Congregation Support Ministers
Quotes and Reflection Questions*
Outlines for Visits with the Pastor Leadership Team

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Note: Each Congregation Support Minister received In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership and is encouraged to read the entire book.

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Quotes from In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership\(^1\) with Reflection Questions

Part 1—From Relevance to Prayer

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

—Matthew 4:4

The Temptation: To Be Relevant
These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments. (p. 28)

- Why would leading with your unadorned self be important to leading mission?
- How does your relevant self currently impact your ministry and leadership?
- What experiences have given you a sense of your vulnerability and being open to receive and give love regardless of what you accomplish or do?

The great message that we have to carry, as ministers of God’s word and followers of Jesus, is that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish, but because God has created and redeemed us in love and has chosen us to proclaim that love as the true source of all human life. (p.30)\(^1\)

• How is the message God loves you not because of what you do or accomplish, different from the message often received from society, families, or work place?
• What message do you hear in your congregation?

One of the main sufferings experienced in the ministry is that of low self-esteem. Many...ministers today increasingly perceive themselves as having very little impact. They are very busy, but they do not see much change. It seems that their efforts are fruitless. (p. 31)

• Do you depend on your relevant self for a sense of self-worth? How does this impact your ministry and leadership?
• When have you experienced low self-esteem as a church leader? In those times, what, if anything, raised your self-esteem?
• What is the impact on you and your congregation of the secular world’s message: “be in control; work harder; your problems are a result of incompetence?”
• At times do you feel your ministry is fruitless? How do you handle that?

The leaders of the future will be those who dare to claim their irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows them to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success, and to bring the light of Jesus there. (p. 35)

• People often feel despair or useless in a success-oriented world. With whom can you share the message of Jesus?
• How can you enter into a deep solidarity with those (sometimes in the pew next to you) who cry in anguish, “Is there anybody who loves me? Is there anybody who wants to be with me... to hold me... and give me a sense of belonging?”

The Question: Do You Love Me?
The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. (p. 37)

• What is your reply to Jesus’ question, “Do you love me?”
• How did you come to know the heart of God?
• How could the congregation draw you into the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal?

Knowing God’s heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begins to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God. (p.38)

*Reflection questions are adapted from work prepared by Katie Harmon-McLaughlin for Orange Congregation Priesthood and Leaders Meeting.
• In what ways have you experienced being loved without conditions or limits?
• What does knowing God’s heart really mean for you as a leader? What does this look like?
• For you, what specifically would this radical love of God look like when lived out? How would this impact the people in the congregation and in your wider community? Would it lead to more tolerance of one another? Would people have a higher priority than things or programs or goals? Would the experience of sacred community take on the character of this radical love? What changes do you need to make in order for people to be immersed and transformed by this love?
• How can you convey in words and actions that God is love and only love? How can you remember and convey that every time fear, isolation, or despair invades the human soul, it is not something that comes from God?
• What fears prevent you from fully expressing God’s radical love in your relationships?

Knowing the heart of Jesus and loving him are the same thing... And when we live in the world with that knowledge, we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope wherever we go. The desire to be relevant and successful will gradually disappear, and our only desire will be to say with our whole being to our brothers and sisters of the human race, “You are loved.” (p. 41)

• What would it be like if you lived with the knowledge that loving Jesus was the same as bringing healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope wherever you went?
• How would this knowledge of the heart of Jesus impact what you do in congregational life?

The Discipline: Contemplative Prayer
The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word, and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness? (p. 43)

Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. (p. 45)

• Contemplative prayer is taking a long, loving look at the Real (adapted from Walter Burghardt). Why is, or how would, contemplative prayer be fundamental to your ministry?
• What practices can you adopt to deepen your relationship with God and to hear God’s voice? [LCM encourages the consistent use of the practice, “Dwelling in the Word.” For other practices to explore and use, check the Pastors and Leaders Field Guide and the online Disciple Formation Guide (www.cofchrist.org/dfg use the Explore Practices tab).]
Feed my lambs, look after my sheep. (John 21:15, 16 adapted)

The Temptation: To Be Spectacular
When you look at today’s church, it is easy to see the prevalence of individualism among ministers… (... many of us feel like failed tightrope walkers… that did not have the power to draw thousands of people… that we were not popular with the youth, the young adults, or the elderly as we had hoped, and that we were not as able to respond to the needs of our people as we had expected…) But most of us still feel that, ideally, we should have been able to do it all and to do it successfully. Stardom and individual heroism, which are such obvious aspects of our competitive society, are not at all alien to the church. There too the dominant image is that of the self-made man or woman who can do it all alone. (pp. 55-56)

- Have you felt an expectation or temptation to be successful in church life? What was that like? Did you feel you were competing with others?
- Do you identify with or feel like a tightrope walker in your ministry? If not, with what other image do you relate?
- How might a success-oriented perspective lead you in the wrong direction with respect to mission?

The Task: “Feed My Sheep”
I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when I am alone. I need my brothers or sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart, and body. But far more importantly, it is Jesus who heals, not I; Jesus who speaks words of truth, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I… Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us. (pp. 58, 59)

- Do you feel we serve better in the name of the Lord Jesus when we minister together, rather than as an individual? If so, in what ways is it better?
- In what practical ways can you pray with, speak with, and be accountable to your brothers and sisters?

Ministry is not only a communal experience, it is also a mutual experience… (Jesus) wants (us) to feed his sheep and care for them, not as “professionals” who know their client’s problems and take care of them, but as vulnerable brothers and sisters who know and are known, who care for and are cared for, who forgive and are being forgiven, who love and are being loved. (pp. 59, 61)

- Do you feel like you need the congregation as much as it needs you? If not, what would need to change for this mutuality to be experienced?
How do you feel about being vulnerable with your congregation? Is this even a good idea?

In what ways do you receive ministry that affirms you as loved, cared for and supported?

What support for your ministry do you yearn for that you feel is missing?

It is a servant leadership...in which the leader is a vulnerable servant who needs the people as much as they need their leader. From this it is clear that a whole new type of leadership is asked for in the church of tomorrow, a leadership that is not modeled on the power games of the world, but on the servant-leader Jesus, who came to give his life for the salvation of many. (pp. 62-63)

What do you see as the positive aspects and challenges of servant-leadership?

In what ways can you base your leadership on mutual personal relationships?

How can you provide a radically different kind of leadership than is typically offered in the workplace or society at large?

What would that leadership look like in your congregation and community?

The Discipline: Confession and Forgiveness

The sacrament of Confession has often become a way to keep our own vulnerability hidden from our community. Sins are mentioned and ritual words of forgiveness are spoken, but seldom does a real encounter take place in which the reconciling and healing presence of Jesus can be experienced. There is so much fear, so much distance, so much generalization, and so little real listening, speaking, and absolving that not much true sacramentality can be expected. (p. 65)

We do not formally practice the sacrament of Confession in Community of Christ. In what helpful ways could you experience healing and reconciliation if opportunity for confession was offered?

How has confession been helpful to you in becoming more like Jesus?

I am convinced that...ministers, especially those who relate to many anguishing people, need a truly safe place for themselves. They need a place where they can share their deep pain and struggles with people who do not need them, but who can guide them ever deeper into the mystery of God’s love. (pp. 69-70)

What is a “truly safe place” where you can share your struggles and hopes? If you do not have such a place of safety, what can you do to create one?

What can you do to create a safe environment in the congregation where people would feel safe to share their struggles and hopes?
Worship the Lord Your God, and serve only him. (Luke 4:8)

The Temptation: To Be Powerful
Without realizing it, the people I came to live with made me aware of the extent to which my leadership was still a desire to control complex situations, confused emotions, and anxious minds. It took me a long time to feel safe in this unpredictable climate, and I still have moments in which I clamp down and tell everyone to shut up, get in line, listen to me, and believe in what I say. But I am also getting in touch with the mystery that leadership, for a large part, means to be led. (p. 74-75)

- How would you characterize your leadership? When is it controlling, anxious, or preferring predictability?
- What are your thoughts about leadership as “being led”? In what ways could this be freeing? In what ways could this be challenging?
- What qualities would need to be nurtured for you to be a leader who is led?

What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. (p. 77)

- In what circumstances, if any, are power and the need for control a temptation for you?
- Do you think of Jesus as “powerless” and if so, how?
- When and how does power or the need for control negatively impact your ministry and relationships?

The Challenge: “Somebody Else Will Take You”
But Jesus has a different vision of maturity: It is the ability and willingness to be led where you would rather not go. Immediately after Peter has been commissioned to be a leader of his sheep, Jesus confronts him with the hard truth that the servant-leader is the leader who is being led to unknown, undesirable, and painful places. The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross. This might sound morbid and masochistic, but for those who had heard the voice of the first love (“We love because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19) and said yes to it, the downward-moving way of Jesus is the way to the joy and the peace of God, a joy and peace that is not of this world. (pp. 81-82)

- What are your thoughts and feelings about this image of servant-leadership—being led to unknown, undesirable, and painful places?
- Is the downward moving way of Jesus frightening, exciting, or compelling to you?
- How do you feel about being willing to be led where you would rather not go?
- Can you share about a time that you were led where you did not want to go?
Powerlessness and humility in the spiritual life do not refer to people who have no spine and who let everyone else make decisions for them. They refer to people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with him, they will find life and find it abundantly. (pp. 82-84)

- Was there a time you did not trust Jesus, and that you wish you could do over? What did you learn?
- When did you follow Jesus in trust? What did you learn?

The Discipline: Theological Reflection
What, then, is the discipline required of a leader who can live with outstretched hands? I propose here the discipline of strenuous theological reflection. Just as prayer keeps us connected with the first love and just as confession and forgiveness keep our ministry communal and mutual, so strenuous theological reflection will allow us to discern critically where we are being led. (p. 85)

To be such a leader, it is essential to be able to discern from moment to moment how God acts in human history and how the personal, communal, national, and international events that occur during our lives can make us more and more sensitive to the ways in which we are led to the cross and through the cross to the resurrection. (pp. 86-87)

The Christian leaders of the future have to be theologians, persons who know the heart of God and are trained—through prayer, study, and careful analysis—to manifest the divine event of God’s saving work in the midst of the many seemingly random events of their time. (p. 88)

Theological reflection is reflecting on the painful and joyful realities of every day with the mind of Jesus and thereby raising human consciousness to the knowledge of God’s gentle guidance. This is a hard discipline, since God’s presence is often a hidden presence, a presence that needs to be discovered. (p. 88)

In the midst...of the loud, boisterous noises of the world, the Christian leader is called to help people hear the soft, gentle, and loving voice of God. (adapted pp. 88-90)

- When or in what circumstances are you most aware of God’s presence? What do you do to hear the loving voice of God above the competing noises of the world?
- In what ways could you lead the congregation into meaningful theological reflection as an ongoing spiritual practice?
- What impact would engaging in conversation about issues and events with “the mind of Jesus” have on mission?
Mission begins with encounter. *We encounter God, God’s love, and God’s purposes in Christ through spiritual practices, in our relationships in community, in ministry with others, and in situations and places that don’t yet reflect Christ’s vision of the peaceable kingdom of God on earth.*

- Acknowledging that one cannot determine an encounter with God, how do you open yourself to be fully awake to God so that your ministry is grounded in God?
- What are ways you can help the Pastor Leadership Team encounter God, God’s love, and God’s purposes?

Mission is lived out most fully in Jesus’ proclamation in Luke 4:18, 19. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.”

- Who is Jesus to you? How have you been changed by God’s good news?
- How can you embody the wholistic mission of Christ in your interaction with the Pastor Leadership Team?

Mission is relational. *Without a safe community of trust, individuals will not feel free to imagine and risk something new for their own lives, their relationships with others, their congregation, and their local neighborhoods.*

- How can you model a level of openness and vulnerability in your relationship with the Pastor Leadership Team and congregation?
- How can you help the Pastor Leadership Team model for the congregation how to be vulnerable with God and one another for the sake of the world?

Mission is disruptive. *Becoming missional is about a willingness to follow the disruptive promptings of the Holy Spirit that cause us to see with new eyes people, situations, and relationships in need of the healing and restoring power of the gospel.*

- How are you developing a sensitivity and openness to the disruptive promptings of the Holy Spirit in your daily walk with God?
- How can you be spiritually awake to the Spirit’s movement in the lives of congregational leaders and members? How do you help leaders create space to see and respond to the Spirit’s movement?
Mission is risking something new. *We are called to risk living into the future of Christ’s vision – a future that is more real to us than the reality of the present. In so doing we co-create the future in partnership with the Holy Spirit.*

- How has Christ’s vision called you to risk something new this week?
- How do you discern and align your life with Christ’s vision of the peaceable kingdom?
- How can you help the Pastor Leadership Team discern and align their lives with Christ’s vision of the peaceable kingdom?

Mission is contextual. *Congregations and other expressions of the church have the capacity and imagination to engage meaningfully in their local contexts.*

- What are you learning about the congregation and its external environment that will help you offer helpful perspectives in conversation?
- How can you help the Pastor Leadership Team create opportunities for the congregation to experience the neighborhoods around the church building, where members live, and in the larger community?

Mission is a unique expression of giftedness and calling. *Mission emerges when God’s people envision how they can use their unique gifts for the sake of others in their local contexts.*

- How is God calling you to use your gifts for the sake of others?
- How can you help the Pastor Leadership Team and the congregation discern their gifts, and begin to imagine how they can live out the gospel in tangible ways?

Mission is a long journey in the same direction. Becoming missional is about living into the strange and new behaviors of the peaceable kingdom of God in community.

- How can you encourage and provide perspective regarding the challenging nature of the missional journey?
- Rather than the Pastor Leadership Team providing the answers, how can you help the Pastor Leadership Team cultivate an environment of hope, discernment, discovery, patience, trust, and missional innovation?

Working definition of the word “missional.” *A sacred community that is shaped and sent by their ongoing encounter with the living Christ in relationship with one another and their neighbors locally and globally.*

- How can you keep this working definition of “missional” before the Pastor Leadership Team?
Three Outlines to Guide Initial Visits with The Pastor’s Leadership Team

The purpose of the outlines is to provide Congregation Support Ministers (CSMs) with ideas to use or adapt for their first three visits (or more) with the Pastor Leadership Team (PLT). The outlines are not lists of tasks to get through. Preparing and actually meeting with the Pastor Leadership Team will be an ongoing learning experience about what may or may not be helpful. In reality, it may take more than a few visits to begin the initial formation of this new relationship. It is important to be patient and not move too fast through any of the ideas shared in the outlines.

Although the CSM will “facilitate” these first few visits, it is of utmost importance that the CSM fully participate in the spirit of being one with the PLT. Hopefully, these first visits create a relationship of “we” rather than “me and you.”

Between the first CMS Retreat and the first Formation Retreat in the fall of 2012, CSMs are to make three visits with the PLT. These initial visits are important opportunities to develop community with one another and to take the “inward journey of transformation” by intentional use of quotes by Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership.

It is also of utmost importance that at least two hours are set aside for each visit. Consider the time needed as being sacred. Find a convenient time for all to attend. Perhaps, some Sunday afternoons could be dedicated for meeting over the next several months.

Each of the three outlines begins with a new page. Each outline has three consistent requests:

1. Use the Nouwen quotes provided or select alternative quotes.
2. Practice Dwelling in the Word each time.
3. Provide plenty of time and opportunity for conversation.

Congregation Support Ministers are encouraged to remember that they are not expected to have many answers. In fact, like all leaders on a faith journey they may not even know where they are going, but the One they follow does. The following words shared by President Stephen M. Veazey in his 2005 World Conference Sermon may be helpful:

*The call of discipleship is the call to attach our lives fully and completely to Jesus Christ. Are we experiencing the peace of Jesus Christ in our heart, mind, and soul? Discipleship must be grounded in intentional spiritual formation that centers us in the presence of God, where we find inner peace.*

*It is out of the depth and overflow of this peace that we find the capacity to cope with life and to extend ourselves in the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world.*
First Conversations Outline Guide #1—Sharing in the Round

In the Name of Jesus and Dwelling in the Word

Sharing in the Round: Meet around a table with refreshments to foster conversation. “Develop and deepen relationships by sharing in the ancient practice of table fellowship. Some of the most important ministries of Jesus occurred around the table of invitation and hospitality. Good food, friends, and conversation lead to deeper relationships and community.” – Sharing in the Round practice from Pastors and Leaders Field Guide. (See page 19 for description.)

Read together quotes from In the Name of Jesus (See next page for quotes).

Read the following prayer as invocation:
Come then, Holy Spirit, breathe on us
—fill us with life anew!
Grace us with new depths of honesty, integrity, and sensitivity.
Grant us new eyes to see the hidden gifts of friend, family, and stranger.
Open unfettered highways of trust, appreciation, and transforming friendship.
Let leadership and management be eclipsed by ministry.
Let not public performance impoverish personal piety.
And finally, gracious God, stir within us the true spirit of servanthood
—remind us of why we do what we do
—the call, the passion, the joy, the hope, the tears, the great laughter.
Give us breathing lessons!
Breathe on us that we may stir your breath of life in others!
In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Lead Dwelling in the Word: (See next page for scripture text and p. 18 for a description)

Continue conversation and share testimonies by reflecting on these questions:

- How can we slow down to create the space that enables us to hear the voice of God in our own lives, in the stories of those in our congregations, and in the larger community? How can we discover how God is moving and calling us to deeper ways of being?
- How might we sense divine clues in our own lives that are calling us to deeper understandings of what it means to be in relationship with people? How can we surprise them with new levels of attentiveness and demonstrate our genuine desire to walk with them on life’s journey?
- How can we enter into the sacred space of people’s lives? How can we help people discover how peace in Christ is seeking to be revealed in our sacred community?
Offer prayer: in gratitude for your time together and bless one another with an ongoing awareness of God in your lives.
Quotes—In the Name of Jesus by Henri Nouwen

I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when I am alone. I need my brothers or sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart, and body. But far more importantly, it is Jesus who heals, not I; Jesus who speaks words of truth, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I... Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us. (pp. 58, 59)

Ministry is not only a communal experience, it is also a mutual experience... (Jesus) wants (us) to feed his sheep and care for them, not as “professionals” who know their client’s problems and take care of them, but as vulnerable brothers and sisters who know and are known, who care for and are cared for, who forgive and are being forgiven, who love and are being loved. (pp. 59, 61)

Dwelling in the Word

Doctrine and Covenants 161:3a, b, c, d and 163:11b

Section 161:3
a. Open your hearts and feel the yearnings of your brothers and sisters who are lonely, despised, fearful, neglected, unloved. Reach out in understanding, clasp their hands, and invite all to share in the blessings of community created in the name of the One who suffered on behalf of all.
b. Do not be fearful of one another. Respect each life journey, even in its brokenness and uncertainty, for each person has walked alone at times. Be ready to listen and slow to criticize, lest judgments be unrighteous and unredemptive.
c. Be patient with one another, for creating sacred community is arduous and even painful. But it is to loving community such as this that each is called. Be courageous and visionary, believing in the power of just a few vibrant witnesses to transform the world. Be assured that love will overcome the voices of fear, division, and deceit.
d. Understand that the road to transformation travels both inward and outward. The road to transformation is the path of the disciple.

Section 163:11
b. There are many issues that could easily consume the time and energy of the church. However, the challenge before a prophetic people is to discern and pursue what matters most for the journey ahead.

- Is there a word, phrase, or image that causes you to pause or go deeper in your understanding of Christ’s mission?
- If this text were written only for you, how does it speak to your life experience and invite you into Christ’s mission?
- If this text were written specifically for your congregation, how does it speak to your call as leaders and ministers?
First Conversations Outline Guide #2—Focus on Conversation and Prayer

In the Name of Jesus and Dwelling in the Word

Gather in ways that model caring for one another as persons and provide opportunity for praying for one another.

Read together quotes from In the Name of Jesus (See next page for quotes).

Dwelling in the Word: (See next page for scripture text and p. 18 for a description.)

Continue in conversation: Discuss the importance of developing mutual expectations over time and making commitments. The following five commitments serve to build cohesion and share leadership (adapted from “Priesthood: Developing Mutual Expectations” in Pastors and Leaders Field Guide). In addition, or as substitutes, ask for other suggestions that would foster and model sacred community.

1. **Schedule time for being together.** All relationships require a commitment to invest time to communicate care and value for one another. It is important when talking about what matters most to ensure each one feels respected, wanted, and valued.

2. **Pray together.** Praying together has the potential to deepen relationships with God and one another. Praying together to center on God’s purposes and seek God’s guidance is essential for spiritual insight so ministry may flow out of lives enriched by God and one another.

3. **Read scripture together.** Dwell in scripture together for the indwelling of the gospel story to shape a shared vision or imagination for God’s world. Take time to talk about and tell your story of faith. Ask the most fundamental question Jesus must have asked, “How am I to be faithful to God?”

4. **Discern together.** Identify together where God is at work and calling for response. By seeing the way ahead together, you, as a team will mutually “own” the vision that God is birthing among them. Help identify, encourage, and free one another’s gifts for Christ’s mission.

5. **Identify and agree on expectations.** Be specific rather than generalize about what you have agreed to do. Effective and excellent ministry involves being intentional and honest about priorities and time commitments. Remember each one has a stewardship of body, mind, spirit, and relationships. Help one another be attentive to finding balance and renewal.

**Offer prayer for one another:** One way to do this is to form a circle and ask each person to place their hands on the shoulders of the person to the right. Silent or audible prayers can be offered for each one.
**Share the Mission Prayer:** The CSM hands out the cards received at the first weekend retreat. The CSM offers prayer for the Pastor Leadership Team that they may be blessed by God’s Spirit and by one another as they share together Christ’s mission.

**Quotes—In the Name of Jesus by Henri Nouwen**

*The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word, and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness? (p. 43)*

Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. *Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. (p. 45)*

**Dwelling in the Word—Romans 8:26-28 (NRSV)**

> 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

- Is there a word, phrase, or image that causes you to pause or go deeper in your understanding of Christ’s mission?
- If this text were written only for you, how does it speak to your life experience and invite you into Christ’s mission?
- If this text were written specifically for us, how does it speak to our call as leaders and ministers to our congregation?

Please Note: These are suggested questions and can be changed to any focus that would be helpful.
First Conversations Outline Guide #3—Centering Prayer

In the Name of Jesus and Dwelling in the Word

Gather in ways that model caring for one another. Provide opportunity for praying for one another. Perhaps, ask each one to say to one another, “God loves you not because of what you do or accomplish, but because God has created you.”

Read together quotes from In the Name of Jesus (See next page for quotes).

Introduce and lead a few moments of Centering Prayer (See page 17 for a description).

Lead conversation with the Pastor Leadership Team by asking:
What are two deep yearnings you have for your ministry related to the congregation? (This gives focus and opens ways that you may sense God is moving.)
1.
2.

What are one or two personal joys you have in your ministry? (This reveals what is real and valuable.)
1.
2.

Lead Dwelling in the Word (See next page for a text and page 18 for a description):
After the text is read, encourage persons to write down the word, phrase, or image that caught their attention from the scripture reading.

Ask each one, quietly in the spirit of contemplation, to identify one or two areas for possible exploration where God may be calling them to serve with their congregation?

1.
2.

In team sharing, ask each one to share one or two areas where God may be calling them to explore. Encourage each one to listen and note what others on the team share.

After each one has shared, take a few moments to encourage any further conversation and then ask the team to quietly rest in God’s presence.

Offer Prayer—in a few words share your gratitude to God and for one another as you journey together in faith.
Quotes—In the Name of Jesus by Henri Nouwen

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal. (p. 37)

Knowing God’s heart means consistently, radically, and very concretely to announce and reveal that God is love and only love, and that every time fear, isolation, or despair begins to invade the human soul, this is not something that comes from God. (p. 38)

Knowing the heart of Jesus and loving him are the same thing. The knowledge of Jesus’ heart is a knowledge of the heart. And when we live in the world with that knowledge, we cannot do other than bring healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope wherever we go. The desire to be relevant and successful will gradually disappear, and our only desire will be to say with our whole being to our brothers and sisters of the human race, “You are loved. There is no reason to be afraid. In love God created your inmost self and knit you together in your mother’s womb” [See Psalm 139:13] (p. 41)

Dwelling in the Word—Acts 3:1-16

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o’clock in the afternoon. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. 4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us.’ 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, * stand up and walk.’ 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 All the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.
Centering Prayer
(Adapted from Pastors and Leaders Field Guide)

Objectives:
- Create space to become aware of God’s presence.
- As you breathe, be open to God’s Spirit moving through your life and listen for the breath of God (a word or phrase that comes to you).
- Experience God’s Spirit centering, calming, and revitalizing your whole being.

Process:
- Sit in a relaxed position. Close your eyes.
- Offer a silent prayer to ask for help and guidance.
- Use your breath to create a sense of peace and letting go into God. Breathe deeply, slowly, calmly, starting with several cleansing breaths that end in an audible sigh. As you fill your lungs and exhale, feel the tension in your muscles and your entire body flow out with the air. Continue to breathe in a regular, natural rhythm from your abdomen rather than your chest.
- Focus on breathing God in, breathing all else out until you feel calm and centered.
- Continue paying attention to your breath as you focus your body, mind, and spirit on the reality that God is present and that you are here with the intention of loving and being loved by God.
- When the time for prayer is over, quietly offer a brief word of thanks to God, take several more deep breaths, become aware of those around you, and trust God’s presence to bless you as you share with one another.
Dwelling in the Word
(Adapted from Pastors and Leaders Field Guide)

Objective:
To read and hear scripture as a spiritual practice that leads to new understandings. “Dwelling in the Word” is a practice based on our understanding that God continues to speak to us in the context of our day and calling. Listen for God’s voice in scripture to connect with God’s mission in Christ. Listen to the voices of others about what God is doing in their lives. This practice is not about gaining information about scripture. Rather, it is about listening to how God is speaking, calling, and sending us to join in Christ’s mission to our communities and the world.

Process:
- Provide a printed copy of a scriptural text. A printed copy allows participants to hear and see the words for reflection.
- Read the scriptural text aloud and pause for a few minutes to allow people time to reflect on what they’ve heard.
- Read the passage a second time. Ask people to make note of a word, phrase, or image they are drawn to as they hear it read again. After a short pause, form into small groups of no more than four or five people to provide opportunities for each person to share their responses to questions like ones provided below. If someone wishes to remain silent, that is acceptable. It is important to make sure the reflections are personal and do not become an exercise in biblical interpretation.

Here are some questions:
- Is there a place in the passage I feel drawn to dwell or explore?
- What words, images, or phrases speak to me in this text?
- What is God’s invitation to me in this scripture?
- What is God’s invitation to our congregation in this scripture?

This is a practice of discovery. Be expectant that God’s mission in Christ is among you as you gain insights from listening to one another and to God.

Process Tip:
Be patient with the practice. Encourage participants to remember it is a spiritual practice that invites scripture to transform our understanding and our way of being and doing. Do not let this become an intellectual exercise which will limit the transformative impact of this practice. Like any practice, this will take time to understand fully.
Objective:
Develop and deepen relationships by sharing in the ancient practice of table fellowship. Some of the most important ministries of Jesus occurred around the table of invitation and hospitality. Good food, friends, and conversation lead to deeper relationships and community.

Process:
- Commit to the practice of sharing in the round every other week by inviting an individual or family in the congregation to have dinner either at your home or a place suitable for good conversation. Since the goal is to deepen relationships, it is important to be intentional in moving the conversation beyond surface level discussion.
- Be willing to be vulnerable by sharing some of what is going on in your life. This often opens the pathway of trust for others to share. Balance sharing with listening. Pay attention to the movement of the Holy Spirit in your conversation. The Holy Spirit may be prompting you to pray for a concern expressed or to extend understanding and compassion.
- Sharing in the Round can also lead to opportunities for outreach when expanded to include people in your neighborhood. Doctrine and Covenants Section 154 challenges us, “My Spirit is reaching out to numerous souls even now…” Openness to this counsel leads to opportunities to encounter sacred community as we invest in the lives of other people.
Sharing and Discovering our Congregational Story

The Doctrine and Covenants urges us to:

*Listen carefully to your own journey as a people, for it is a sacred journey and it has taught you many things you must know for the journey yet to come. (D&C 162:2)*

It’s important to “catch” that last phrase. It does not indicate that we should listen to our story to anchor us in the past, nor to simply appreciate where we came from (as important as that is). Instead, this verse of scripture asks us to listen to our story because of its lessons *for the journey yet to come.*

Story can be powerful. Stories can remind us of who we are and where we come from. They can help us bring the very best of our past into our present and future. What is more, hidden in our stories can be clues to our gifts and inner resources. The telling of story can help build community as we remember the fibers that weave us together and deepen our understanding of both one another and our shared journey.

It’s no wonder that the verse of scripture quoted above goes on to gift us with this wise counsel about our story:

*Listen to its teachings and discover anew its principles. Do not yearn for times that are past, but recognize that you have been given a foundation of faithful service, even as you build a foundation for what is yet to be.*

Our story—the broad sweep of the Christian tradition, the treasures of Community of Christ, the unique story of our congregation—can free us to discover insights for the journey ahead. This resource is designed to help us draw out these insights, to assess where we are today, and to identify some key questions that may frame where God calls us into the future.

**Approaches**

To help us tell our story, the following approach is offered in two different forms. The first is an experience of story-sharing and discussion that is facilitated over the course of 8 weeks, in which the congregation engages in the discussion for about an hour each week (During the Christian Education hour, or some other time that works well for the congregation). The second is an experience of story-sharing and discussion that happens over the course of a weekend or all-day experience. The Pastor Leadership Team will have to determine which approach makes the most sense for your congregation.
Before You Announce...

(Important Points for the Pastor Leadership Team)

Before announcing this opportunity to “Share / Discover Our Congregational Story”, it is important for the Pastor’s Leadership Team (PLT) to plan the announcement in such a way that includes the following points.

- God wants to guide us—our congregation—into the future.
- Inspired counsel to the church asks us to listen to our own journey as a people because it can teach us things that we “must know for the journey yet to come.” (D&C 162)
- Our congregation’s unique story is part of the journey that we need to listen to.
  - To really understand our congregational story, we all need to participate in discovering and sharing it.
- All members and friends of the ______________Congregation are invited to participate in “Sharing / Discovering Our Congregational Story”, which will be: (date.....time.....place)
- This will be fun....and important as we try to understand where we are as a congregation and what questions we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future.

The above can be announced easily in less than one minute. It also fits neatly onto a bulletin insert. As you plan this announcement, please consider the following:

- Begin announcing this (at least) several weeks in advance
- Consider having different people share the announcement, rather than having the same person do it every time.
- Select people for the announcement who can be genuinely enthused about what they are announcing.
Our Congregational Story

(“Weekly Approach” Model)

The “Weekly Approach” Model can be implemented in a variety of settings, including the Christian Education hour (which the following outline is based on). It may however, be used in other settings, depending on the needs of the congregation. A pivotal question for the Pastor Leadership Team (PLT) is, “What setting and times will allow the most people to be involved without placing undue burdens on already-busy schedules?”

Before you Begin

1. The PLT will need to select someone to facilitate the process. This person needs to have a good grasp of facilitation skills, including the capacity to encourage sharing from the group, without the need to control the outcome.
2. Please make sure that all Christian Ed. teachers are aware in advance that we’ll be doing something special over this 8-week period. It is important for as many age groups as possible to be involved (young and older adults, teens, and children old enough to write)
3. Select a wall that will become the congregation’s “storyboard” (you’ll probably need to dedicate the entire length of the wall for this). If possible, select a wall where the developing storyboard can remain for several weeks. On the wall, place pieces of poster board end to end. Along the bottom of the poster board, mark the years in decades, beginning with the decade of the congregation’s birth. So, if your congregation began in the 1960’s, the wall would look like this:

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4. Make sure you have pens for everyone (narrow-tipped markers are best, but not essential), LOTS of 4”x6” “sticky notes” (25 per person should be enough for the 8 weeks) or 4”x6” cards (with masking tape).
5. Set up chairs so that everyone (if possible) can see the wall/storyboard.
6. Select someone to collect the information that will be posted on this wall over the next 8 weeks. The information should be left on the wall during this time, but you will want to capture it electronically EACH WEEK to make sure that nothing is lost. The person recording the information must capture the information as it appears, including repetitive stories/comments.
7. Begin inviting people to this experience of discovering and sharing our congregational story several weeks in advance. If helpful, you may want to copy and distribute the first page of this resource as part your publicity effort in the congregation.
8. This is NOT an experience to invite people from other congregations to participate in.
The Process

**Week #1**

1. Welcome everyone.

2. The facilitator BRIEFLY (5 minutes) shares the following principles:
   a. The importance of story. Use the introductory paragraphs of this resource. (You may even want to print and hand out the first page of this resource)
   b. Given the importance of story, we’re here today to begin telling our congregation’s story in a special way.
   c. The need for everyone to have input. Our true story...our whole story...is like weaving a tapestry. It’s incomplete unless the thread of everyone’s story is included.

3. It is also important to share and stress the following:
   a. *In addition to what’s already been said, there’s one more reason that we are doing this.* As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God’s work. Part of that, is discerning the **essential questions** that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. **The body of information that we create over the next few weeks will be used to help us discover those important questions.**

4. Ask someone to offer a prayer, thanking God for our congregational story and asking God’s blessing on our time together.

5. If there are 12 or more people present, form groups of approximately 6.
   a. Give everyone a pen and 4-5 “sticky-notes” (or cards)

6. Story Remembering / Story Sharing
   a. Inform everyone that we’re about to enter a period of silence. Ask people to use this quiet time to consider 2 questions (share that you’ll be repeating the questions soon)
      i. The first question is: **In your experience, when have you experienced the greatest sense of community/belonging in this congregation?** This could have involved a particular event, or it may have been a specific period in the congregation’s life. (Giving brief examples from your own life may help. For instance: *I experienced a strong sense of belonging/community last summer when we helped with adult literacy effort in the neighborhood......when we take the time to do “Dwelling in the Word”....a few years ago when we did all those social things in each other’s homes...when I was sick and so many people called....etc.*)
      ii. The second question is: **Has your personal story taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation?** If “yes”...how?
b. Ask everyone to take out 2 sticky notes. (demonstrate the following on a flip chart, board, slide, etc.)
   i. On one sticky note, write a one-word/phrase “name” of the experience or time in the congregation’s life that you are remembering when you felt a strong sense of community/belonging. (i.e.: adult literacy effort...dwelling in the word...socializing in homes...when I was sick...etc.) Below this “name”, give a brief (1-2 sentence) description of what made this so meaningful to you. Put and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.
   ii. On the other sticky note, write one or two sentences about how your personal life/story has taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation. Write and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.

c. Encourage people to write down as many stories as they wish—one story per sticky note. Ask them to “print” and to write as big as possible.

d. Begin the quiet time and allow 5-10 minutes for people to write.

e. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share just one of their stories with their group. (approximately 10 minutes for group sharing)

f. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes. The ones which share a specific memory should be posted on or near the appropriate point in time where the stories occurred. The ones that describe how personal lives have taken on added meaning can be posted away from the “timeline” at a place of the facilitators choice. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats.

7. Have everyone form one group again. In the time remaining, ask if there is anyone who would like to share one of their stories.
   a. Hear as many stories as time will allow.
   b. Tell everyone that if someone’s story triggers a memory in you, please write it on a sticky-note and post it on the board when you leave.

9. In the closing 5 minutes:
   a. Thank everyone for sharing and tell them that we’ll be considering a new question for story-sharing next week.
   b. Explain that we will be engaging in this experience of story sharing for the next 3 weeks. After that, we’ll spend 4 weeks digesting and discussing what we’re learning though our congregational stories. We’ll explore where we are right now in our congregational journey, and what key questions need to be asked in order to discern how God is calling us into the future.
   c. Share that we will also keep a set of sticky-notes and pens here by the wall. You can come in at any time to write and post a memory/story that “comes to you” in regard to the aspect of congregational life that we’ve talked about today or will talk about in the weeks ahead.
   d. Close with prayer
**Week #2**

1. Welcome everyone and begin with prayer.
2. Share a brief reminder about why we’re paying attention to our congregational story, based on page one of this resource.
3. Make sure that everyone has a pen and 4-5 sticky notes, and if there are 12 or more people present, form groups of 6.
4. Share that this week our story focus question is: *When, in your experience, were you especially grateful for the way members of the congregation shared their gifts?* As the facilitator, consider the following:
   a. It may be helpful to share a few brief examples from your own life. For instance: *I really appreciate the gift of hospitality that I experience when I arrive at the church.* OR *I remember the time a few years ago when several people volunteered their time to help tutor neighborhood kids.* OR *I remember when we used to “commission” shut-ins to pray for any major ministry effort that we were launching.*
   b. Point out how none of the foregoing examples name specific people by name…but only name the experience and the gifts offered. (hospitality, tutoring, prayer)
   c. You may need to explain that the term “gifts” refers to any attribute or ability that can be used in Christ’s service.
   d. Ask everyone to write two things on their sticky-note:
      i. 1 phrase or sentence that “names”/states the experience they want to share.
      ii. 1-2 sentences that tells why the experience was so striking or so meaningful to them
   e. Ask everyone to put and circle a number “2” in the top right corner of the sticky-note
   f. Encourage people to share as many stories as they wish—one story per sticky note. Ask them to “print” and to write as big as possible.
5. Begin the quiet time and allow 5-10 minutes for people to write.
6. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share just one of their stories with their group. (approximately 10 minutes for group sharing)
7. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes on or near the appropriate point in time where the story occurred. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats.
8. Have everyone form one group again. In the time remaining, ask if there is anyone who would like to share one of their stories.
   a. Hear as many stories as time will allow.
   b. Tell everyone that if someone’s story triggers a memory in you, please write it on a sticky-note and post it on the board when you leave.
9. Thank everyone and close with prayer

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**Week #3**
1. Follow the steps outlined for Week #2. This time, in step #4 (from the Week #2 outline), the story focus question is: *When have you experienced the congregation dealing with difficult challenges or distress in a manner that resulted in blessings.* As the facilitator:
   a. Brief examples may again be helpful.
   b. Ask everyone to write 2 things on their sticky-notes:
      i. 1 phrase or sentence that “names”/states the experience they want to share
      ii. 1-2 sentences that describe why this experience was so meaningful
   c. Ask everyone to put and circle a number “3” in the top right corner of the sticky-note

**Week #4**

1. Follow the steps outlines for Week #2. This time, in step #4 (from the Week #2 outline), the story focus question is: *What do you think is the current "story" of your congregation as most members would tell it? What are some things you wish they'd include or exclude?* As the facilitator, ask everyone to write the following 4 or 5 things on their sticky-notes:
   a. Write “Current Story” at the top.
   b. Write a sentence or two summarizing the current story as you understand it.
   c. Write “Include:” and then briefly list what you think are most important things to include in the congregation’s current story
   d. Write “Exclude:” and then briefly list anything that you hope would be excluded
      i. On the back of the sticky-note, write a sentence or two about why you hope this/these things would be excluded
   e. Ask everyone to put and circle a number “4” in the top right corner of the sticky-note
2. Close with prayer, after sharing that next week we will begin our exploration of what we have posted over the past 4 weeks.

**Week #5**

1. After welcoming everyone, explain that today we begin the process of talking about what we’re learning from our congregational stories.
2. Have someone pray for our time together today.
3. Distribute or post the collected story information that was captured by the recorder over the past 4 weeks.
   a. Invite everyone into a time silence (about 10 minutes), during which time they should review the information. Ask them to pay attention to:
      i. Anything that strikes them as significant.
      ii. Do they see any recurring themes?
      iii. Do they see any surprises? (including anything that might be missing)
      iv. Are there any patterns to the gifts that were expressed (or gifts that must have been behind the scenes) in the stories?
4. Invite observations, questions, feelings, comments, etc. This discussion will take the rest of the session. Have someone take notes. (the recorded notes can allow comments to be anonymous)
5. Thank everyone and point out the significance of their observations, insights, and questions. Share that next week we’ll venture further into the conversation.

6. Close with prayer.

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**Week #6**

1. Welcome and prayer for our time together.

2. Distribute or post the collected story information from the recorder. This now includes the notes from last week’s session.

3. Invite everyone into a time of silence (about 5 minutes) in which we will simply look at the stories and information from last week. Let it soak in. Ask them to be aware of any impressions that might strike them. It might be a word, a phrase, an image, a feeling, etc. *Facilitator’s Note: this is like a “Dwelling in the Word” experience, except we’re contemplating our stories, rather than a specific section of scripture. In last week’s discussion, people were asked to apply traditional thinking / observation processes to the matter before us. This week, they will be accessing “intuitive” functions as they allow images, phrases, etc. to strike them. Both the traditional thinking process and the intuitive process are important pathways of insight.]*

4. Form groups of 6 and invite people to share any brief impressions, thoughts, images, or feelings that they experienced during the time of silence. (Give about 10 minutes for this)

5. Ask everyone to turn their chairs and become one group again. Again, invite everyone into 2-3 minutes of quiet stillness. Preface the quiet time by asking them to consider this question: *What might God be saying to us through our congregational story?*

   a. Emphasize that no one should “stress” over this question—or somehow “strain” to hear God’s whisper. Neither should anyone just assume that their thoughts are God’s thoughts just because they feel strongly about something. It’s just a simple question that we are now asked to ponder. If thoughts or insights arise—fine. If nothing occurs to us—that’s fine too.

6. The rest of today’s session will be taken up with the group discussing this question. (Comments should be recorded, but can be left anonymous)

   a. In some congregations, it might help to emphasize the importance of prefacing comments with the phrase “God might be saying”; or “I wonder if God might be saying”. *Facilitator’s Note: Relating to the Holy Spirit is a subjective experience that we’re all needing to mature into. The language suggested here gives people permission to “wonder” about God’s whisper, while not suggesting that “we know what God is saying”. It also hints at the importance of community discernment, rather than giving any one person the authority to definitively say “here’s what God is saying”.*

7. When closing, remind everyone that our congregational story is an unfolding one. Share that next week we’ll be discussing how our congregational stories can help us understand where we are right now on our congregational journey.

8. Thank everyone and close with prayer.

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**Week #7**
1. Welcome and Prayer for our time together.
2. Make sure that all story information, including notes from last week, has been distributed or posted.
3. Share the following:
   a. Over the past several weeks, we’ve learned a lot about our congregational story.
   b. Last week, we discussed what God might be saying to us through our story.
   c. So, today we want to ask what all this might imply about where we are right now in our congregational journey.
4. Continue Sharing….
   a. However, before we jump into this conversation, let’s be aware of 4 dangerous traps that congregations can fall into at this point.
      i. First, some congregations are prone to feeling badly if they are not where they want to be in their journey of faith.
      ii. Second, some congregations are prone to “justify” or “defend” where they are, if they have not made the progress that one might otherwise hope for.
      iii. Third, some congregations are happy to let current “successes” or good times lull them into an attitude of complacency.
      iv. Fourth, some congregations tend to respond to any discussion of this kind by feeling an urgency to put together some type of program or effort to move us along.
   b. None of these temptations are helpful. In fact, they can be harmful. So let’s be clear. There is no need to be harsh with ourselves; no need to defend where we are; no need to pat ourselves on the back; and no need to rush prematurely into action. We just want to pause and have a conversation about a simple question: Where are we right now in our congregational journey?
   c. So, where are we? Let’s keep in mind all of the story information that we’ve gathered, but let’s take a special look at the stories we shared in Week 4: What do you think is the current “story” of your congregation as most members would tell it? What are some things you wish they’d include or exclude?
5. Give people 4-5 minutes to review the information that was created in response to this question (during week 4).
6. Facilitate a discussion with the congregation in response to this question: Based on what we’ve said about our current story, plus keeping in mind all of the other information that we’ve gathered, where are we right now in our congregational journey?
   a. Where are we in relationship to each other?
   b. Where are we in relationship to our surrounding community?
   c. Where are we in relationship to God and the mission of Jesus Christ?
   d. (Have someone take notes, again allowing comments to be anonymous)
e. “a” through “c” do not have to be answered in order, but they are good questions to pose in order to help the congregation consider the primary question.

7. Thank everyone and close with prayer

**Week #8**

1. Welcome and prayer for our time together
2. Distribute or post all of the collected story information we’ve created so far, including notes from last week’s session.
3. Explain that today, we want to hear some very recent stories.
   a. If 12 or more people are present, form groups of 6
   b. Invite everyone into a time of silence (about 2 minutes). Ask them to spend this time contemplating this question:
      i. *How has this experience over the past 7 weeks of exploring our congregational story affected you?*
   c. *Sharing in groups for 10 minutes*
4. Bring everyone back together into one group. Distribute or post the 5 Mission initiatives. State that in Community of Christ, when we talk about Christ’s mission, we’re talking about the Mission Initiatives. Share that we’re not going to discuss these today, but that we all should hold them in our hearts and minds as we consider the future to which the church is called.
5. Share the following:
   a. *Here we are today, poised between the stories that we have shared and the future that God invites us into. To enter that future as faithful to Christ’s mission as possible, what are the most important questions that we should be asking ourselves as a congregation?*
6. Invite everyone to respond to this question and facilitate the discussion. (Someone should be taking notes, allowing comments to be anonymous.)
7. At the end of the discussion:
   a. Remind everyone of what you said at the beginning of Week #1: *As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God’s work. Part of that, is discerning the essential questions that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. The body of information that we create over the next few weeks will be used to help us discover those important questions.*
   b. Thank everyone for participating in the discovery of these questions, and for the other insights that have arisen as we’ve shared our stories.
   c. Share that the Pastor Leadership Team will prayerfully consider all of the information that has been shared, and will consider ways of helping the congregation explore these important questions.
   d. Close with prayer.
LATER

The Pastor Leadership Team will now want to take all of the information gathered and continue the conversation about what we are learning. Patterns of giftedness, recurring themes, notable “stirrings”, should all be noted and discussed, as well as the key questions that were identified. These things now become some of the raw material that the PLT (and the congregation) can consider in times of prayer, meditation, and conversation as we continue to discern God’s call to us.

Process Tips

- As people “remember” things in their stories, some may suggest that “We need to start doing _____ again.” The PLT will want to exercise caution here. The point of this experience is not to replicate programs/activities from the past. The point is to peer into our stories to discern:
  - “Types of things” that may more naturally invoke congregational energy
  - Patterns of giftedness that can be called upon in current circumstances
  - Insights about the nature of congregation life, dynamics, personality
  - What God may want to say to us through our stories
  - Where are we now and what questions do we need to be asking?

- This experience may invoke stirrings or senses of call in someone, which may need to be honored. There is a difference though, between doing something because we are responding to what we sense is God’s movement in our lives, and doing something because “it worked once so let’s try it again”. The former can increase energy, while the latter—if not accompanied with a sense of “calling” or “rightness”—can diminish energy.

- It is VERY IMPORTANT to keep all the notes from this experience. You will be needing them later on.
Our Congregational Story

(Weekend Model)

The “Weekend Model” can be held in a variety of places, including conference centers, campgrounds, or in the church building itself. It can be structured as a weekend retreat, or as a single, whole-day experience. Exact times listed in the outline are only for guidance and may be adjusted according to need.

Before you Begin

1. The PLT will need to select someone to facilitate the process. This person needs to have a good grasp of facilitation skills, including the capacity to encourage sharing from the group, without the need to control the outcome.
2. Select someone to handle logistics, especially set-up, snacks, beverages, etc.
3. Select a wall that will become the congregation’s “storyboard” (you may need to dedicate the entire length of the wall for this). On the wall, place pieces of poster board end to end. Along the bottom of the poster board, mark the years in decades, beginning with the decade of the congregation’s birth. So, if your congregation began in the 1960’s, the wall would look like this:


4. Make sure you have pens for everyone (narrow-tipped markers are best, but not essential), and LOTS of 4”x6” “sticky notes” (25 per person) or 4”x6” cards (with masking tape).
5. Set up chairs in circles of 6. Have pens and sticky-notes in each circle.
6. Select someone to collect the information (electronically) that will be posted on this wall over the course of the day. The person recording the information must capture the information as it is appears, including repetitive stories/comments.
Process

8:30 Welcome and Dwelling in the Word  [Facilitator’s Note: Review the missional practice “Dwelling in the Word” — found in the LCM Manual — and select an appropriate scriptural passage for the beginning of this important day. Facilitate the experience according to the outline presented in the LCM Manual. People will already be sitting in circles of 6, in which they can share the Dwelling in The Word experience.]

9:00 Facilitator shares the following:

a. The importance of story. You can use the introductory paragraphs of this resource, and may find it helpful to copy and distribute page one of this resource.
b. Given the importance of story, we’re here today to begin telling our congregation’s story in a special way.
c. The need for everyone to have input. Our true story…our whole story…is like weaving a tapestry. It’s incomplete unless the thread of everyone’s story is included.
d. It’s also important to share the following:
   i. In addition to what’s already been said, there’s one more reason that we are doing this. As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God’s work. Part of that, is discerning the essential questions that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. The body of information that we create this weekend will be used to help us discover those important questions.

Prayer: thanking God for our congregational story and asking God’s blessing on our time together.

9:15 Story Remembering (round 1)

a. Explain that we’re about to enter a period of silence. Ask people to use this quiet time to consider these questions:
   i. In your experience, when have you experienced the greatest sense of community/belonging in this congregation? This could have involved a particular event, or it may have been a specific period in the congregation’s life. Giving brief examples from your own experience may help. For instance: I experienced a strong sense of belonging/community last summer when we helped with adult literacy effort in the neighborhood……when we take the time to do “Dwelling in the Word”….a few years ago when we did all those social things in each other’s homes…when I was sick and so many people called….etc.)
   ii. Has your personal story taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation? If “yes”…how?
b. Ask everyone to take out 2 sticky notes. (Demonstrate the following on a flip chart, board, slide, etc.)

i. On one sticky note, write a one-word/phrase “name” of the experience or time in the congregation’s life that you are remembering when you felt a strong sense of community/belonging. (i.e.: adult literacy effort...dwelling in the word...socializing in homes...when I was sick...etc.) Below this “name”, give a brief (1-2 sentence) description of what made this so meaningful to you. Put and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.

ii. On the other sticky note, write one or two sentences about how your personal life/story has taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation. Write and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.

c. Encourage people to share as many stories as they wish—one story per sticky note. Ask them to “Print” legibly and to write as large as possible.

9:30 Story Sharing (round 1)

a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to briefly share just one of their stories with their group. (about 10 minutes for group sharing)

b. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes on the wall. The ones which share a specific memory should be posted on or near the appropriate point in time where the stories occurred. The ones that describe how personal lives have taken on added meaning can be posted away from the “timeline” at a place of the facilitator’s choice. Give people a few moments to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then share that we’ll now take a break.

9:45 Break

10:00 Story Remembering (round 2)

Come together in groups again, but mix the groups up so that everyone is sitting with different people. Explain that we’re going to now be thinking about a different set of stories. Our story focus question this time is: When, in your experience, were you especially grateful for the way members of the congregation utilized their gifts?

Again, it will be helpful to share a brief example or two from your own life. For instance: I really appreciate the gift of hospitality that I experience when I arrive at the church...or... I remember the time a few years ago when several people volunteered their time to help tutor neighborhood kids...or... I remember when we used to “commission” shut-ins to pray each day for major outreach efforts that we were launching.

a. You may need to explain that the term “gifts” refers to any attribute or ability that can be used in Christ’s service.

b. Point out how none of the foregoing examples name specific people by name...but only name the experience and the gifts offered. (hospitality, tutoring, prayer)
c. Remind people to write down as many stories as they would like—one story per sticky-note. Each sticky-note should include:

- A one-phrase “name” of the experience or time in the congregation’s life that you are remembering
- A brief description (one or two sentences) about what made this experience so meaningful for you.
- Put and circle the number “2” in the top right-hand corner
- Print as clearly as possible
- Do not put your name on it

10:15 Story Sharing (round 2)

a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share just one of their stories with their group. (about 10 minutes for group sharing)

b. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes on the wall on or near the appropriate point in time where the story occurred. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats, and to sit with new people if possible.

10:30 Story Remembering (round 3)

Our story focus this time is: *When have you experienced the congregation dealing with difficult challenges or distress in a manner that resulted in blessings.* As the facilitator:

a. Remember that brief examples may again be helpful.

b. Ask everyone to write the following on their sticky-notes:
   - 1 phrase or sentence that “names”/states the experience they want to share
   - 1-2 sentences that describe why this experience was so meaningful
   - Put and circle a number “3” in the top right-hand corner
   - Print as clearly as possible
   - Do not put your name on it

10:45 Story Sharing (round 3)

a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share one story with their group about when they experienced the congregation dealing with difficult challenges or distress in a manner that resulted in blessings. (about 10 minutes for whole group to share)

b. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes on the wall. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look at what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats—sitting with new people if possible.

11:00 Story Remembering (round 4)

Our story focus this time is: *What do you think is the current "story" of your congregation as most members would tell it? What are some things you wish they’d include? Exclude? Ask everyone to: (demonstrate on flip chart, board, slide, etc.)*
a. Write “Current Story” on the sticky note.
b. Write a sentence or two summarizing the current story.
c. Write “Include:” and then briefly list what you think are most important things to include in the congregation’s current story
d. Write “Exclude:” and then briefly list anything that you hope would be excluded
   i. On the back of the sticky-note, write a sentence or two about why you hope this/these things would be excluded
e. Put and circle the number “4” in the top right-hand corner
f. Print as clearly as possible
g. Do not put your name on it

11:15 Story Sharing (round 4)

a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, invite them to come to the wall and “post” their sticky notes near the “present” end of the timeline. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats.

11:25 Whole Group Sharing

Ask if anyone would like to share one aspect of how they would hope the story would be told.

Thank everyone for sharing their stories this morning. This afternoon we will take a look at them and see what we’re learning.

12:00 LUNCH (The Pastor Leadership Team will need to determine in advance if it’s best to “go out” and eat; or, is it better to have lunch together “in”.)

During lunch, chairs can be arranged to form one group

1:30 Let’s Review

Welcome everyone back …Invite everyone to come up and look at the stories posted on the wall. Ask that they pay special attention to:

--Anything that strikes them as significant.
--Are there any surprises? (including anything that might be missing)
--Any recurring themes?
--Are there any patterns to the gifts that were expressed (or gifts that must have been behind the scenes) in the stories?

Let people know that we’ll have almost 30 minutes for this, so they can take their time. [Facilitator’s Note: the group may not need 30 minutes, but the informal story sharing prompted by their review of the story board—it’s may deepen conversation yet to come.]
2:00 What are we Learning?

Ask everyone to return to their seats and invite observations, questions, feelings, comments, etc. Facilitate a congregational discussion. (Have someone take notes, focusing on major points. No need to capture details. The notes can allow comments to be anonymous. Notes will need to be projected or written where all can see in the very next session.)

2:30 Dwelling in Our Story

Invite everyone into a time of silence in which we will simply look at our stories again and the notes (posted or projected) from our last session. Just let it all soak in. Ask everyone to use this 5 minutes of silence to simply be aware of any impressions that might strike them. It might be a word, a phrase, an image, a feeling, etc. [Facilitator’s Note: this is like a “Dwelling in the Word” experience, except we’re contemplating our stories, rather than a specific section of scripture. In our previous discussion, people were asked to apply traditional thinking processes and observations to the matter before us. This time, they will be accessing more “intuitive” functions as they allow images, phrases, etc. to strike them. Both the traditional thinking process and the intuitive process are important pathways of insight.]

Close the time of silence and ask people to share any brief impressions, thoughts, images, or feelings that they experienced.

3:00 What Might God be Saying?

1. As you transition into this new segment, ask: Is it possible that God may want to speak to us through the stories of our congregation? If so, what might God be saying to us?
2. Tell everyone that they’ll have about 30 minutes to ponder this question. Encourage people to get up and review the storyboard again, or to go for a walk as the question “percolates”, or to just sit and reflect on the matter.
   a. Emphasize that no one should “stress” over this question—or somehow “strain” to hear God’s whisper. Neither should anyone just assume that their thoughts are God’s thoughts just because they feel strongly about something. It’s a just a simple question that we are now asked to ponder. If thoughts or insights arise—fine. If nothing occurs to us—that’s fine too.
3. Tell everyone that they are on their own for the next 30 minutes, and then snacks/drinks will be available.

3:30 Break

4:00 What Might God be Saying through our Congregational Stories?
1. Welcome everyone back and facilitate a discussion on this question. Repeat the principles of item 2a (above). In some congregations, it might help to emphasize the importance of prefacing comments with the phrase “God might be saying”; or “I wonder if God might be saying”.  

   [Facilitator’s Note: Relating to the Holy Spirit is a subjective experience that we’re all needing to mature into. The language suggested here gives people permission to “wonder” about God’s whisper, while not suggesting that “we know what God is saying”. It also hints at the importance of community discernment, rather than giving any one person the authority to definitively say “here’s what God is saying”.)

2. During the discussion, have someone take notes and, as always, comments in the notes can be left anonymous.

   

4:45  

   [Facilitator’s note: Up until now, your role has been primarily one of facilitation. In the opening minutes of this session though, it’s important for you to present the information in steps 1-2 as clearly and succinctly as possible.]

1. Share the following:
   
   a. During the day, we’ve learned a lot about our congregational story.
   
   b. We discussed what God might be saying to us through our stories.
   
   c. So, what does all this imply about where we are right now in our congregational journey?
   
   
   d. However, before we jump into that conversation, we need to be aware of 4 traps that congregations can fall into at this point.
   
   i. First, some congregations are prone to feeling badly if they are not where they want to be in their journey of faith.
   
   ii. Second, some congregations are prone to “justify” or “defend” where they are, if they have not made the progress that one might otherwise hope for.
   
   iii. Third, some congregations are happy to let current “successes” or good times lull them into an attitude of complacency.
   
   iv. Fourth, some congregations tend to respond to any discussion about mission by feeling an urgency to put together some type of program or effort to move us along.
   
   e. None of these temptations are helpful. In fact, they can be harmful. So let’s be clear. There is no need to be harsh with ourselves; no need to defend where we are; no need to pat ourselves on the back; and no need to rush prematurely into action. We just want to pause and have a conversation about a simple question: Where are we right now in our congregational journey?
   
   f. So, where are we? Let’s keep in mind all of the story information that we’ve gathered, but let’s take a special look at the stories we shared earlier when we were asked: What do you think is the current "story" of your congregation as most members would tell it?
(In other words, what’s been happening recently?) What are some things you wish they’d include or exclude?

2. Give people several minutes to review the information that was created in response to this question.

3. Facilitate a discussion with the congregation in response to this question: Based on what we’ve said about our current story, plus keeping in mind all of the other information that we’ve gathered, where are we right now in our congregational journey?
   a. Where are we in relationship to each other?
   b. Where are we in relationship to our surrounding community?
   c. Where are we in relationship to God and the mission of Jesus Christ?
   d. (Have someone take notes, again allowing comments to be anonymous)
   e. “a” through “c” do not have to be answered in order, but they are good questions to pose in order to help the congregation consider the primary question.

5:30 DINNER

****Optional Endings****

The Pastor Leadership Team will need to decide in advance when the closing session should be held. One option is to reconvene after dinner, another is to dismiss everyone for the day, and hold the closing session the next morning, possibly during the Christian Education hour. If the congregation is on an overnight retreat, then holding the final session the next morning before a closing service will work. The question is, which schedule will allow for the greatest participation and least amount of schedule inconvenience for our congregation? Whatever way is chosen, the closing session outline is as follows:

(15 min) Distribute, project, or post all of the collected story information we’ve created so far, including notes from the last session.

Share that in this session, we want to hear some very recent stories. (Form groups of 6)

Ask everyone to ponder and discuss this question in their groups:

i. How has this experience of exploring our congregational story affected you?

(5 min) Bring everyone back together into one group. Distribute, project or post the 5 Mission initiatives. State that in Community of Christ, when we talk about Christ’s mission, we’re talking about the Mission Initiatives. Share that we’re not going to discuss these today, but that we all should hold them in our hearts and minds as we consider the future to which the church is called.

Share the following:
Here we are today, poised between the stories that we have shared and the future that God invites us into. To enter that future as faithful to Christ’s mission as possible, **what are the most important questions that we should be asking ourselves as a congregation?**

(30min) Invite everyone to respond to this question and facilitate the discussion. (Someone should be taking notes, allowing comments to be anonymous.)

(5min) Remind everyone of what you said at the beginning of the first session:

*As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God’s work. Part of that, is discerning the essential questions that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. The body of information that we create over the next few weeks will be used to help us discover those important questions.*

Thank everyone for participating in the discovery of these questions, and for the other insights that have arisen as we’ve shared our stories.

Share that the Pastor Leadership Team will prayerfully consider all of the information that has been shared, and will consider ways of helping the congregation explore these important questions.

Close with prayer.

**LATER**

The Pastor Leadership Team will now want to take all of the information gathered and continue the conversation about what we are learning. *Patterns of giftedness, recurring themes, notable “stirrings”, should all be noted and discussed, as well as the essential questions that were identified. These things now become some of the raw material that the PLT (and the congregation) can consider in times of prayer, meditation, and conversation as we continue to discern God’s call to us.*

**Process Tips**

- In processes such as the foregoing, there is a natural tension between allowing good, important conversation to “flow” and keeping things on track so that we can get to issues that need to be addressed. In this regard, the timeframes in the foregoing are only guides to inform the ebb and flow of the process. The facilitator will have to determine when some discussions are allowed to “go long” and when some discussions may need to be curtailed. One advantage of this experience being held in a weekend retreat setting is the flexibility that it gives the facilitator.
However, the Pastor Leadership Team will need to determine which format makes the most sense for their congregation.

- As people “remember” stories, some may suggest that “We need to start doing _____ again.” The Pastor Leadership Team will want to exercise caution here. The point of this experience is not to replicate programs/activities from the past. The point is to peer into our stories to discern:
  - “Types of things” that may more naturally invoke congregational energy
  - Patterns of giftedness that can be called upon in current circumstances
  - Insights about the nature of congregation life, dynamics, personality
  - What God may want to say to us through our stories

- This experience may invoke stirrings or senses of call in someone, which may need to be honored. There is a difference though, between doing something because we have “discerned our way into it”, and doing something because “it worked once so let’s try it again”. The former can increase energy; while the latter—if not accompanied with a sense of “calling” or “rightness” can diminish energy.

- It is VERY IMPORTANT to keep all the notes from this experience, including a record of all stories posted on the wall. You will be needing them later on.