

A JOURNEY *to* THRIVING

*A Workbook for
Congregations
and Their Leaders*

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CENTER *for*
CONGREGATIONAL
RESOURCES
AT SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION TO A JOURNEY TO THRIVING

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20-21, RSV





Welcome to *A Journey to Thriving*! In this workbook, we would like to share what we at Samford University's Center for Congregational Resources (CCR) have learned about how congregations thrive. This workbook is a culmination of our Churches Calibrating to Thrive initiative, which was funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. as part of their Thriving Congregations Initiative.

Lilly Endowment, Inc. has described three essential elements for congregational thriving. Thriving congregations "explore and understand their rapidly changing social and cultural contexts; gain greater clarity about their mission and values; and draw on Christian practices from their theological and ecclesial traditions to adapt their ministries to the demands of their changing contexts."¹



With these elements in mind, this workbook leads you through a journey to help your congregation thrive. Topics include:

- ***What thriving looks like (and doesn't look like) for congregations***
- ***Changes in the U.S. religious context***
- ***Innovating and navigating change well***
- ***Approaching change with imagination, not a mindset of scarcity***
- ***Clarifying your congregation's mission and values***
- ***Learning about and engaging in your neighborhood and community***
- ***Discerning next steps and setting ministry goals***
- ***Creative ways to use congregational space to support ministry goals.***

As you start this journey, we encourage you to build a small leadership team from your congregation that can work through the workbook together. Throughout Churches Calibrating to Thrive, we have learned that, for a congregation to be successful in undertaking this journey, the lead or solo pastor, priest, or minister needs to be involved and on board. However, a pastor, priest, or minister alone will not be able to help the congregation to thrive. When building your church's team, it would be helpful to include some other staff members (when possible) as well as lay people who are actively involved in the congregation. We recommend a leadership team of 3-5 people.

To assist you along this journey, each chapter includes the following resources:

- A short reflection on the chapter's theme
- Exercises and/or discussion questions
- Recommended books and online resources on the topics
- Space to answer questions and to make notes.

We hope that this journey will be fruitful and helpful for your congregation.

¹ Thriving Congregations Coordination Program, accessed March 26, 2025, <https://thrivingcongregations.org/about/#initiative>.

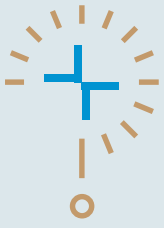
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WHAT THRIVING LOOKS LIKE

“Make me to know thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me, for thou art the God of my salvation; for thee I wait all the day long.”

Psalm 25:4-5, RSV





KEY QUESTION

What would it look like for my congregation to thrive?

When leaders and attenders consider what it means for their congregation to thrive, many look at two metrics: the number of people attending and the amount of money the congregation brings in. When these numbers are growing or large, many people think a congregation is thriving. Overall, this isn't surprising because U.S. congregations are impacted by the broader U.S. culture, where bigger is often thought to be better. Many local congregations have adopted business models to measure success. While it makes sense for business to care about the number of products they are selling, the number of customers they are reaching, and the profit they are earning, this model isn't very effective to help congregations to determine if they are thriving—for a key reason. This model does not at all take into account what God calls congregations to be and to do. It solely looks at numbers, not a congregation's faithfulness to God. If we want to understand whether a congregation is thriving, we need to look at other factors of congregational life, not these two metrics.



Many scholars who study local churches have developed ways to measure and to understand congregational vitality, and these schemes focus more on a congregation's life, ministry, and mission than on its size and budget. We would like to introduce you to one, developed by colleagues at the Flourishing Congregations Institute, that is applicable across many Christian theological traditions. We love how it encompasses eleven different ways that local congregations can flourish or thrive.

- Four relate to organizational health: a clear self-identity, empowering leadership, innovation, and effective structure and processes for undertaking ministry.
- Four relate to internal dynamics: discipleship, engaged lay people, hospitable community, and diversity among attenders.
- The final three concern a congregation's outward efforts: evangelism, community partnerships, and meaningful connections with neighbors.²

You may notice that number of attenders and amount of money are not included as markers of flourishing or thriving. Our colleagues at the Flourishing Ministry Institute argue that: "Numbers [attendance and money] are also important to this discussion [of flourishing and thriving] insofar as organizations need people and resources to sustain their viability. However, we do not equate numerical size or growth with flourishing, though correlations may exist at times."³ Overall, this type of model is more helpful for gauging thriving than just focusing on a congregation's attendance and budget because it focuses on essential elements of local congregations' ministries and structure. When considering what it would look like for your congregation to thrive, it's important to shift from attendance and money to this type of more holistic model.

² Joel Thiessen, Arch Chee Keen Wong, and Mark Chapman, "Congregations as Storytelling Organizations," in *The Stories Congregations Tell: Flourishing in the Face of Transition and Change*, ed. Joel Thiessen, Arch Chee Keen Wong, and Mark Chapman (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024), 5-6.

³ Thiessen et al., "Congregations as Storytelling Organizations," 6.

Adopting this more holistic understanding of thriving offers key benefits for local congregations. It takes the pressure off of a local congregation to feel like they have to be good at everything and to thrive in every possible way. When we understand thriving as having multiple dimensions, we recognize that congregations can have strengths in some but not other areas. No local congregation can perfectly thrive in every area. Thriving also does not look the same for each congregation. One congregation may thrive through focusing on innovating how they engage lay people to serve in their neighborhood. Another congregation can thrive through creating a clear identity on valuing discipleship that equips people to engage in evangelism and to share Jesus's good news. A third congregation can have effective leadership that welcomes a diverse range of attenders that can help the congregation to build a wide range of meaningful community partnerships. The number of ways that congregations can thrive is endless.

*...what works
for one
congregation may
not work for
another.*

Because there are numerous ways in which congregations can thrive, a more holistic understanding of thriving protects congregations from assuming that there is only one way to thrive and from concluding that they are not thriving, just because they are not like another congregation that they consider to be vibrant.⁴ Similarly, when congregations compare themselves to other congregations, it can be easy to see that “the grass is greener” in other contexts. However, what works for one congregation may not work for another. There is no one silver bullet that guarantees that a congregation will thrive. Congregations differ in their leaders, in their attenders, and in their contexts—theologically, demographically, and geographically. What it takes for a congregation to thrive will vary in different contexts.

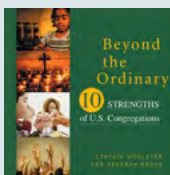
In addition, this more robust sense of thriving allows for how local congregations thrive to grow and shift overtime. Many congregations have transitions at various points from pastoral changes, moving locations, conflicts, and other changes. A congregation's particular strengths and emphases can often shift as different leaders and attenders come to the congregation with different gifts, skills, and desires. It can be easy for congregations to reminisce about previous points of thriving, especially if the congregation had greater attendance and giving in the past, and then feel like it's unattainable to thrive currently because they cannot replicate what their ministry was like in the past. It can also be easy for congregations to stick with an approach to ministry that helped them thrive in the past but is no longer working for them and to think that they just need to try harder to thrive. It's good news that what thriving looks like can change over time. Local congregations are not beholden to past models or ministries that are no longer helping them to thrive, and congregations can discern, through God's help, other ways to thrive that are attainable and make sense for their current context.

4 Allen T. Stanton, *Reclaiming Rural: Building Thriving Rural Congregations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 27-30.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES



Thiessen, Joel, Arch Chee Keen Wong, and Mark D. Chapman, eds. *The Stories Congregations Tell: Flourishing in the Face of Transition and Change*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024.



Woolever, Cynthia, and Deborah Bruce. *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

The Flourishing Congregations Institute's website has a number of wonderful and practical resources: <https://flourishingcongregations.org/>. Leadership Education at Duke Divinity's Faith & Leadership website provides numerous articles and resources on congregational thriving: <https://faithandleadership.com/thriving-communities>.

As the Thriving Congregations Coordination Program, LEADD also shares what various Thriving Congregations programs have learned and undertaken to help congregations thrive: <https://thrivingcongregations.org/>.

Discussion Questions

Why is it important to define what it would look like
for your congregation to thrive?

What would be different if you could define what it
looked like for your congregation to thrive?

Describe a time in the history of your congregation
where you felt like it was thriving.

What was different about your congregation in the
above-mentioned time compared to now?

What (if any) personnel changes have there been
since the above-mentioned time?

How is your surrounding community different than it was
when your congregation was thriving?

What ministry activities were present then that are no longer present now?

How are *you* different now than in the above-mentioned time?

Describe *yourself* when your congregation is thriving.

How would your surrounding community be different if your congregation was thriving?

Describe what it would look like for your congregation to thrive.

What barriers are keeping your congregation from thriving?

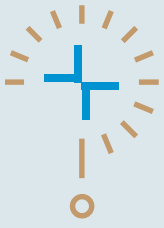
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CHANGES IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

*“Behold, I am
doing a new
thing; now it
springs forth,
do you not
perceive it?”*

Isaiah 43:19, RSV



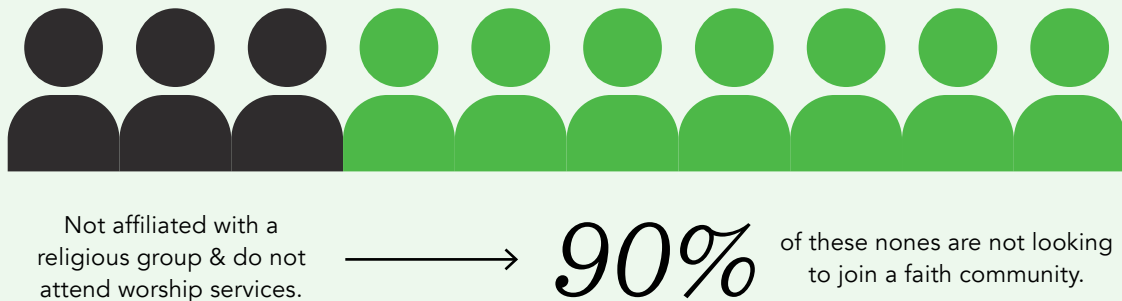


KEY QUESTION

How is my congregation's social and cultural context changing?

Congregations, whether they want to or not, have been navigating lots of change lately. Within Lilly Endowment's Thriving Congregations Initiative, the first of the three core goals is to help congregations to "explore and understand their rapidly changing social and cultural contexts," and we are turning to this topic in this chapter. We would like briefly to describe four significant changes, and we are largely drawing on content from Mark Chaves' *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*.

First, the United States is experiencing a decline in religiosity among adults. In a 2021 Pew Research survey, about 3 in 10 indicated that they were not affiliated with a religious group, and a similar percentage indicated that they did not attend worship services. Many people who are not religious—called "nones"—are not necessarily antagonistic toward religious faith and practice, but religion is just not an important part of their lives. The challenge for congregations who desire to reach out to people who do not know Christ is that about 90% of religious nones are not looking to join a faith community, and it is becoming harder for many congregations to find nonreligious people who are interested in learning about faith and joining a congregation.⁵



Second, these declines are particularly pronounced among young adults. Among different generations of adults, young adults are the least likely to be religious, and they are also the most likely not to attend church services. Some congregations are noticing that their attenders are primarily older and that they are experiencing difficulty attracting young adults and young families.⁶

Third, the typical congregation size is growing smaller, while attenders are becoming more concentrated into the largest congregations. According to a 2023 survey, half of U.S. congregations had a typical

5 For selected findings from the 2021 Pew Research survey, see Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>. For additional information about religious "nones," see Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 14, 45; Pew Research Center, "Nones" on the Rise (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2012), <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

6 For data on the percentage of Millennials who attend at least once a month and the increasing age of attenders, see Chaves, *American Religion*, 51, 66-67.

weekend attendance of 60 or fewer people.⁷ Alongside this change, scholars of American religion have noted that “people are becoming increasingly concentrated in the very largest churches, and this is true for small and large denominations, for conservative and liberal denominations, [and] for growing and declining denominations.” This change can be particularly concerning for smaller congregations because many large churches and megachurches are growing through attracting people who attended smaller churches.⁸

Fourth, there is growing political and cultural polarization—on topics like race, gender, abortion, climate change, and others—that impacts local congregations. An outcome of this polarization is that, over time, “frequent attendance at worship services is becoming more strongly associated with social and political conservatism.”⁹ Many Americans have expressed concern, though, with this polarization and do not support the efforts of religious leaders and groups to influence politics.¹⁰



In the midst of these changes, congregational life was very much upended by the pandemic. Very quickly, churches had to pivot to pre-recording worship services, streaming with limited staff and volunteers present, gathering in virtual spaces, and trying to figure out the best next thing to do. Some churches had conflict, struggled to navigate public health restrictions, experienced significant disruptions to their ministry, had difficulty staying connected with members, and faced significant financial challenges. Two thirds of clergy said that 2020 “was the hardest year of their ministry,” and a number of clergy questioned their calling to ministry and seriously considered leaving ministry.¹¹ Despite these challenges, many congregations also were able to expand their ministries and opportunities to serve in the community.

Even though many of the pandemic restrictions are behind us, church life is not going to automatically revert “back to normal” to how it was before the pandemic. Many congregations have fewer in attendance and fewer willing to volunteer in 2023 than in early 2020. Compared to early in the pandemic, fewer congregations are experiencing significant conflict now, many have restarted programming that they paused, and many are optimistic about their congregation’s future. Hybrid worship is now common in many congregations. However:

Creative uses of technology, the continued burden of hybrid worship, and ongoing adaptations to a shifting post-pandemic reality rest squarely on the shoulders of church leaders. This comes at a time when the loss of members is still being felt and the level of volunteering while growing is still less than in the past. The inertia of fatigue and three years of survival are taking their toll on clergy.¹²

7 Hartford Institute for Religion Research, *Back to Normal? The Mixed Messages of Congregational Recovery Coming Out of the Pandemic* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2023), <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Epic-4-2.pdf>, 2.

8 The quote “people are becoming increasingly...” comes from Chaves, *American Religion*, 73. For information on the concentration of attenders into larger congregations, see: Chaves, *American Religion*, 72-74; Bob Smietana, *Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters* (New York: Worthy Publishing, 2022), 102-18.

9 Jennifer M. McClure Haraway, *No Congregation Is an Island: How Faith Communities Navigate Opportunities and Challenges Together* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 3.

10 For information about polarization related to worship service attendance, see Chaves, *American Religion*, 101-16. For data on the growing opposition to religious influence in politics, see Chaves, *American Religion*, 114-16.

11 Hartford Institute for Religion Research, *Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2021), https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Navigating-the-Pandemic_A-First-Look-at-Congregational-Responses_Nov-2021.pdf.

12 Hartford Institute for Religion Research, *Back to Normal?*, 13.

Having had to adapt during the pandemic, fewer congregations are willing to undertake new changes now, and many clergy are still struggling.

In our experience working with congregations, an essential element of thriving is learning how to navigate change well. However, doing so can be challenging when so many changes are happening at once. The next chapter focuses on how to innovate and develop agility in ministry in ways that are committed to the Christian faith and adaptive to our changing context.

RECOMMENDED BOOK AND ONLINE RESOURCES



Chaves, Mark. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation Amidst and Beyond COVID-19 is a 5-year research project, funded by Lilly Endowment, charting how congregations have navigated and changed through the pandemic: <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/>.

Pew Research Center - <https://www.pewresearch.org/topic/religion/>



What changes are you noticing within your congregation?

What changes are you noticing within the broader culture?

How long have you noticed these changes?

How did your congregation change during the pandemic?

How is your congregation similar or different
than it was before the pandemic?

To what extent and how have these changes impacted your church
– both positively and negatively?

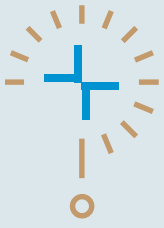
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INNOVATION IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Romans 12:2, RSV





KEY QUESTION

As the world changes around my congregation, how can my congregation navigate change and innovate well?

In our experience working with congregations, an essential element of thriving is learning how to navigate change well. It's important for congregations and their leaders to learn how to innovate and to be agile in an ever-changing ministry context. In Samford's Churches Calibrating to Thrive initiative, we started each cohort with an event led by leadership experts from Fuller Theological Seminary, Dr. Scott Cormode and Dr. Tod Bolsinger, who have focused on how congregations can navigate change well.

How Scott began his talk made a big impression on us. After introducing himself and setting some expectations for the day, he said, "I'm tired, and so are you, and so is your congregation. Anything we do today has to acknowledge that." He continued:

...the church as we know it is calibrated for a world that no longer exists

It would be very easy to come to this kind of a thing and think: "Oh great, they're going to pile a bunch of new stuff on me that none of us has the energy to do." I promise that's not what we're interested in today. ...

One of the things that happens when we're tired and one of the things that happens when we encounter new things is we feel stuck: "I don't know what to do." When you feel stuck, you don't want someone to tell you: "Here is the correct answer. Just follow this formula, and all will be well," because we don't trust that person. They don't know my world. What do you want when you're stuck? You want positive options. You want stuff you can try."¹³

Many churches feel stuck right now because, in Scott's words, "the church as we know it is calibrated for a world that no longer exists."¹⁴ Many churches use models of and approaches to ministry that used to work but are now less effective, and it's easy for churches to feel stuck. Both Scott and Tod offered, in Scott's words, "stuff you can try, when time is right, whenever you begin to feel stuck,"¹⁵ and here are a few of the practical suggestions and insights they offered.

To start, it's helpful to begin with what we mean by innovation and healthy motivations for innovation. The type of innovation that Scott and Tod encouraged is not necessarily changing worship styles or tweaking some programming, and it's definitely not a "one size fits all" solution or a silver bullet. It's much deeper. In *The Innovative Church*, Scott wrote, "The goal of Christian innovation is to create shared stories of hope that make spiritual sense of the longings and losses of the people whom God has entrusted to our care."¹⁶ What innovation looks like in each congregation is very contextual to the

¹³ Scott Cormode, "Innovative Church Session 1," Center for Congregational Resources, October 9, 2021, YouTube video, 1:09:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iy7atDnjTc>.

¹⁴ Scott Cormode, *The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 1.

¹⁵ Scott Cormode, "Innovative Church Session 1," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iy7atDnjTc>.

¹⁶ Cormode, *The Innovative Church*, 20-21.

people whom God has gathered in the congregation, the community where the congregation is located, and the congregation's leadership. However, innovation does not involve moving away from the fullness of the Christian faith. Rather, the key question is: "How to we maintain a rock-solid commitment to the unchanging Christian faith while at the same time finding innovative ways to express that faith in an ever-changing culture?"¹⁷

Scott shared a very helpful process for innovation. One of the most important elements of leading amidst change is listening, and Scott offered five essential questions for churches to ask:



1. *Who are the people entrusted to your care?*
2. *How do those people experience the longings and losses that make up the human condition?*
3. *What big lies do your people believe that prevent them from hearing the gospel?*
4. *How do you make spiritual sense of those longings and losses?*
5. *How do you express that spiritual meaning as a shared story of hope?*¹⁸

Asking these questions and empathetically listening to people transforms those who hear and provides a foundation for recalibrating.

Developing the ability to adapt as a leader is also crucial for ministers, pastors, priests, and lay leaders who are navigating change. In *Canoeing the Mountains*, which focuses on how to navigate change when there is no map to follow, Tod wrote:

*When the world is different than we expected, we become disoriented. When the tried-and-true solutions to our problems don't work, we get stuck. When we are faced with competing values that demand a decision which will inevitably lead to loss, we can get overwhelmed. At exactly the moment when the congregation is looking for the leader to give direction, the leader's own anxiety and inner uncertainty is the highest. ... This is the moment when the transformational leader mobilizes a group toward the growth they will need in order to face the disorientation and find the capacity to reframe their shared identity in a new expression of their shared mission.*¹⁹

¹⁷ Cormode, *The Innovative Church*, 3.

¹⁸ These questions are verbatim from Cormode, *The Innovative Church*, 41-42

¹⁹ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 89-90.

In this book, Tod shared a variety of characteristics of transformative and adaptive leaders, and he describes how leaders can develop these tools both in *Canoeing the Mountains* and in *Tempered Resilience*. Adaptive leaders:

- calmly face the unknown
- refuse quick fixes
- engage others in the learning and transformation necessary to take on the challenge that is before them
- seek new perspectives
- ask questions that reveal competing values and gaps in values and actions
- raise up deeper issues at work in a community
- explore and confront resistance and sabotage
- learn and change without sacrificing personal or organizational fidelity
- act politically [i.e., strategically] and stay connected relationally
- help the congregation make hard, often painful decisions to effectively fulfill their mission in a changing context.²⁰

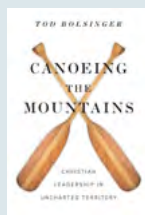
We are grateful for Tod's reminder that these capabilities take time and experience to develop. "This capacity building is more than just some techniques to master. It's a set of deeply developed capabilities that are the result of ongoing transformation in the life of a leader."²¹

There are just a few highlights from Scott's and Tod's work. It was hard to pick which ones to share here! We are very grateful for them, and we found their work to be very valuable for the churches in our Churches Calibrating to Thrive initiative. We encourage you to read their books and explore the additional recommended resources below.

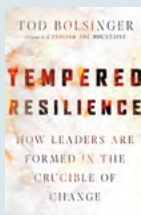
20 Bullet points are verbatim from Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 90-91.

21 Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 91.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES



Bolsinger, Tod.
Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Praxis, 2015.



Bolsinger, Tod.
Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Praxis, 2020.



Cormode, Scott.
The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020.

Leadership Education at Duke Divinity's Faith & Leadership website provides numerous articles on similar topics. Here are two:

"Traditioned innovation" by L. Gregory Jones,
<https://faithandleadership.com/traditioned-innovation-0>.

"The church isn't dying. It's being remade" by Shannon Hopkins,
<https://faithandleadership.com/the-church-isnt-dying-its-being-remade>.

Recordings from Scott Cormode's presentation at Samford are available on the Center for Congregational Resources' YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/@centerforcongregationalres6786>.

Discussion Questions

How would you define innovation in congregational life?

How open is your congregation to change and adaptation?

Describe a situation where your congregation innovated.
How did the church innovate, and what was the result?

What do you think about Scott Cormode's definition of innovation? "The goal of Christian innovation is to create shared stories of hope that make spiritual sense of the longings and losses of the people whom God has entrusted to our care."²²

²² Cormode, *The Innovative Church*, 20-21.

Who is entrusted to your congregation's care?

What are their longings and losses, and what lies keep them
from embracing the Gospel?

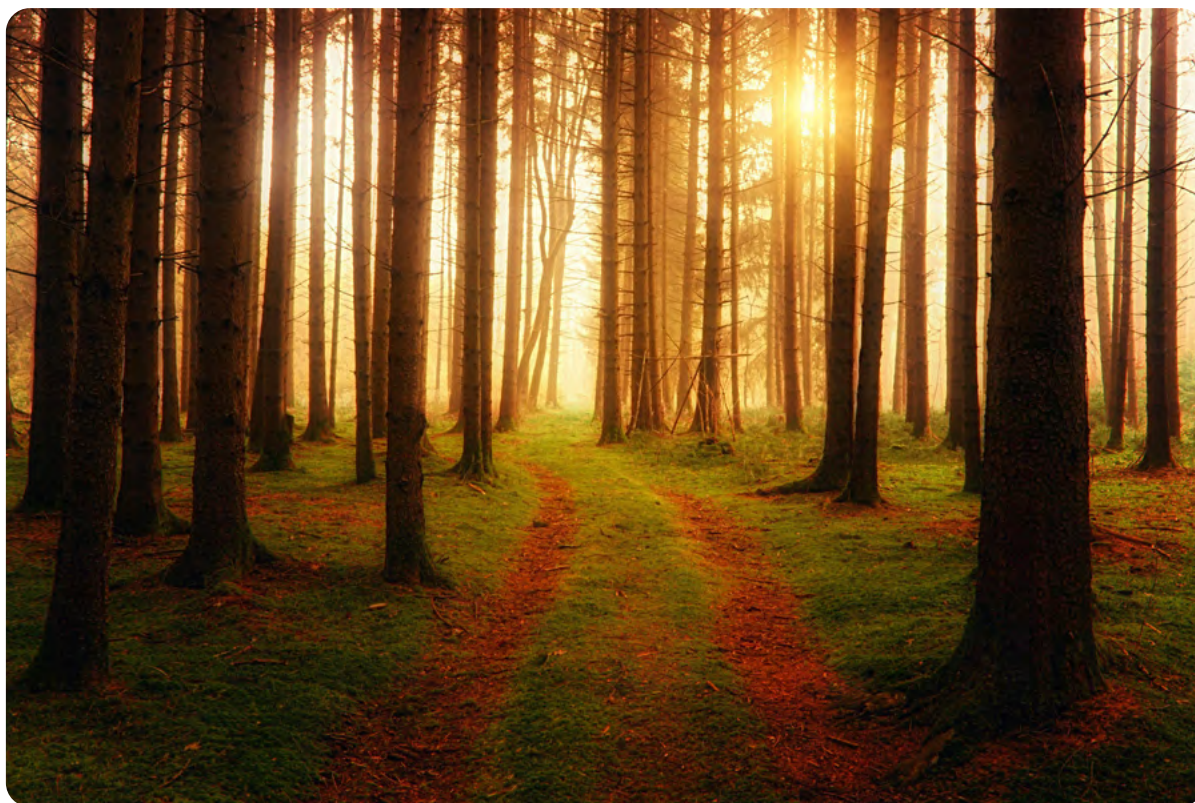
How can your congregation make spiritual sense of these longings and losses and create shared stories of hope?

Describe a situation where your congregation felt stuck.

How did your congregation respond to this situation?

What roles did leaders play in navigating this situation?

Every leader has room to grow. What elements of adaptive leadership would you like to grow in?

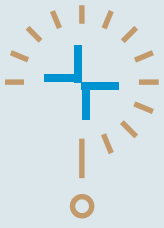


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MOVING FROM SCARCITY TO IMAGINATION

“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Philippians 4:19-20, RSV



KEY QUESTION

What would it look like to address congregational needs with wonder and imagination?

When we are navigating change, uncertainty, and something we didn't expect, it can be easy to get to a place where we don't know what to do and we feel stuck. Sometimes when we have a goal that is difficult to reach, it also can be easy to focus on what is preventing us from reaching that goal, typically something that we lack but feel is necessary. This can be common in congregational life because many congregations, as we discussed in Chapter 3, are small.



I (Jennifer) recently experienced trouble reaching a goal at my indoor climbing gym. There was a route that I could not figure out how to do. I am of shorter stature, and I just couldn't seem to reach the handholds and footholds that I needed to progress toward the top. Frustrated, I began to grumble about how the people who designed the route weren't keeping shorter people in mind, and I began to see climbing to the top of the route as impossible and unattainable for me. However, there was a more experienced climber at the gym who had given me advice on numerous occasions, and I asked him for advice, fully expecting him to confirm my assumption that my height would prevent me from completing the route. I started the climb again, and he gave me advice about how to climb the crux – the most difficult part of the route. Because of my height, I had to use holds and the even wall itself in ways I hadn't imagined, but with his advice, I was able to get through the crux and to the top! I have completed this climb numerous times since, and each time I feel more and more comfortable and confident doing it. Focusing on what I lacked—height—made the climb seem impossible. Getting advice helped me to see it in a new and doable light and to grow to love that particular climb.

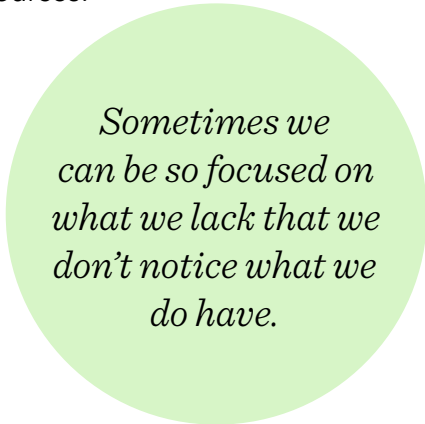
Many congregations can find themselves in similar situations. They are navigating an unexpected or unwelcome change and are not sure how to respond. Perhaps they have a goal that reflects what they feel God is calling them to be and to do, but they lack resources to reach it and feel stuck. The challenge seems less like an opportunity than an insurmountable obstacle. There are key things that congregations can do to get unstuck from a situation like this, all of which helped me when climbing this seemingly impossible route.

First, I had to be honest about how I was feeling—that the route seemed impossible, that I felt limited because of my height, and that continuing to try what I had already tried wasn't going to help me climb to the top of the route. This is a necessary but sometimes hard step for congregations. Many church leaders are hopeful and optimistic about the work of God in their church, and it can be difficult to acknowledge that the church is stuck, needs additional resources, is trying things that are not working, and/or is stuck due to anxiety about trying something new and failing.

Second, I needed to be willing to ask for help and advice and to be open to the possibility that I could complete the route. Often when we feel stuck in a situation, other people can provide emotional support, can see options and opportunities we cannot, can notice resources or strategies that we are missing, can help us to identify our fears, and can help us to brainstorm what we would like to try if we couldn't fail. These are important benefits congregations can experience when they receive support from other congregations, leaders, and organizations.

The third is to think creatively and "out of the box" about what resources are available. Sometimes we can be so focused on what we lack that we don't notice what we do have. While climbing, I had to learn a new way of using the handholds and footholds to navigate through the crux—I had to see it differently. Churches often need to see things differently to notice additional resources.

People with a scarcity mentality focus on limits, are able to see only their immediate needs, are fearful of loss, have diminished impulse control, focus on the short term, and see themselves in competition for scarce resources. People with an abundance mentality, on the other hand, focus on possibilities and are willing to take risks. Scarcity thinkers tend to be resentful of the success of others. They are into hoarding, into defending what they have. Abundance thinkers are generous, willing to share what they have. They have confidence that there will be enough for everyone.²³



Sometimes we can be so focused on what we lack that we don't notice what we do have.

For example, a church may be so focused on not having enough money to staff a program that they may overlook that there are enough volunteers to lead the program. Similarly, a church may not feel like they have the capacity to add a new ministry or program because the staff and volunteers are already too stretched thin. Sometimes it can be helpful for churches to reflect prayerfully on what ministries and programs are currently most fruitful. In this situation, a congregation may need to end one program, ministry, or activity gracefully so that they have the capacity and resources to transition to where God is leading them. These examples illustrate how there are often resources available to congregations that congregations may struggle to see if they are too focused on what they lack.

Lastly, congregations can also find resources through collaborations. When I was climbing, I benefited from asking another more experienced climber for help. Many congregations can benefit similarly when they feel stuck. Most U.S. congregations are smaller, with recent estimates indicating that half of congregations have about sixty or fewer people in in-person attendance in a typical weekend and half of congregations have budgets of at most \$170,000.²⁴ Congregations that are smaller may not have the space, financial, or human (staff and/or volunteers) resources that they need within their congregation to achieve a particular goal, but any congregation can expand their capacity for ministry through collaborating with other congregations, nonprofits, and other organizations in their community.

Here's an example. A church in a lower income, predominantly African American community identified a need for an after-school program in their neighborhood and wanted to develop one but lacked the volunteers they needed to staff it. They were able to collaborate with a nearby congregation that had a large college ministry, and they staffed their after-school program with students from the other congregation's college ministry.²⁵ Doing so expanded their capacity to follow God's calling for them. In addition, a church in an aging building that they are not fully utilizing may be concerned about how much

23 Roy M. Oswald and Arland Jacobson, *The Emotional Intelligence of Jesus: Relational Smarts for Religious Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 20-21.

24 *Faith Communities Today, Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2021), <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>; Hartford Institute for Religion Research, *Back to Normal?*.

25 McClure Haraway, *No Congregation Is an Island*, 88-90.

money they are spending on building maintenance, fearing that that expense is taking away from the ministries they feel God is calling them to offer. They could partner with a local nonprofit, renting space to the nonprofit for offices or activities and using the rental income to pay for the needed maintenance. Through collaborating, congregations can partner with other congregations and organizations to do more than they would have been able to do alone through combining finances, space, staff, and volunteers.

Doing these things can help a church to move from a mindset focused on scarcity to imagination and abundance—thinking creatively and out of the box.



RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES



Elsdon, Mark. *We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry*. Eerdmans, 2021.



McClure Haraway, Jennifer M. *No Congregation Is an Island: How Faith Communities Navigate Opportunities and Challenges Together*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023.

An online article about *We Aren't Broke*:
<https://faithandleadership.com/mark-elsdon-the-church-not-broke>.

Two online articles about *No Congregation Is an Island*:
<https://religionnews.com/2023/10/20/in-tough-times-churches-cant-afford-to-go-it-alone-new-book-advises/>
<https://faithandleadership.com/jennifer-m-mcclure-haraway-congregations-can-help-each-other-navigate-opportunities-and-challenges>.

Discussion Questions

Why is it important to shift from a scarcity mindset to an imaginative mindset?

What would be different if you could approach your congregational needs from a mindset of wonder and imagination rather than a scarcity mindset?

What resources would you say your church currently has
(people, facilities, programs)?

What are non-tangible resources
(engagement of lay leaders, spirit of willingness)?

How have your resources changed over the past five years?

What programs do you value, but the congregation does not?

Which programs should be blessed and closed?

What are the limits of your congregation (its people, facilities)?

Approximately what percentage of your church serves consistently?
How could this grow?

Are there unspoken expectations that your congregation should grow at the same rate and in the same ways as other churches in the area? Explain.

What are the unspoken fears of the church?

If you knew you wouldn't fail, what would you like to try in your congregation?

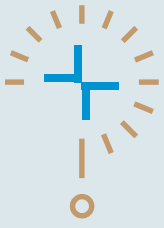
6

CLARIFYING MISSION AND VALUES

“For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.”

Jeremiah 29:11-12, RSV





KEY QUESTIONS

What are my congregation's mission and values?

What is my congregation's purpose, and how does my congregation live out its purpose?

Within Lilly Endowment's Thriving Congregations Initiative, the second of the three core goals is to help congregations to "gain greater clarity about their mission and values," and this topic is our focus in this chapter. Having a clear mission and values is essential for thriving for many reasons, and here are three. First, having a clear mission and values gives the congregation a shared identity and reason for gathering, worshipping God, and serving together. Second, it provides congregations with guiding themes to draw on as they strengthen existing ministries, develop new ministries, plan for the future, and make important decisions. Third, it offers congregational leaders and attenders an opportunity to view their leadership and participation in the congregation through a larger lens of participating in what God is calling their congregation to be and to do.²⁶

Clarifying a congregation's mission and values is also essential for navigating change well. When we are feeling disoriented, overwhelmed, or discombobulated due to change, it can be helpful to have a compass or something that can provide a helpful direction for moving forward. As Tod Bolsinger shared:

*For church leaders, moments of disequilibrium ... certainly bring our own motivations into focus: What are we really called to? ... Is it merely to get more people into the church pews and dollars in the offering plate so our congregations can keep offering religious services to those who desire them? ... Or isn't there a higher purpose ... about being a community of people who exist to extend God's love and just reign and rule in all the earth?*²⁷

Below, we offer three exercises that can help your congregation to discern its mission and values.

Exercise #1 – Congregation-wide Conversations

Tod Bolsinger offers some helpful questions for congregations to clarify their identity, mission, and values. Because many people in a congregation can have different perspectives about a church's identity and values, we encourage you to ask these questions in gatherings across your congregation to gather a wide range of responses.

- Why do we exist as a congregation?
- What would be lost in our community ... or in the world if we ceased to exist?
- What purposes and principles must we protect as central to our identity?
- What are we willing to let go of so the mission will continue?²⁸

²⁶ Thriving Congregations Coordination Program, accessed March 26, 2025, <https://thrivingcongregations.org/about/#clarify-mission>.

²⁷ Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 95.

²⁸ The questions are verbatim from Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 95.

Exercise #2 – Congregation-wide Surveys

Many congregations have a variety of strengths, aspects of their life and ministry in which they excel and which people cherish, and these areas can be helpful for identifying the church's mission and values. To gauge these values, it can be helpful to conduct a survey of congregational attenders, members, parishioners, or congregants with a question like this:

Which of the following aspects of this congregation do you personally most value?
(Mark up to three.)

- ☐ Wider community care or social justice emphasis
- ☐ Reaching those who do not attend church
- ☐ Traditional style of worship or music
- ☐ Contemporary style of worship or music
- ☐ Sharing in Holy Communion, Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper
- ☐ Social activities or meeting new people
- ☐ Sermons, preaching, or homilies
- ☐ Bible study or prayer groups, other discussion groups
- ☐ Ministry for children or youth
- ☐ Prayer ministry for one another
- ☐ Practical care for one another in times of need
- ☐ The congregation's school or pre-school
- ☐ Openness to social diversity
- ☐ Adult church-school classes²⁹

We love multiple things about this question!

1. This question makes attenders focus on their top three values. Many of us have more than three things that we value about our congregation, but this question clarifies what attenders value the most – what is most important to them.
2. This question gives attenders lots of options to choose from. In the national survey that asked this question, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, Wave 2, 2008-2009, attenders valued a variety of factors about their particular congregation. For over 80% of congregations, when looking at the range of factors that attenders mentioned were in their top three values, almost all of the fourteen factors above were mentioned by at least one attender.
3. This question can give congregations a clearer picture of their attenders' top values. Most congregations in the second wave of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey had at least one factor that half or more of their attenders chose as one of their top three values. Other congregations did not, rather having a wider range of values, none of which were widely embraced across the congregation. This is very helpful for identifying which values and aspects of the congregation are most central to its identity and mission.

²⁹ This question comes from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, 2008/2009, attender survey. (Chapter 10)

Exercise #3 – Exploring Congregational Fears

The third exercise builds on Chapter 5 by digging into areas where the congregation feels stuck. Here's how Pastor Kara Root describes the exercise in her book, *The Deepest Belonging*. At a retreat with other leaders at her congregation:

We asked ourselves, What is keeping us from noticing what God is doing and joining it without hesitation? What unspoken fears are holding us back?

We gave language to four big assumptions that, as a community and as individuals, we regularly unwittingly rehearsed:

1. Our glory days are in the past.
2. We are too small, and we don't have enough money.
3. If you volunteer for something, you'll be stuck for life.
4. A few people do all of the work.

We wrote these big, fear-based assumptions on a large sheet of paper and looked at them for a few minutes. Every one of them seemed absolutely true. Saying them aloud was a relief, actually.

Then we did something challenging. I asked them "What is the opposite of these statements? Saying the opposite of these things felt scary. It felt like pretending. But we did it anyway.

And by this exercise, we came up with these four statements:

1. God is doing something here and now that incorporates the past and leads us into the future.
2. We are exactly the right size and makeup, and have the resources we need, for what God wants to do in and through us.
3. Every person participates from their particularities and passions.
4. We all share the ministry of church.³⁰

This exercise helped this congregation to clarify key elements of its mission and values, and these four statements now hang prominently on a wall in their building.

When we first hung them there, we didn't yet really believe them. But we hung them up anyway. And before long what at first felt false came to absolutely describe us.

We return to these guiding convictions when we need to remember what we know to be true. They were a way of reorienting ourselves out of fear and back to trust, and now they are faithful reminders that this is God's church and that we are joyfully along for the ride.³¹

30 Kara K. Root, *The Deepest Belonging: A Story about Discovering Where God Meets Us* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 146-147.

31 Root, *The Deepest Belonging*, 149.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES



Bolsinger, Tod.
Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory.
Downers Grove, IL:
IVP Praxis, 2015.



Root, Kara K.
The Deepest Belonging: A Story about Discovering Where God Meets Us.
Minneapolis, MN:
Fortress Press, 2021.
(Chapter 7)

Stories about how congregations clarifying their missions and values:
<https://thrivingcongregations.org/category/mission-values/>

Additional Discussion Questions for Preparing to Create a Mission Statement and Values Statements

Which of this chapter's exercises did you undertake?

What did you learn from these exercises?

What does your church do for the members?

What does your church do for the community?

What does your church do for the world?

Explain how your church does these things.

Describe why your church does what it does.

Why is it important to articulate a clear mission statement?

Guidance for Writing your Mission Statement:

Start with the words, "The mission of (your church name)"

Use a strong verb in present tense "is to (insert verb here)"

For whom do you do it "(insert the object here)"

The result/benefit from the church's work (insert the desired goal here)

The what and how you do it. "...by (insert the what and how here)

Example: The mission of First Church of Thriving is to disciple the people of the Thriving community to be devoted followers of Jesus by faithfully sharing the love of God through word and deed.

In one sentence, articulate your mission statement.

Guidance for Writing your Value Statements

Value statements are short statements that support the mission statement. Consider these the “how” your congregation accomplishes the “why” of your Mission Statement. Here are examples of value statements from the Samford University website:

The Samford community values lifelong:

- *Belief in God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit*
- *Engagement with the life and teachings of Jesus*
- *Learning and responsible freedom of inquiry*
- *Personal empowerment, accountability and responsibility*
- *Vocational success and civic engagement*
- *Spiritual growth and cultivation of physical well-being*
- *Integrity, honesty and justice*
- *Appreciation for diverse cultures and convictions*
- *Stewardship of all resources*
- *Service to God, to family, to one another and to the community*

Aspirational values are things that you want to value, but there is no evidence to show that they are a current priority. Actual values are those things that you say you value and there are actions that show you prioritize them by either offering programming or resource allocation to accomplishing them. For instance, if your church values missions, there should be some evidence that your church is engaged in missions. This evidence could include sending mission teams, partnering with churches overseas, partnering with urban ministries, or hosting a missions conference. When writing your church’s value statements, consider actual values rather than aspirational values.

To get you started, answer the following question:

(Your church's name) _____ values the following:

1. _____

Evidenced by: _____

2. _____

Evidenced by: _____

3. _____

Evidenced by: _____

4. _____

Evidenced by: _____

5. _____

Evidenced by: _____

6. _____

Evidenced by: _____

7. _____

Evidenced by: _____

8. _____

Evidenced by: _____

9. _____

Evidenced by: _____

10. _____

Evidenced by: _____

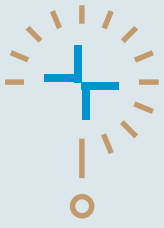
7

NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Matthew 22:37-39, RSV





KEY QUESTIONS

Who is in my community?

How can my church minister well in its neighborhood?

An additional essential for congregations to thrive involves engagement in a congregation's community or neighborhood. In the Bible, Jeremiah prophesies to Jewish exiles in Babylon: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7, RSV). God likewise calls local churches to minister and participate with communities where they are located.

Sometimes congregations, however, see their neighborhood as more of a liability than an opportunity. It can certainly be tempting to see greener grass in other areas. When churches are discerning how to minister within their communities, it is important to remember that God is already at work! Despite the challenges in your community (and every community has them), God has not forsaken your community. He is actively working, and we are called to discern what he is doing and partner with God in it.



To do this well, it's important to get to know your church's community. We offer three exercises for doing so later in this chapter. The following story illustrates why getting to know your community is important for discerning how you want to minister and engage in your community. A congregation in the CCR's Churches Calibrating to Thrive program desired to do something in its neighborhood for children, perhaps an after-school tutoring program. However, when they looked at their community profile (Exercise #1), they noticed that there were not many children in their neighborhood but that rather there were many senior adults. This church pivoted their ministry plans into a wonderful project to offer services, social opportunities, health clinics, and other resources to older adults in their community. We are grateful that they took the step to get to know their community first.

As your church discerns how God is calling you to minister in your community. Here are a few things to remember. First, we are called to minister *with*—not *to*—the community.³² This means building relationships and partnerships within the community, welcoming people with hospitality, and together discerning the opportunities and challenges your community is experiencing as well as the assets, resources, skills, and talents available in your community. Second, it is important not to duplicate existing ministries and resources in your neighborhood. If your congregation feels called to do something that another organization or leader is already doing, see how you can partner with them in it. People can, with good intentions, recreate the wheel by developing resources that were already available in the community. Lastly, there are many benefits to collaborating in how your congregation ministers in the community. Collaborations allow your congregation to pool people, money, and space to minister with other congregations, nonprofits, and organizations to expand and strengthen the ministry in the community that you feel called to. Sometimes congregations feel a sense of calling to minister in a community where they are not located and where they do not have many connections. Collaborations with trusted, established organizations in the particular community where the congregation feels called to minister are crucial in this situation.

We recommend these three exercises for getting to know your church's local community:

Exercise 1 – Creating a Community Profile

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) has a free community profile builder for congregations. Here's how to get started:

1. Go to <https://thearda.com/>.
2. On the top toolbar, go to Congregations → Community Profiles → Profile Your Community.
3. This should take you to: <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/community-profiles/build-a-profile-of-your-community>.
 - Before we create the profile, we would like to point out that this page has a variety of guides that can walk you through each element of your community profile.
4. Please enter your congregation's zip code, city/state, or address, and then click "Create Profile."
 - Next, you should see a map of your community with roads, highways, parks, landmarks etc. You may notice diamonds indicating the location of different congregations and religious organizations.
5. In the white toolbar at the top of the webpage, choose a radius of how large or small of an area around the congregation you would like to profile. The default is 2 miles, but you can choose anything from 0.1 mile (a city block) to 25 miles.
 - We encourage a radius of 1 mile or less so that you can get the best sense of the neighborhood closest to your congregation.
6. In the map, click on your congregation's location.
 - You can click on the correct location even if a diamond is not present or in the correct location for your congregation.
 - If your congregation is missing or in an incorrect location on the map, you can reach out to contentfeedback@data-axle.com to provide correct location information.

³² Jonathan Brooks, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 130-132.

7. You will see some lines appear on the map. The dotted circle is the radius you've selected. The solid lines outline the census block groups that fall wholly or in part within the circle. Your profile will cover the areas outlined in solid lines.
 - Feel free to tweak your profile area with a different radius. Please remember to change the radius first and then select the location of your congregation.
8. When you are happy with your profile area, click "Profile."

In the profile, you will find information on the education, employment, family, gender and age, housing, income, and racial and ethnic characteristics of your profiled area as well as the religious characteristics of the county or counties that fall within the profiled area. We would like to point out a few of the many things that we appreciate about these profiles and that we hope you will find helpful:

- You can see changes in your community over time.
- You can compare your community to the United States overall. This is helpful for identifying areas where your community is normal and areas where it is unique.
- You can explore maps to see variations within the areas that you profile (click "Click to view color-coded map").

Note: Sometimes this feature gets updated, and its instructions may change. If the instructions above do not work, please search "thearda" and "community profile" and follow the directions that the ARDA provides.

Exercise 2 – Walking around Your Neighborhood

Another key way that congregations can get to know their communities is to walk around them, to notice various things, and to pray for their community. Here's some guidance about how to do a neighborhood prayer walk well:



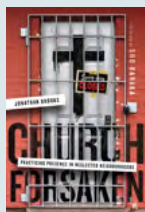
One great exercise in getting started listening and unlearning is a prayer walk. We meet at the church or at a coffee shop and go out into the neighborhood to walk around for an hour with the prayer on your heart, "God, please show me something I need to see in order to better understand my neighbors." We deliberately suspend all assumptions and just look with curiosity. The family in the first house you pass has tall weeds in their yard. Your easy assumption could be, "These people don't care enough to mow their grass." A better stance is to say, "I wonder why the grass is so high here." We might be surprised by the amount of care in that home. It might be that they can't afford a lawn mower or that they work multiple shifts to put food on the table and have no energy left for yard work. Or you might say, "In the lives of this family, I bet there are things a lot more important than these weeds. I wonder what they are."³³

33 Paul Nixon, "Listening to Your Community," Lewis Center for Church Leadership, June 14, 2022, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/listening-to-your-community/>.

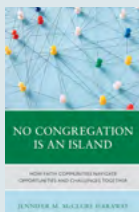
Exercise 3 – Getting to Know Community Leaders

Leaders in your church's local community can provide valuable insights as your congregation gets to know its neighborhood. We encourage you to have conversations with leaders at key or anchor institutions in your community. They could be local government officials, school principals, restaurant owners, librarians, pharmacists, other clergy, and non-profit leaders – and more. These leaders can help you to learn more about the history of your neighborhood, your neighborhood's current opportunities and challenges, other leaders with whom you can connect, and opportunities to get more involved in your neighborhood.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES



Brooks, Jonathan. *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*. IVP Books, 2018.



McClure Haraway, Jennifer M. *No Congregation Is an Island: How Faith Communities Navigate Opportunities and Challenges Together*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023.



Soerens, Tim. *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are*. IVP Praxis, 2020.



Sparks, Paul, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen. *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community*. IVP Praxis, 2014.

The Association of Religion Data Archive's Community Profile Builder: <https://thearda.com/us-religion/community-profiles/build-a-profile-of-your-community>

Stories about how congregations are engaging with their contexts: <https://thrivingcongregations.org/category/church-context/>

Wesley Theological Seminary's Lewis Center for Church Leadership: <https://www.churchleadership.com/tag/serve-your-neighbor/>

Discussion Questions

What in the demographic profile resonates with
what you know about your community?

What in the demographic profile surprises you?

Do you know people in the neighborhood around your church?
If so, who?

Do you know leaders in the neighborhood around your church
(local government, other clergy, nonprofit leaders, school principals,
business owners, police officers, etc.)? If so, who?

Which neighborhood restaurants, parks, businesses, and organizations have you visited in the last week, month, year?

What are the biggest needs in your neighborhood / community?

What resources does your congregation currently have that can be used to help address the needs in your community (volunteers, skills, space, etc.)?

What resources do you lack that, if available, could help address needs in your community (volunteers, skills, space, etc.)?

8

DISCERNING NEXT STEPS AND SETTING MINISTRY GOALS

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him.”

James 1:5, RSV



At this point, having explored how congregations thrive and navigate change and having explored essential aspects of thriving like having clear mission and values and community engagement, we would like to invite you to take some time to discern some ministry-related goals for your church. This could involve starting a new ministry, revitalizing an existing ministry, gracefully ending a ministry, or a variety of other things.

An important first step is to take time to discern what God may be leading your church to do. Throughout the Bible, we have models for doing this. For example, Nehemiah, hearing about the broken walls of Jerusalem, prayed and fasted to discern how to respond (Nehemiah 1:4). In addition, Peter, while praying, had a vision where God told him to share the Gospel with Gentiles (Acts 10:1-48). Spiritual practices like prayer and fasting can help us to discern God's will for our congregation. The spiritual practice of stillness can also be very helpful for slowing down and listening to God – who spoke in “a still small voice” to Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-18).



As you discern, please keep in mind the following:

- **Rely on God, not just your own ideas and desires:** “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6, RSV).
- **Explore ways your church can serve others with humility:** “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4, RSV).
- **Discern together. Early church leaders discerned to what extent Gentiles needed to follow the Jewish law together:** “It has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose... For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:25, 28, RSV).

Hopefully, as you discern, you can identify some goals for your church to pursue. When setting goals, some goals are more effective than others. Sometimes people struggle to set goals well. We can be tempted to set goals that are unrealistic, and we can also set vague goals that are hard to reach because they lack clarity and it's hard to tell when we've met the goal.

Experts in strategic planning encourage people to make SMART³⁴ goals, and as you discern your ministry goals, we encourage you to make them SMART:

Specific → Is your goal clear, detailed, and precise?

Measurable → How will you gauge progress as you work toward your goal?
What impact do you expect your goal to have?

Achievable → Is your goal realistic? Do you have the resources you need to achieve it?

Relevant → How does the goal align with your congregation's mission and values?

Time-bound → When do you plan to start working on the goal, and how long will it take to achieve the goal?

Next, we offer some templates for setting SMART goals. As you develop goals below, we will ask you to consider each of the following:

- The purpose of your goal
- When you will begin this goal
- How long it will take to complete this goal
- Specific resources you need to achieve the goal
- How you hope your congregation will be different when you achieve the goal
- What measurement you will use to determine if the goal was successful

34 It's important to note that, if you do additional research on SMART goals, you may notice that there are different descriptions of SMART goals with slight variations. They all, however, are getting at the same general themes.

RECOMMENDED BOOK



Cahalan, Kathleen A.
*Projects That Matter: Successful Planning
& Evaluation for Religious Organizations.*
Rowman & Littlefield, 2023.

Ministry Goal Setting

SMART goals are defined as Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Describe 3-4 SMART goals that would enable your congregation to thrive.

Ministry Goal 1:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...

Ministry Goal 2:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...

Ministry Goal 3:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...

Ministry Goal 4:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...



9

SETTING GOALS FOR CONGREGATIONAL SPACES

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce... but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile.”

Jeremiah 29:5, 7, RSV

*I*n following-up to Chapter 8, it's important to consider goals related to your congregation's space. All ministry is located somewhere, whether in a building, in a particular location outdoors, or even in a virtual space. As you discern your congregation's ministry goals and how to move forward with them, it is also necessary to think about the space that you need or that would be helpful as you work toward these goals.

As we begin this chapter, we would like to note that this reflection will start by focusing on congregations that own their own space. We'll turn to congregations in other situations later in the reflection.



For congregations who own their land and building, it can be helpful to think about how much space you may need for your ministry goals and whether you may need to use some of your current space differently. Sometimes different ministries at a congregation that need space at different points during the week can share the space. Perhaps a space that is used for a ministry that is no longer fruitful can be redeveloped or renovated for a ministry that the church is starting or revitalizing. There may also be strategic reasons for hosting events in other spaces not owned by the congregation.

An interesting fact about how most congregations use their space is that congregational space tends to be utilized more on the weekend than during the week. Some congregations may feel like they do not have enough room for everyone on Sundays but then have mostly empty space during the week. Other congregations that built a large building decades ago but that are now much smaller may have a mostly underutilized space both during the week and on weekends.

As you discern your space-related goals, we encourage you to remember that your facility and land are important assets for your congregation that you can creatively use as you think about your ministry goals. Seeing space as an asset is important because some congregations are tempted to think of their space as a liability instead. Certainly, many congregations spend a significant amount of resources on building maintenance and other expenses. Some congregations with fewer attenders and limited financial resources but large facilities may have real and urgent concerns about how to sustain their buildings. If you're in this situation, you are not alone! There are creative ways where congregations can build collaborations with their space that can expand their capacity and opportunities for ministry, especially for ministry in the community.

Below are some examples of ways that congregations have used their spaces innovatively. These examples come from a resource called *Sacred Spaces, Innovative Places: Reimagining Church Property and Facilities as Assets*. Colleagues at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship created this two-volume resource, which is freely available online. Here are some examples:

- A church with a large, aging building felt a calling to address issues surrounding homelessness in their local community, but they did not have many volunteers. They were able to partner with a local nonprofit that offered food, clothing, and educational opportunities and that needed additional space. In their agreement, the church continues to own the building, but the nonprofit pays for utilities as well as needed maintenance and renovation. Together, they can do more than they would be able to do alone.³⁵
- A church in a college town rents parking during football games to raise funds for missions, and another church in a downtown area uses their parking to host a food truck that donates meals to hungry community members.³⁶
- An urban church with a large building but a declining number of members wanted to use their space in a way that aligned with their mission and values. They do this in numerous ways. They rent space to nonprofits working in their community that cannot afford to rent space in its expensive neighborhood. They also share worship space with other congregations who desire to worship in that neighborhood and do not have access to other spaces. In doing so, this church provides space for other nonprofits and congregations to minister within its community and generates funds to maintain their building.³⁷
- A congregation with a significant amount of land (that's not covered by buildings or parking lots) wanted to strengthen the core values around its ministries and to build deeper connections within their community. They have been able to do numerous things with their land, including a pumpkin patch where people can pick and purchase pumpkins and purchase other items (jewelry, baked goods, etc.) from local nonprofits. They have also collaborated with a nonprofit to host a local soccer league for youth, and they also open up the church's playground to the local community. Through selling pumpkins and renting their land, this congregation is able to raise funds to expand their ministries.³⁸

In addition to many other examples, these books have some very helpful guidance for congregations about financial considerations of sharing space.

If you are a congregation that does not own its own building or land, it's crucial to think about where you plan to host events related to your ministry goals. Congregations can rent or borrow space from other congregations, nonprofits, or another organizations, and congregations can host events in homes, restaurants, coffee shops, at parks or other outdoor settings, and other locations. Do your best to develop clear expectations of what space you need for events and how you plan to go about accessing it.

35 Rickey Letson and Kelly Rhodes Adams, *Sacred Spaces, Innovative Places: Reimagining Church Property and Facilities as Assets, Volume 1* (Decatur, GA: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 2024), 4-9.

36 Letson and Adams, *Sacred Spaces, Innovative Places, Volume 1*, 22-27.

37 Letson and Adams, *Sacred Spaces, Innovative Places, Volume 1*, 34-39.

38 Rickey Letson and Kelly Rhodes Adams, *Sacred Spaces, Innovative Places: Reimagining Church Property and Facilities as Assets, Volume 1* (Decatur, GA: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 2024), 10-15.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS AND ONLINE RESOURCES



Letson, Rickey, and Kelly Rhodes Adams. *Sacred Spaces, Innovative Places: Reimagining Church Property and Facilities as Assets, Volume 1*. Decatur, GA: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 2024.



Letson, Rickey, and Kelly Rhodes Adams. *Sacred Spaces, Innovative Places: Reimagining Church Property and Facilities as Assets, Volume 2*. Decatur, GA: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 2024.

"A North Carolina nonprofit helps churches convert property from liabilities into assets" by Yonat Shimron, <https://faithandleadership.com/north-carolina-nonprofit-helps-churches-convert-property-liabilities-assets>

Discussion Questions

What space does your congregation regularly use
(building, parking, outdoors, etc.)?

Do you own, rent, or borrow this space?

In what locations and on what days do you not have enough space?

In what locations and on what days do you underutilize space?

What resources do you invest into the space that you use
(mortgage, utilities, rent, maintenance, etc.)?

What space do you need to pursue the ministry goals you
developed in the last chapter?

Do you currently have access to this space?

If so, does the space need to be modified or renovated to pursue the ministry goals?

If yes, what are the rationale, cost, and timeframe for these modifications?

If you do not currently have access to this space, what are various ways you can find the space you need? With whom can you partner to find space?
What resources can you bring to the partnership?

If you have underutilized space that you wish to share, what mission, values, and goals can inform a potential collaboration?

If you have underutilized space that you wish to share, what organizations are looking for space, and how can a potential collaboration align with your mission, values, and goals?

Spaces Goal Setting

SMART goals are defined as Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Describe 3-4 SMART goals that would enable your congregation to thrive in the physical spaces of your church.

Physical Spaces Goal 1:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...

Physical Spaces Goal 2:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...

Physical Spaces Goal 3:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...

Physical Spaces Goal 4:

What is the purpose of your goal?

When will you begin this goal? _____

How long will it take to complete this goal? _____

What 5 specific resources must be attained for you to achieve this goal?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

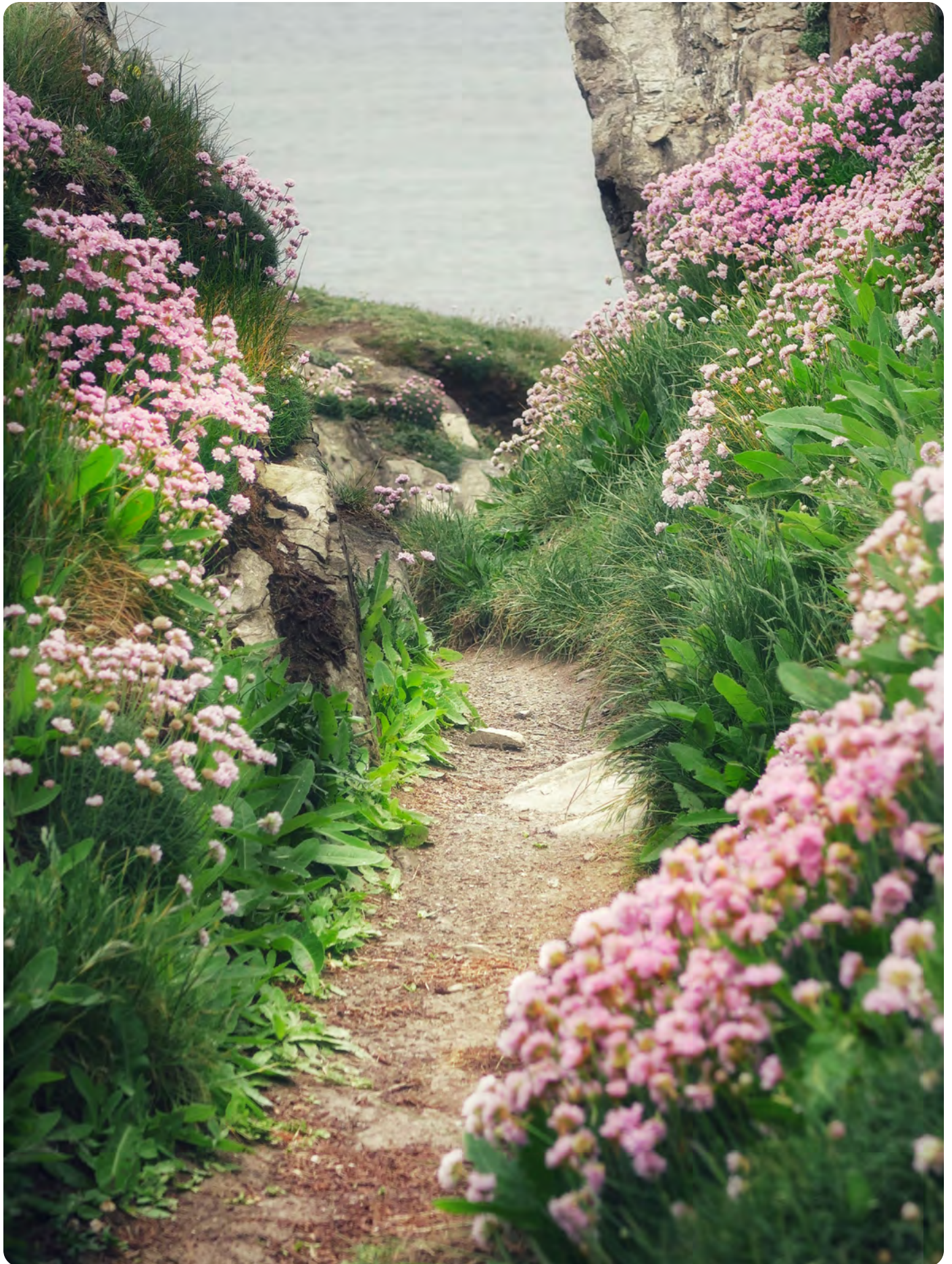
4. _____

5. _____

How will your congregation be different when you achieve this goal?

What is the measurement that you will use to determine success?

This goal will be determined successful if...



10 CONCLUSION

“And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Philippians 1:6, RSV

Thank you for your engagement with *A Journey to Thriving*! We hope that the workbook has been helpful for your congregation. We would like to conclude with a few final thoughts.

First, thriving takes time. It is not a quick process, and it also needs intentionality and effort. It's important to take time away to reflect, pray, and have meaningful conversations about your congregation and its ministry. Many of the things we have encouraged you to do throughout the workbook take time to do well—developing the capacity to navigate change, revising and clarifying congregational missions and values, learning about your congregation's community, and discerning next steps. These things cannot be rushed if we want to do them well. Please work through this workbook at the pace that makes the most sense for your congregation and its context.

Second, thriving takes care and tending. Because congregations are encountering a significant amount of change, it is helpful for congregations every few years to continue to learn about their communities, to continue to clarify their mission and values, and to continue to discern next steps. If a congregation stops doing these things, it is likely to become stagnant and not able to navigate change well. You are welcome to return to or revisit any chapter of this workbook as frequently as you would like.

Lastly and most importantly, churches can thrive at any size and in any community because God is at work everywhere. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). We pray that, throughout this process, you have been able to see God's work in your congregation and in your community. God is always at work in your congregation and has sustained it in many ways, some of which you may know and others of which you may not be aware of. Trust that God will continue the work that he has begun. May we remain faithful and open to participating in God's good work in the power and spirit of Christ Jesus.



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