I. Listening to God's Story: Hearing the Spirit's Call

## Engagement with the Word

In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and in the Revelation to John, the last book of the Bible, the tree is a powerful symbol of knowledge and life. Have you ever reclined under a tree, or perched on one of its branches and imagined the stories it could tell? Most large trees have been living long before us and will continue to live after us. Think of all of God's creatures who, over the decades, have found refuge, shade, or home within the same tree. A very popular New Testament story challenges us to ponder the smallest of all seeds, the mustard seed that grows into the largest of trees, providing a place for nesting birds. The growth and promise in this story exude delight! However, not all of the stories trees could tell are joyful; some, in fact, would be quite painful. Trees might tell of crucifixion and lynching, things we don't like to think or talk about, but from which we can learn. One crucifixion, we know, has changed our life forever!

Like a tree, your worshipping community has stories to tell—stories of faithfulness and sinfulness, stories of joy and sorrow, stories of conflict and of reconciliation, stories of routine meetings and monumental miracles. More established congregations, like ancient trees, have seen decades or even centuries of people, each of whom brings his or her own life into that of the community. Even when a congregation is new, in its first decade of life, it has stories of its own and of its members.

As children of God, our stories are never ours alone. They are the stories of God's creativity in our lives, forgiving and saving us through Jesus Christ, comforting and compelling us through the Holy Spirit. They are stories linked with all who have come before and all who will follow. They are stories of how our lives today are intertwined with and interdependent with others throughout the world. They are stories of community.

As you think about your worshipping community, what comes to mind? What is its story today? Is there a story from the Bible that is similar in action or in theme? Or is there a hymn or verse that comes to mind? How about a psalm? Or perhaps you are thinking of an image, a symbol, a sculpture or painting. Maybe you're thinking of a place in Scripture, such as a desert, a river, a mountain, or wilderness—or more specifically: Bethlehem, Cana, or Emmaus. If not a place, perhaps a person from the Bible reminds you of your community now: Abraham or Sarah, Jonah, David, Esther, Matthew, the woman at the well.

For instance, remember the younger and older brothers in the parable commonly referred to as "The Prodigal Son"? In more recent times it has been called the parable of "The Loving Father." Wasn't he an awesome, merciful parent? Have you ever wondered where the mother was? If these two boys had instead been sisters, what might have happened? This story is filled with all kinds of things that continue to happen today: inheritances, greed, squandering, pride, jealousy, mercy, forgiveness, unconditional love, and parties!

The Word of God is a living word. We can look to the Bible for insights into our everyday experiences, as individuals and as community, and as we listen and pray we can anticipate that

the Holy Spirit will show us ways that we can hear, respond, and grow spiritually. The will of God, like a hidden treasure, will be revealed. It takes time.

Biblical vision does not emerge from our own imaginations, but as a gift of the Holy Spirit. The process of discernment of God's vision requires immersing ourselves with others in a listening experience. We can anticipate pauses and silences. The Holy Spirit will use this time to shape our thoughts and actions, and in God's kingdom, we expect surprises!

Before we can discern a new vision, it is helpful to identify the current operating vision of the community. We always live with a vision, whether it is articulated or not. What is that vision NOW? Recall a story, theme, or image (or hymn or psalm or biblical place) that shares a commonality with your perspective on current issue(s) and/or vision(s) of your community of faith.

- Why did you select this (story)?
- What does it say and mean to you?
- How does it resemble your community of faith?
- What is the most significant part?
- What emerges as the key (verse/line/image)?
- What image of God does it present?
- What image of the people of God is presented?
- What does it offer to teach you?
- What does it suggest needs to die (be left behind or let go)?

If you are using this module for the second time:

- What new story is being whispered in our ear?
- Which new song is waiting to be sung?

Notes to the leader:

Encourage participants to become familiar enough with the story (or hymn or...) to tell it to others. This "immersion" may be done individually or in pairs.

Set up a table in advance. Display Bibles (include picture Bibles!), hymnals, poetry, art...any visual images for inspiration.

If the group struggles with the study, you might begin by asking for any memories of Jesus to share.

If the group needs inspiring, a few possible stories include:

Genesis 22:1-18	sacrifice of Isaac
Exodus 3:1-6	call of Moses
I Samuel 3:2-18	Eli & Samuel
I Samuel 17:41-50	David & Goliath
Isaiah 11:6	“A little child shall lead them.”
Psalms 98	“Sing a new song.”
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15	“To everything a season”
Proverbs 22:2	rich and poor
Jonah	
Job	
Ruth	
Hannah	
Matthew 4:1-11	Jesus in the Wilderness
Mark 9:2-9	The Transfiguration
Luke 10: 25-37	The Good Samaritan
Luke 10:38-42	Mary & Martha
Luke 12:13-21	The Rich Fool
Luke 15:3-7	The Lost Sheep
John 2:1-11	The Wedding at Cana
John 6:1-14	Feeding the 5000
Ephesians 4:25-32	speaking truth in anger
Mary, Mother of Jesus	
Peter	
Saul/Paul	
James & John, the sons of Zebedee	

## Lambeth Bible Study

**Opening Prayer:** Oh Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. One individual reads passage slowly.
2. Each person identifies the word or phrase that catches their attention (1 minute).
3. Each shares the word or phrase around the group.
4. Another person reads the passage slowly (from a different translation if possible).
5. Each person identifies where this passage touches their life today. (3-5 minutes)
6. Each shares.
7. Passage is read a third time (another reader and translation if possible).
8. From what they have heard, each person shares what they believe God wants them to do or be and/or any ways in which they believe God invites them to change. (5 minutes)
9. Each shares.
10. Each prays for the person on their right, naming what was shared in step #9.

Close with the Lord's Prayer.

## **II. Telling the Congregation's Story: Listening to Each Other**

### **Telling the Congregation's Story**

As a congregation begins to ask, "Who is God calling us to be?" group story-telling helps answer a prior question, "Who are we now?" The following simple technique for telling the congregation's story can serve congregational leaders well for several reasons. It can elicit parts of a congregation's story that may not otherwise be told. Since the group tells the story together, it doesn't reflect any one person's point of view. Each person can tell the parts or perspectives of the story that are important to him or her.

The group gathers in a circle, and the facilitator might begin by saying something like, "Together, let's tell the story of our congregation. Anyone can begin by saying, "Once upon a time..." and telling part of the story. The next person says, "And then..." or "But before that..." and tells another piece of the story. The story-telling continues around the circle in the same way, until all of the parts that seem important have been told. It usually takes a few times around the circle until everything that seems significant has been voiced.

When the group has a sense that it has told most of the story, the facilitator invites the group to reflect on the story and its telling: "What did you notice about our story and how we told it?" In response, for example, someone might observe that the group took a while to get going, but then told the story with lots of energy, which mirrors the congregation's history. Or perhaps someone might notice what was left out of the story and wonder why. Themes might emerge. A group might be saddened by pieces that were painful to recall, or be surprised by how much laughter and celebration have been a part of their story. Sometimes a sentence or two that sums up the story arises as the group reflects together.

### **Our Story, God's Story**

Simply telling the congregation's story together can be a powerful and illuminating experience. A facilitator might then invite the group to wonder what stories, images, or verses from Scripture seem connected to the congregation's story. Before the facilitator invites the group to sit in silence to see what rises up for them, some words of reassurance might be helpful. Some members of the group are likely to be concerned that they don't know enough about the Bible to do something like this. The facilitator can assure them that they need not know all the stories, that God can work with the stories that are known, and that it will even be okay to say, "Isn't there some story about...?" without knowing chapter and verse!

The group can be invited to get comfortable, to recall the congregation's story, and to sit for a short time in silence (perhaps 2-3 minutes), listening for which stories, people, metaphors, images, or phrases from Scripture come up during the quiet that somehow seem connected to the congregation's story. The facilitator will bring the silence to a close and invite people to share what arose for them. Making a list on a whiteboard, blackboard, or chart paper will be helpful. When everyone has offered what surfaced for them, the group may recognize a theme emerging; or, after another time of silence, may find that they are drawn to one particular story. In one

congregation, as the group wondered what the wide variety of stories they had listed had in common, one person said, “In every one of those stories, the main character finally had to trust God—and ultimately they did.”

As a congregation listens for God’s leading and God’s vision for their future, they may return to these stories and images in prayerful ways, wondering together how God is speaking to them in what we as Lutherans trust is God’s Living Word.

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Group-telling of stories and story-weaving are more fully discussed in the context of discernment and visioning by author Charles M. Olsen in *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders*, an Alban Institute book.

## Tree

An important element of the visioning process is asking and responding to the question, “Where have we been?” There are numerous ways to remember and represent the congregation’s history. The image of a growing tree may be used to describe the life of a congregation. As trees grow over the years, a living history is captured in the concentric rings that are formed in its trunk. It is these rings that create the grain we see in wood, giving it strength, beauty, and uniqueness. Not only do the rings correspond to the *age* of the tree (one ring per year), but they also provide information about what *happened* during the year. Rings that are very close together indicate that growth during those years was slow, while years of rapid growth are marked by more widely separated rings. *Growth rate* may be affected by weather, soil conditions, the presence or absence of other trees competing for sunlight, water, or nutrients, pests (e.g. gypsy moths), disease (e.g. Dutch Elm disease). The presence of knots or irregular rings may suggest physical *trauma* such as a lightning strike. What has happened in past years affects what happens in the future, as rings tend to follow an established pattern.

The facilitator should prepare for this module by first speaking of the need for an understanding of the past as a component of assessing the present and preparing for the future. A brief description of the congregation being represented as a tree should be introduced at this point, especially if this is a new image in the visioning process. Having a cross section of a tree, as well as a bonsai plant or other small, living tree visible during this exercise will enhance the process. Encourage conversation about the **roots** (“*What feeds us? Anchors us?*”), the **trunk and branches** (“*What are the structures and programs that support us?*”), as well as the **leaves** (“*What is budding—opening—changing color?*”), and **fruit** (“*What ministries are just peaking—maturing—rotting?*”).

To begin the exercise, use a large sheet of paper (at least flip chart size) to draw a picture of a tree, showing some roots, branches, budding leaves or fruits, mature leaves (or fruits), withering leaves (or fruits) and fallen leaves (or fruits). Distribute several post-its, preferably in four different colors, and invite participants to write or draw images of ministries or activities of the congregation that are promising or just emerging (budding); those that are established and going well (mature); those that are on the decline (withering); and those that seem to have died (fallen). Designate a color for each, if you have provided four different colors. Ask participants to place their post-its on the “tree,” and allow conversation about each designation.

- ❖ What new possibilities are energizing?
- ❖ What seems to have established momentum?
- ❖ Of those that are on the decline, which might be let go, and which merit efforts for revival?
- ❖ Of those that have died, how did they serve well in their time, and how might their ending free up time & energy for new endeavors?

Alternatively, you might draw a cross-section of a tree trunk with only the outline of the diameter of the tree visible. Invite participants to use markers to draw in the concentric circles (rings) that represent years in the history of the congregation. (Remind folks to work from the

center—beginning—of the congregation outward.) As the rings are drawn, key events may be recorded on the rings themselves, but it may be advisable to have participants use Post-its that could be affixed outside the cross section itself, with lines drawn to the corresponding ring (year).

A culminating activity for this module might be to devise a way to more permanently capture the history of the congregation and visibly represent it. Perhaps a cross section of an actual tree trunk could be displayed, with key dates & events marked with a wood burning tool. Or, looking ahead to the completion of the visioning process, perhaps a tree could be planted as a sign both of the historical roots and emerging future of the congregation, when birds may yet come to find a home in the congregation.

## The Peace of Christ

Congregations that are using a liturgical framework for the visioning process may consider the rite of exchanging the peace as an outline for exploring its history.

One significant aspect of sharing the Peace in the Eucharistic liturgy that could be drawn upon is the sense of *mutuality and community* that it conveys and embodies. At various points in the liturgy, the presider greets the congregation with the words, “The Lord be with you,” and the congregation responds, “And also with you.” In the sharing of the peace, the response is directed not only toward the worship leader, but toward the entire assembly. The gift of peace—the Peace of God that passes human understanding—is received by and shared among the gathered community. Our peace comes not from within us, but from Jesus Christ. It comes to us as a gift, is relational, and builds community.

The facilitator will want to explore with the participants these questions, either in small groups if there are many participants, or as a single group if there are a dozen or fewer:

- ✘ How do you understand and experience Christ’s peace? What words, images, and events come to mind?
- ✘ Where has the gift of Christ’s peace been most present or apparent in the life of this congregation?
- ✘ Where is this gift most needed?
- ✘ In what ways does this congregation share Christ’s peace in the larger community?
- ✘ With whom do we need to make peace?
- ✘ With what times or events of our history do we need to make peace?

After providing ample time for reflection and discussion (and reporting back to the large group if the participants have been working in smaller groups), it will be helpful to conclude this module with ritual. This might be a simple gesture of peace—a kiss, handshake, or embrace—shared among the people. Alternatively, an adaptation of the service of light from Evening Prayer (LBW p. 142f.) could be utilized, with a large lighted candle representing Christ’s Peace, and smaller, individual candles lighted as this peace is shared among the gathering.

Another option might be to adapt the opening rite from the Easter Vigil. Construct a small bonfire and invite participants to write on small pieces of paper words or drawings describing their needs for peace (persons with whom they need to make peace, or experiences, fears, and pain that make it difficult to experience peace more fully, as well as specific needs for peace in the world that are known to them). Those papers are then placed in the fire to be consumed by the flames. Next, a light is taken from the fire to light a large candle. (The Pascal candle would be an appropriate sign of the ritual’s connection to Holy Baptism and the ways that this sacrament connects us to Christ and one another.) Finally, each participant would receive this light with their own candle, and a fitting hymn sung to conclude the ritual.

## Timeline

Creating a timeline provides an opportunity for disciplined remembrance of a congregation's history. The congregation may gather for an evening or a weekend afternoon, perhaps in conjunction with a pot-luck or other meal.

1. Begin by securing a long sheet of wide, light paper to a wall, and mark a horizontal line from one end to the other, about 1/3 of the way from the top edge. On the left end mark the congregation's founding date. On the right, mark the present date. Mark off the intervening period in suitable intervals. (Decades or single years are probably appropriate.)
2. Encourage participants to recall significant dates in the church's history, and make note of them near their dates, below the horizontal line. Alternatively, events may be noted on Post-its, and marked on the timeline by a single scribe. If photographs are available, they may also be added.
3. Next, encourage recollection of important events of the same period in the wider culture: the neighborhood, nation, and world.
4. Help participants discern the connections between events in the congregation and the world.
5. Leave the timeline up so that later additions can be made, and others who were not present may see the findings.
6. Consider a liturgical celebration of God's faithfulness in the past, and our hope in Christ for the future. Alternatively, you might conclude the event by singing a hymn, such as "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."
7. Consider disseminating the findings to the congregation.

## Small Group Discussions or Cottage Meetings

One way we “listen” as part of our visioning process, is to listen well to the perceptions and dreams of congregational members or partners. The following is one format for use in small group discussions or “cottage meetings.” It allows you to compare some of the responses of your *members* with the responses gathered through community surveys of *community members and neighbors not yet a part of your church*. Common responses concerning the greatest needs and best strengths of the community may help congregational members see connections between those already worshipping and those who would like to be.

This exercise also encourages the congregation to dream about the future this visioning process might inaugurate. It asks participants to imagine accomplishments they hope to be celebrating in five years. The leading question for this element of the process is: How will the body of Christ, the church, be built up in your place in the next five years?

As always, results of these surveys and conversations should be published, posted, shared in worship, etc. This especially helps those who have not participated to “catch the vision!”

## **Cottage Meeting Survey**

### Community Needs and Congregational Resources for Being the Church in Our Place

1. What do you think is the greatest need or issue in our community?
2. What do you think are some of the strengths of our community?
3. What strengths does our congregation bring to our community?
4. Pretend you are attending the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of this visioning process. What ministries, missions, changes, expansions, are you celebrating?
5. In your imagination, how did congregational strengths and resources help meet the greatest needs in our community?

### **III. Listening to Our Neighbors: Hearing from Those Beyond Our Congregation**

#### **Being a Listening Presence**

Being rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ means also to be rooted in the world which God loves. If God so loved the world that he sent his Son, should we not also love the world by listening intently for the needs of the people with whom we live—congregation members, neighbors, and friends? In this we join Dietrich Bonhoeffer who saw the poles of the Christian life as those of prayer and righteous action. These two poles are linked for believers by intercessions which first listen and then respond to the needs of people.

Being a listening presence in the community gives us an opportunity to hear what we may never have heard before about opportunities for ministry. It requires that we “go out” and connect with others beyond the gathered congregation—a “great commission” movement in itself. Listening also builds relationship with people who may not have heard the Good News of Jesus Christ. In this way, the act of listening itself builds up the Body of Christ, the Church.

Listening to our communities also breaks down the artificial barriers we often construct between “us” and “them” Hearing some of the same needs and concerns articulated on the street corner as we congregational members raised in one-to-one conversations or cottage meetings helps us to see that “we” have needs together that the resources of faith and of our church can help to meet.

One way to take this ministry of listening seriously is to incorporate into your visioning process one or more of the following suggestions. All seek to cultivate in you and your congregation a bias toward those who are not yet sitting in your pews, those who are not yet worshipping, serving, giving partners in your faith community. The compassionate exercise of being a listening presence cannot leave us unchanged. Rather, it leads us out...embodying God’s extraordinary love for us in extraordinary love for our neighbors.

Among the options for developing a preferential option for those who have not yet heard the Gospel are the following:

- One-to-One Conversations in the Community
- Community Needs Survey
- Community Town Meeting
- Listening to the Numbers: What Do the Demographics of Our Place Tell Us?

## **One-to-One Conversations in the Community**

One-to-one conversations are an easy vehicle to use. A small group of people could agree to conduct these conversations for your whole visioning team and report back, or each participant could agree to do three, or some other appointed number. Conversations can happen with people's neighbors who don't go to church, local merchants, realtors, police, school or other community officials, other religious or civic leaders, and other colleagues at work (for those who work in the community where the church is located). You are seeking a good "mix" of community leaders and just "normal folks" in order to get at the heart of needs and changes in your community.

A model questionnaire follows:

SAY: I'm a member at \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church. Our congregation is seeking to be more in touch with the needs of this community. May I ask you a few questions that may help us do that?

1. What do you believe are the strengths of this community?
2. What are the greatest issues and needs in this community?
3. How has the community changed while you have been living here?
4. What should this church be doing that could help you (and your family) and make our community stronger?

## Community Needs Survey

Conducting a community needs survey is another way to conduct similar conversations. You simply have a small group from your visioning team recruit others to help them conduct a *statistically significant* number of surveys—say around one hundred. This is often done best at all the places people in your community shop on Saturday morning. At the end of this section are guidelines for conducting such a survey and questions you might ask.

Remember, as with any one-to-one conversation, this survey process is about making connections and developing relationships with people—even if it lasts only five minutes! The goal is to listen, not to argue a point. The purpose is to listen for people’s deepest pains and needs, as well as their greatest hopes and dreams. For each of those five minute conversations, you are your church embodying the gospel through a powerful ministry of listening.

### Community Needs Survey Guidelines

The following are a few guidelines for participating in this form of listening:

1. Dress in comfortable, casual clothes.
2. Bring a clipboard for holding the survey papers and pen.
3. If conducting the survey in front of a store, be sure to get the approval of the manager in advance. You may want to call the store the week ahead, and remind the manager on duty again that morning.
4. As you approach someone entering or leaving the store, *smile*, be polite, look them in the eye, and tell them your name. Also tell them where you are from and what you are doing.
5. Ask them, “Could I have two minutes of your time to ask you a few questions about our community?” If they say “no,” don’t push it!
6. If they say “yes,” to the survey, and then “yes” to the first question on the survey, thank them for their time. Explain that you are trying to talk with those who are not now affiliated with a nearby church or faith community. You may wish to ask them where they attend, and chat a moment about that. Say something nice if you can!
7. Ask those who respond “no” to the first question all five remaining questions. Give them time to answer fully. **Listen intently.** Record their answers, but make regular eye contact, too.
8. **Do not challenge their answers**, even if you have a strong reaction to a statement. If they are strongly “anti-church” you can simply say, “I’m sorry to hear that,” or “It sounds like your experience of churches has not been positive.”

9. Remember, this is a survey to identify community needs and what they might be looking for the church to do in response. This is not a time to evangelize, other than through listening. We are not there to judge or debate issues with them, simply to collect information.

10. If they ask you again which church you come from, tell them. Feel free to try to answer any questions they ask, but let them set the agenda for the conversation!

### **[YOUR TOWN] COMMUNITY NEEDS SURVEY**

*Hello, I'm \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church in \_\_\_\_\_.  
I'm conducting a brief survey to help our church be better in touch with the community needs.  
Could I have two minutes of your time?*

1. Are you currently an active member of a nearby church or other faith community?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No      \_\_\_\_\_ Kind Of

2. What do you think is the greatest need or issue in our community?

3. What do you believe are some of the strengths of our community?

4. How has the community changed since you have been living here?

5. What should our church be doing that could help you (and your family) and make our community stronger?

6. Would you like to receive a copy of the results of this survey when we are finished? (If yes, please have them write down their name & address.)

*“Thank you for your time!”*

## **Community Town Meetings**

Community town meetings are another way to listen to your community. These can also be a useful follow-up to one-to-one conversations and/or community surveys. This is especially true if one pressing community need or issue arises which your congregation feels must be articulated and addressed. This approach to listening creates an opportunity to help congregation members and community members speak about such needs and issues with elected or appointed town officials, social service providers, police or fire officials, etc. It identifies the church with a desire to better meet community needs and establishes a stronger link between congregation and community.

The church provides the meeting place and the coffee or other refreshments and arranges for community leaders to be invited. You also make sure that the leaders will be asked the questions to which you are seeking answers. The model one-to-one conversation or model community survey could be modified for this purpose. You may also wish to present the results of your community surveys in some form, and articulate the responses as a church, in behalf of the community.

This model of community listening can help bring the congregation and community together around a common cause. It can create a broader sense of community. The church intercedes on the community's behalf and this concern embodies the church's care for those who are not yet sitting in the pews. The gospel is proclaimed through this deep listening.

## Listening to the Numbers:

### What Do the Demographics of Our Place Tell Us?

Listening to the numbers in conjunction with listening to people strengthens our ability to identify community needs and to build a foundation from which to respond to those needs. Congregations in pastoral transition are often already seeking such demographic data as they complete congregational mission profiles. Among the data you are seeking are:

- A view of the community by age & gender
- An occupational profile of your community
- Ratio of retired to working people
- Income levels in your community
- Educational levels in your community

The ELCA Department of Research and Evaluation offers congregations access to such information free of charge. Sometimes such information is also available from community planning boards or other offices and agencies in your town or city. If you have people gifted in “listening to the numbers” you are fortunate and can put them to work to help make the numbers “speak” to you. What is essential, however, is that you don’t allow the numbers do all the talking. They can tell you only so much, offering *hints or clues* as to people’s greatest fears and concerns, hopes and dreams and yearnings. If the numbers confirm what you hear from living people, then you are listening well!

#### *Rooted for Life in our Communities*

What a gift to be rooted for life in our communities! What a blessing to have abundance to share and life in Christ so ripe and sweet that it can feed the souls of hungry people. But how do we root in our communities so they they can receive the invitation to come and enjoy the feast that the Lord has prepared for them?

A ministry of listening in Christ’s name for the sake of the world is one way to begin. As one bishop of our church has said, “A congregation that is always listening to its community is a congregation that is always ready to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with its neighbors.”

## **Summary Sheet for Community Listening**

(may be used with any of the foregoing listening methods)

Review the results of your community conversations, surveys, and meetings. As vision team participants, begin to distill the learnings of this listening process. Together, answer questions like those that follow in order to move from a listening posture to a visioning posture. The guiding question becomes:

*As we hear the voices of those who are not yet here, what is our calling as the servant Body of Christ in this place?*

1. What are some of the strengths of your community?
  
2. What did people tell you are the greatest needs in your community?
  
3. How did they think the community had changed?
  
4. List in priority order the three areas of community need surfaced in the surveys, meetings, or conversations that you feel are the most important areas for your congregation to develop ministries, opportunities, or emphases:
  - a.
  
  - b.
  
  - c.
  
5. What about these areas excites you?
  
6. What makes this a potential aspect of your congregation's vision for ministry?
  
7. With what congregational strengths or what aspect of your congregation's history does this potential piece of your vision connect? (What assets might already exist to bring to bear on this issue?)

## **Lurk, Listen, Pray**

As a congregation seeks to discern God's vision for its future, one way to listen for God's leading may be to do a little "creative lurking." Along with more traditional ways of gathering information about their community (such as surveys or interviews with community leaders), congregations can also "overhear" the needs of the community and then, in their visioning, wonder about how God is calling them to respond.

Bill Easum and Tom Bandy, a duo with a love for the gospel and a strong sense of mission, are advocates for "Prayer triads." Groups of three people in the congregation meet at one of their homes for prayer, and then go out to the busy places in their community to simply listen for a while. Grocery stores, Wal-Marts, donut shops, Home Depots, and fast food places are among the spots the members of the prayer triad might spend a couple of hours just looking and listening.

The group then returns to the home at which they began to talk about what they have each noticed and overheard. What are the concerns, frustrations, worries, and yearnings of the people they observed.

The next step is not an easy one for many Lutherans: pray out loud for these total strangers. Easum and Bandy's advice is to continue to "lurk" and share and pray until, as they might put it, "God gives you a heart" for some of these people. The concerns that the prayer triads are drawn to can be clues to God's vision for the congregation and to the mission and ministries which might grow out of that vision.

## Intercessions

Intercession is prayer. It is a priestly function, in which we lift others and their needs to God. It is not intended to be a substitute for real-life engagement, but a catalyst for it. We are to be drawn into the lives of those for whom we pray, so that both they and we can be transformed by the mighty grace of God.

In terms of a congregational visioning process, intercession needs to be very specific, and capable of opening the eyes of the congregation to possibilities for ministry, both local and distant.

For example, it is not sufficient to pray for “the poor,” “the lonely,” “the stranger,” or for “peace.” It is far more powerful to bring specific people to mind and allow God to move us in some way toward them. We might pray for the man who begs near the intersection downtown, or the family who is so often at the soup kitchen, or the clerk who rang up our groceries, or the kid we so often see sitting alone at the skateboard park, or the six people who were just laid off from the nursing home staff. If the intention is to become more global in scope, a petition “for peace” might become “for the Lutheran Peace Fellowship and its ministry;” a more local emphasis might include petitions “for the people who stand on the green each Saturday afternoon calling for peace” or “the reservist who left home yesterday, and for his family.” Another layer might be to pray for the mission of Lutheran World Relief or ELCA Disaster Response or the International Center at Bethlehem.

The point is that when prayers become this specific, they can lead us to engage with those for whom we are praying. We can follow up with a greeting, an offering, a visit, a letter, or another fitting form of connection.

This module might be undertaken in small groups to dialogue about making general prayers more specific and challenging them to be led to some action.

Another feature of this segment might be to encourage people to refocus their private prayers when they are feeling distracted. For example, a person might be trying to pray in the evening at home, but cannot stop fretting about the rude behavior of someone in the parking lot at the store. By making that rude person the focus of prayer, new insights may occur. God may be keeping us focused on this person, when we might otherwise try to pray only for more loveable types.

When a congregation can learn to use its prayers to engage the world in new ways, God guides this to the blessing of all.

## **IV. Discerning and Responding to God's Call:**

### **Putting It All Together**

One of the challenges of concluding your visioning work will be how to draw together learnings from each of the modules you have done. You will have heard your congregation's story told in a number of voices, listened to the stories of God and God's people in scripture and listened in one or more ways to members of the larger community to which you are called. What's important now, is simply that you prayerfully gather those conclusions that consistently shaped your conversation, informed your reflection and would not go away! Listen, again for the Spirit's guidance!

Depending on which image you have chosen to guide your visioning process, "putting it all together" may take different shapes. The image of a tree might continue to work for you with its roots, trunk, branches and fruit, if you have used this metaphor during your visioning process. The elements of the foundation, structure, roof and blueprint may fit your summary process if you have depended on the metaphor of a church building. A liturgical format may shape your representation of learnings if this has guided your conversation all along. Your summary can move through confession to learnings from the word, to essential intercessions, etc., and give shape to your sending into the world (action plan).

In addition to a visual representation, a narrative version of your conclusions will also be helpful as you go on to share the vision and articulate your action plan to the whole congregation. Consider doing both.

The goals of "putting it all together" are to:

- 1) move towards clarity about God's claim on the congregation and God's desires for your future together;
- 2) and to provide for a plan of action for the congregation's response to that claim as you move faithfully into God's future—a future filled with promise and hope.

To begin, pray for God's vision to take continue to take shape in your midst. Pray for guidance, for open hearts and minds, for God to make your congregation a new creation yet again. Prayerfully listen for God one more time.

It may be helpful to use the following kinds of questions in a worksheet format to allow individuals to answer first for themselves. Or just begin together with a large group conversation. Draw a large tree, church or worship bulletin (or any other image that fits the one you have chosen) and write your collective results on it as well as on a collective worksheet.

What's important, is that you shape the questions to fit each of the modules you did together and the image you have chosen and that you pray for God's vision to come; for God's desires for your congregation to be made known.

### **Telling the Congregation's Story: Listening to Each Other**

What key insights into God's historic activity in and through this congregation have remained with you throughout this visioning process?

What few words best sum up our telling of the congregation's story?

Did our telling of the congregation's story connect to a particular scriptural story or verse that has continued to resonate with the visioning team?

What themes arose as we told—and listened to—the story of our congregation shared in different ways by different people?

Through what aspects of our telling and listening did we experience Christ's peace?

### **Listening to God's Story: Hearing the Spirit's Call**

Did a song, hymn, Bible story or key scripture emerge as you engaged the living Word in various aspects of the visioning process?

What biblical themes recurred in your visioning process as you listened to the Word, to congregational partners and to community members?

What were the key community needs or issues articulated by congregational partners?

What new biblical story is being whispered in our ear? What new hymn is being sung to encourage and guide our congregation?

### **Listening to Our Neighbors: Hearing the Spirit's Call From Beyond Our Congregation**

What were the key community needs or issues articulated by those beyond our congregation?

Where do community member's assessment of pressing needs overlap with congregational partners' sense of community issues and needs?

With which congregational strengths, aspects of our history or emergent biblical themes do each of these potential aspects of our vision connect? How might God be speaking through these connections?

## **Discerning God's Call**

Prayerfully consider all that you have summarized so far. Take time individually, in teams and collectively to pray for God's vision to further take shape among you. Then consider:

Which three areas of community need seem most pressing for our congregation to develop ministries, opportunities, emphases, programs, etc.?

What "big ideas" might God be planting as you consider how the congregation might respond to the most pressing needs identified in your community and impressed upon your hearts?

What "little ideas" might God be planting as you consider how the congregation might respond to the most pressing needs identified in your community and impressed upon your hearts?

What might be considered realistic time frames for the big ideas that most resonate with the group?

What might be considered realistic time frames for the little ideas that most resonate with the group?

Is there one aspect of your unfolding sense of God's call that feels most urgent or that you feel you simply must do together for Christ's sake?

## Sculpting

Preparation: Decide whether you will work in a single group or multiple small groups and, if working in small groups, whether to use one medium for all participants, or a different medium for each group. Designate a central supply area, or a place for each of the various supplies.

Materials may include:

Lincoln Logs

Tinker Toys

Modeling Clay

Various Foods: graham crackers, pretzels, licorice strings, marshmallows, M & Ms,

Goldfish crackers, frosting, gumdrops, chocolate bars, etc. (Check your pantry!)

Procedure:

- Begin by asking participants to recall some of the themes that resounded in their listening to God, listening to the congregation, listening to the community.
- Invite the group(s) to spend a few minutes in reflection, then to imagine how God is calling the congregation to be shaped as it moves into a new season of ministry.
- Encourage participants to use the sculpting materials, and the playful, imaginative areas of the brains to shape that new future. Some will delve into such an exercise with delight; others, undoubtedly, will need to be encouraged and assured that artistic skills are not required. Some will be more comfortable with physical depictions (“a computer lab for our after-school program”), others with more symbolic portrayals (“a church without walls”). Both are okay!
- Allow about 45 minutes for creating; then invite reflection on the process and the sculptures:

What hopes and dreams are represented?

What tugs at your heart? What excites and inspires you? What is frightening?

## Mural

Preparation: Determine what will serve as the surface for working on the mural. A long table is optimal; otherwise, a long wall or even the floor will do. Decide what materials to use: a roll of newsprint or butcher paper, a large wood panel, a solid white or light-colored bed sheet...perhaps, on a fair-weather day, a temporary mural might be created on the sidewalk or parking lot (using chalk, or course).

Materials: Background material: newsprint, butcher paper, bed sheet, wood panels, poster board panels, or other suitable material; tempera or poster paints & brushes, fabric paints, markers, pastel chalks; smocks for participants, as needed; protective material (newspaper, tarp, etc.) for other surfaces, as needed. (Of course, if you are fortunate enough to count a true artisan among your group, you may undertake a more ambitious mural, such as a mosaic; but artistic value is secondary!)

Procedure:

- Ask participants to recall the major themes that arose during the listening components of the visioning process. Ask: What kept emerging as the congregation listened to God, to one another, to the wider community? What new future do those themes suggest? How do you visualize this community of faith in the coming years? What might God's dream for this congregation look like?
- Ask participants to spend some time, about ten to fifteen minutes, or longer if your time frame allows, sharing their ideas, seeking to discern a shared image or several related images that may be depicted in the mural. Don't worry about having a clear picture before you start creating! Remember, God's Spirit will work through the painting or drawing as well as in the speaking.
- Then begin creating the mural. You may need as little as a half an hour or much longer, depending on the size you have chosen, the materials used, and the artistic sensibilities of the group.
- Finally, look over your work. What do you see? What is surprising? Exciting? Challenging? Energizing? If possible, display the mural in a place where others who did not take part will have a chance to see it.

## Drama

A drama offers multi-faceted opportunities to imagine and begin to move into a new vision of ministry. It starts with the recollection of those ideas and images that emerged, perhaps over and over again, in the listening exercises. These provide the themes for your drama. From there the options are almost countless:

- You might choose to write a new drama, weaving the themes you have identified into the script. It need not be elaborate, but may be a simple production that communicates the stirrings of the Spirit that you have identified.
- You might provide a variety of simple props and costumes, then break into small groups, and invite each to improvise a quick skit that captures an idea of a new direction for the congregation, then coming together to identify a common direction.
- Another possibility, especially for groups that have chosen a biblical story that reflects the congregation as it is now (“Our Story, God’s Story”) is to choose a new biblical story—one may come quickly to mind; or you might consider one of those suggested in the list accompanying the “Our Story, God’s Story” exercise—that seems to capture a new identity toward which God is calling, and to act it out.

After performing the drama(s), invite all participants (including those who may not have contributed to the staging of the drama, but who watched) to reflect on the experience:

## Writing a New Hymn or Verse

### Preparation:

If possible, arrange for a musician—a pianist, flutist, guitarist, violinist (you name it—anyone who can support a melody)—to be a part of your group. Provide copies of the LBW, WOV, or whichever book(s) your congregations uses for hymns, one for each participant, as well as paper and pencils. Also have on hand markers and some newsprint or other large paper for introducing the new verses to the total group. Those with technological savvy could project them onto a wall or screen.) Arrange the space to accommodate small groups, with adequate, comfortable space for writing.

### Procedure:

- Begin with some total-group reflection on the themes and images that grew out of the listening components of the process. Which one(s) seem to resonate most with the group? Which seem most to pull on your hearts and draw people in? What new reality—new ministry emphases or direction—do they suggest for your congregation?
- Form small groups of 3-5 persons.
- Ask each group to choose a hymn with a familiar melody. A list of some possibilities to consider follows; however, you will know which are best known to your own congregation. Alternatively, if your congregation has already identified a hymn that reflects its present identity or image, each small group might begin with that hymn.
- Allow time for small group conversation & composition, incorporating the themes and images and ideas you have identified. About a half an hour is probably sufficient.
- Invite each group to select a melody and compose one or more verses that depict an emerging identity or ministry focus that has begun to come into view.
- With the help & support of the appointed musician(s), have each group introduce the new verses they have composed, and sing them together.

When all have had the chance to share their compositions, gather the large group for reflection:

- What common themes emerged?
- What was exciting and inspiring?
- What is challenging or daunting?

Consider finding an opportunity to share the new verses with the entire congregation.

**Some possible hymns:**

LBW:

82 “As With Gladness...”  
87 “Hail to the Lord’s...”  
97 “Christ, the Life...”  
147 “Hallelujah! Jesus Lives”  
182 “Rise, O Children...”  
200 “For the Bread...”  
250 “Open Now Thy Gates...”  
278 “All Praise to Thee...”  
300 “O Christ, Our Hope”  
356 “O Jesus, Joy...”  
424 “Lord of Glory...”  
467 “Eternal Father...”  
495 “Lead On, O King...”  
503 “O Jesus, I Have Promised”  
551 “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee”

WOV:

652 “Arise, Your Light...”  
654 “Alleluia, Song...”  
674 “Alleluia, Jesus is Risen”  
684 “Spirit, Spirit...”  
689 “Rejoice in God’s Saints”  
693 “Baptized in Water”  
698 “We Were Baptized...”  
723 “The Spirit Sends...”  
745 “Awake, O Sleeper”  
755 “We All Are One...”  
756 “Lord, You Give...”  
776 “Be Thou My Vision”

## Journaling

### Preparation:

Provide comfortable space—or spaces—for reflecting and writing. (You might wish to spread out into several rooms for this portion of the exercise.) Provide writing tablets and pens or pencils for each person.

### Procedure:

Select several readings from Scripture to use as “grist” for your reflections. (A list of some suggestions follows; but you may choose any that might speak to your congregation.) Ask different people to read one or more of the passages aloud, then share in some large-group reflection as to what each suggests about the character and call of a community of faith.

Ask some thought-provoking questions, such as:

- What elements of discipleship does this passage lift up?
- What do you think about that aspect of discipleship?
- What hints does this passage suggest as to the context of the community that might have been its first audience?
- How might that community of faith have lived out that element of discipleship in its time & place?

Next, form small groups of three or four, and assign each one of the readings.

Allow time for pondering and writing, providing questions to guide the reflection:

- How would you summarize the way in which a Christian community is to live in the world in light of this passage?
- Which aspects of this passage or aspects of discipleship do you find especially difficult or challenging to live out?
- How does this passage suggest your own community of faith is called to live out its calling—“to be the church”—in your own context?
- How might your congregation be called to change or to establish different priorities in light of this passage?

Call the participants back together to share the thoughts that emerged from their writing and reflecting.

- What does each passage contribute to the developing sense of what a faithful community of God’s people looks like?
- What new directions or priorities emerged?
- What is exciting? Energizing? Challenging?
- What common themes can you discern?

**Some passages to consider:**

Nehemiah 2:17-20

Nehemiah 4:1-6

Jeremiah 33:10-11

Ezekiel 34:11-16

Ezekiel 37: 1-10

Matthew 5:1-11

Matthew 6:19-21

Matthew 9:10-13

Luke 4:14-21

Acts 4:32-37

Acts 16:11-15

Galatians 6:1-10

James 1:26-27

## **Recommended Resources**

### **VISION AND DISCERNMENT**

- Ackerman, John. (1994). *Spiritual Awakening: A guide to Spiritual Life in Congregations*. New York: The Alban Institute
- Bauer, Arthur O.F. (1974). *Making Mission Happen*. New York: Friendship Press
- Bouman, Stephen P., Lisa Stoen-Hazelwood, H. Gaylon Barker, and Carla Meier. (1998). *Re-Rooting in Our Communities: Area Mission Strategy Process*. New York: The Metropolitan New York Mission Institute.
- Christenson, Ray and Jim Petersen. (1993). *Shaping Ministry for Your Community*. Congregational Leader series. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Easum, William M. (1996). *The Complete Ministry Audit*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Farnham, Suzanne G., Stephanie A. Hull and R. Taylor McLean. (1999). *Grounded In God*. Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing.
- Goodwin, Steven J. (1999). *Catching the Next Wave*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Holford, Trish. (2002). *Our Staff*. Congregational Leader Series. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Hughes, Brian H. (2002). *Our Structure*. Congregational Leadership Series. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Johns, Mark D. (2002). *Called to Lead*. Congregational Leadership Series. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Klaus, Alan C. (1996). *In Search of the Unchurched*. One and Future Church Series. New York: The Alban Institute.
- McCullough-Bade, Robin and John. (2002). *Our Mission*. Congregational Leader Series. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Mead, Loren. (1994). *Transforming Congregations for the Future*. Once and Future Church Series. New York: The Alban Institute.
- Mead, Loren. (1991). *The Once and Future Church*. New York: The Alban Institute.
- Melander, Rochelle and Harold Eppley. (1998). *Growing Together – Spiritual Exercises for Church Communities*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.
- Morris, Danny E. and Charles M. Olsen. (1997). *Discerning God's Will Together*. Bethesda: Alban Publications.
- Olsen, Charles M. (1995). *Transforming Church Boards*. An Alban Institute Publication.

- Oswald, Roy M. and Robert E. Friedrich, Jr. (1996). *Discerning Your Congregation's Future*. New York: The Alban Institute.
- Payne, Bishop Claude E. and Hamilton Beazley. (2000). *Reclaiming the Great Commission*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rendle, Gilbert R. (1995). Study Guide: *Transforming Congregations for the Future and The Once and Future Church*. New York: The Alban Institute.
- Rendle, Gil and Alice Mann. (2003). *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*. An Alban Institute Publication.
- Russell, Keith A. (1994). *In Search of the Church*. New York: The Alban Institute.
- Schwarz, Christian A. (2003). *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*. St. Charles, Illinois: ChurchSmart Resources.
- Sitze, Robert. (2002). *The Great Permission: An Asset-Based Field Guide for Congregations*. An Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Publication.
- Vogel, Nancy. (1999). *Catching the Next Wave* (Workbook). Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Williamsen, Thomas P. (1997). *Attending Parishioners' Spiritual Growth*. An Alban Institute Publication.