

Discernment Conversation Starter Resource

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/courageous-conversations-regarding-the-future-of-the-umc>

The following is a four-session outline for guiding local church conversations about the relationship with The United Methodist Church. What follows is a sample outline. While the setting and sequencing are intentional, you are encouraged to adjust as needed for your context.

Session One focuses on participants' emotional responses to their history with The United Methodist Church and the current state of The United Methodist Church. Acknowledging and engaging emotions in the first session will enable more thoughtful conversations, which are the focus of sessions two and three.

Session Four will focus on discerning the next steps in the church's relationship with The United Methodist Church.

Discernment takes time. Discernment is hard work. The difficulty is compounded when dealing with groups. More sessions over a longer period are likely to enhance trust and deepen relationships, so participants value the process regardless of the outcome.

We recommend a minimum of four sessions, spread over time. Since each session is based on a 120- to 140-minute timeframe, these conversations could easily be adapted to a six- or eight-session format.

If you are using a videoconference platform, do a practice session to enable participants to become more familiar with the platform. Help them to use the chat features, respond to a poll, practice going to a breakout room and returning, and so on. These instructions will help make the videoconference platform more of a tool for conversation and less of a distraction.

However else you may adapt what is presented here, we strongly encourage you to incorporate these practices:

1. Start with a practice dialogue. A slower, structured approach to the dialogue will help participants experience the work of discernment at the heart of this process. It also sets a standard of expectation that listening and learning from all participants is encouraged and valued.
2. Attend to silence where indicated. Intentional periods of silence give time both to appreciate what has just been said and to prepare for what might be said next. While some participants experience silence as awkward, the silence will become appreciated as times for personal reflection.
3. Provide several means of connection in addition to talking at each meeting. Food, singing together, communion or baptismal reaffirmation, and even play are integral to this process. These activities forge and underscore our relationships and remind us of the God we worship and who is with us as we do the work of discernment.

This four-session sample outline includes an activity to help the church discern its future. Do not rush to this activity or assume that it must be used. Ideally, seek consensus. The goal is not a vote. The goal is to come to a place where how you may need to proceed becomes so clear that a vote may become a mere formality.

If, at the conclusion of this process, it becomes clear that your congregation will be moving in a different direction from your annual conference, consult the church's district superintendent. Consult The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016 and guidance from your conference's bishop as needed.

Preparation

Designing a Courageous Conversation will require time and work. It will also contribute to an atmosphere that promotes listening and learning. It is advised that those leading the process participate in the [How to Have a Courageous Conversation](#) teaching series, which includes more resources.

- Attend to process. Taking the appropriate steps increases the level of trust. Begin with the church council (or single board). The church council should create a design team to design the process. (See below.) District superintendents should be made aware of the local church holding conversations about the future of the church. Guidance from the district superintendent should be welcomed.
- Recruit the Design Team. This team should consist of no more than eight people (including the pastor) and include a broad spectrum of perspectives. This design team has three main functions: model Courageous Conversations, recruit participants, and give input to the structure of the event. Learning and practicing the process itself will help the design team members understand the benefits, model the behaviors, and empower them to be champions for recruiting participants for the larger event. This team should:
 - Determine what success would look like – a decision, growth in empathy or perspective, learning, and so on.
 - Think through all the elements needed to make the event successful
 - Determine the amount of time to allow for each activity, the use of facilitators, the involvement of the district superintendent,
 - Plan the logistics and details of the settings
 - Develop a communication plan.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate. The purpose of the process (what success will look like). The dates, times, and locations (or links) for the meetings. The conversation guidelines and covenant and how to obtain copies of them. How participants should prepare for the first meeting. How to use any online platforms you will offer. This may involve participation in in-person or online orientation and training before the first scheduled meeting takes place.
- Invite personally. While you may also have public forms of invitation through announcements, newsletters, or other media, plan to rely primarily on invitations that reach and invite each individual personally, such as email, phone calls, or conversations. Design team members may want to highlight what they have learned through their experience of these kinds of conversations in their invitations. Especially if you will be using a video conference platform, it might be helpful to email or mail the covenant or conversation guidelines ahead of time so that participants can be familiar with these items prior to the first dialogue. Your church might even ask participants to sign the covenant before coming to the first meeting.

- Train facilitators. Those who are leading the process, whether in plenary or small-group sessions, need to be trained for their roles as facilitators of Courageous Conversations. This does not come naturally. It needs to be taught and learned. The conversations that occur will be emotionally and spiritually charged, which means they can become problematic or dangerous unless led by facilitators who know how to respond and keep everyone on track. Make sure and name the facilitators so that participants see them as people with authority to moderate the conversations and keep the conversations on track.
- For those who need it, note the supplemental resource at the end of this document – “Why can’t our local church just leave the denomination to become our own church?”

4. Setting

- Setting the environment is important to provide participants the proper atmosphere of reverence, intentionality, respect, listening, and learning.
- Project or post a covenant or conversation guidelines. A covenant or guidelines will help participants know what to expect in the conversations and help set the proper tone for the conversation. It can be helpful to distinguish a safe space (where participants are cautious with their language so as to not offend) from a brave space (where exploratory questions are encouraged).
- Round tables or even circles of chairs without tables are useful for participants to be able to communicate within their small groups. (If using a videoconference platform such as Zoom, it is recommended to make use of the breakout rooms so that conversations can be more intimate and allow more participants to speak.)
- If holding an in-person event, as participants enter the room, have them choose a number that corresponds to a numbered table or set of chairs. Participants then sit at the corresponding table or circle of chairs. Six people per table or area will provide the best small-group dynamics. If you are using facilitators (and it is recommended that you do), assign one facilitator per group. (If using a videoconference platform, randomly assign participants to breakout groups. It is recommended that groups be even smaller in video breakout groups; 4-5, maximum.)
- Each table or open area of a circle of chairs should include a centerpiece (for example, a cross), some identifying marker for participants to know their table assignment (could use numbers or fruits of the spirit), and a talking stick and/or timer. Consider providing cards with questions for conversation starters (such as Table Topic ®) for early participants to begin to talk to one another. A talking stick can be a small cross or a plastic two-minute game timer. The beneficial feature of the game timer is that it also serves as a timer to limit the speaker to two minutes before having to pass the talking stick and/or timer to the next participant. (If using a digital platform, have the facilitator or someone elected from the group use a smartphone or other device to monitor the time.)

Session 1 Outline

Materials

- Elements for communion or baptismal reaffirmation.
- Audiovisual equipment for any presentations and microphones for participants during the large-group time. Encourage all participants to use a microphone in case anyone is hearing impaired.
- Index cards for participants to write down questions during the break. (If using a videoconference platform, you can use a chat panel.)

Meal/Snacks

- Provide a meal or snacks to encourage casual conversation and relationship building before the event. (If using a videoconference platform, you might spend some extra time doing relationship building. For example, allow participants to share their favorite memories of church or how they became Christian. You can even play games together using online tools, such as [Kahoot!](#))

Introduction (5 Minutes)

- Housekeeping items (restrooms, snacks, audiovisual, etc.)
- Review the covenant. One option is to read each line of the covenant as a group. Another option is to randomly assign parts of the covenant to different participants.
- Explain the purpose of the random table assignments (or the random assignments to breakout rooms). The hope is that participants will hear different perspectives. People grow in learning when their own perspective is expanded and when they are challenged to think through divergent understandings.
- Opening Prayer (See samples at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/prayer-guide-for-courageous-conversations>.)

Hymn – Upbeat Song or Hymn (5 Minutes)

- Singing together reminds us that although we do not think alike, we all worship the Triune God together. (If you are using a videoconference platform, you could play a YouTube video of a choir singing and invite participants to sing on their own. Another option would be to replace this hymn singing time with another relationship-building question – “What is your favorite vacation spot?” “Who most influenced your Christian walk?”)

Centering: Ephesians 4:1-6 (5 Minutes)

- Have as many as three different readers read the passage. Before each reading, the reader should prompt those listening to reflect on these questions:
 - Before the first reading: What word or phrase sticks with you from the passage?
 - Before the second reading: Keeping that word or phrase in mind, what is God calling to your attention in this passage?
 - Before the third reading: What is God calling you to do or be? What is your next step?

Opening Question (5 Minutes; 1 Minute Per Person at the Table)

- "What brought you here?" (5 minutes; 1 minute per person at the table)
 - After reading (or posting on a slide) the question above, pause for one minute of silent reflection. A time of silent reflection allows everyone time to process before speaking. It will also enable participants to listen more instead of concentrating so much on what they will say when it is their turn to speak.
 - Around the circle, allow each participant no more than one minute to answer the question. Whoever would like can begin. (Sometimes guidance is helpful so possible orders could be in alphabetic or reverse alphabetic order.)
 - (If using a videoconference platform, have the host share the screen to display the question or type the question in the chat panel for all participants to see. Then break into breakout rooms. In breakout rooms, participants could answer in alphabetical order so there is less of a pause.)

Practicing Dialogue (10 Minutes)

- Topic: "Which do you prefer: candy or cookies?" Or "Which meal of the day is your favorite?"
 - Using one of the above questions or choosing one of your own that is not likely to provoke high anxiety allows participants to get a feel for this style of conversation. (Ideally, the practice topic is one where participants have different perspectives but are not overly passionate about them.) Most adults are used to butting in and talking over one another. A true dialogue style is uncomfortable to many participants. It can feel mechanical or forced. It is normal for participants to feel slightly constrained or frustrated. However, dialogue reinforces listening and learning.
 - After reading (or posting) the question, pause for one minute of silent reflection.
 - After the minute of silent reflection, whoever would like to speak first should use the talking stick or plastic timer. Whatever is being used as the talking stick should be passed to the next person who would like to speak. The individual who wants to speak can indicate this desire by raising a hand or by passing the talking stick to the right or left. Participants can pass if they don't have anything to say. (If using a videoconference platform, you might go in alphabetical or reverse alphabetical order.)

Video from Delegation or Bishop (5-10 Minutes)

- If possible, include information from your annual conference's delegation and/or bishop.
 - This should be focused on information. Unfortunately, misinformation gets spread about the decisions and procedures of the General Conference. This is an opportunity to keep the participants working from the same information.

Expressing Emotions (5-10 Minutes)

- Depending on the size of the group, this exercise can be done in medium-size groups (8-15) or small-group settings.
- Each participant should take turns filling in the following sentence (within one to two minutes):
 - "When I engage in a difficult conversation, it makes me feel _____ because..."

- Another option is to use cut outs of emoticons to help participants express their emotions.
 - Before engaging directly in the issues, it is helpful to engage our emotions. If we jump too quickly to dialogue, it will be tempting to engage based on emotions alone.

Break (5-Minute Stretch Break)

- During the break, allow participants to write down any questions they have about General Conference or United Methodist polity. These questions should be submitted anonymously. These questions can be about General Conference, the role of General Conference delegates, annual conference, the local church, and so on. (If using a videoconference platform, have participants submit their questions through the chat panel to an assigned person.)
- Have a common collection place for the questions so that they can be read later.
- Questions should be submitted anonymously.

Small-Group Dialogue (45 Minutes)

- As with the practice dialogue, one minute of silence precedes the dialogue for each question. Talking sticks should guide the conversations. Post the questions for all to see. (See above recommendations if using a videoconference platform for the order of conversation and posting of the questions.)
 1. When have you felt closest to God? (15 minutes)
 2. How has being part of this local church contributed to your faith? (15 minutes)
 3. What has been your experience with the United Methodist denomination? (15 minutes)

Large-Group Talk Back (10 Minutes)

- What did you learn? What did you hear that was new? or What did someone else say that you would like to affirm? What did you hear that has you thoughtful?
 - This is a time for participants to hear from different groups. It is a time to share what they have learned or are still wrestling with. This is not the time for monologues.
 - Consider using a trained facilitator. Facilitators keep the group focused on the process and enable participants to hear what is being expressed in the best possible light.
 - If using a videoconference platform and your large group size exceeds what can be displayed on a single screen, consider creating several medium-size groups by combining smaller groups instead of doing this activity as one large group.

Written Exercise (10 Minutes)

- Have a facilitator read the questions that have been submitted from the exercise during the break. As best as possible, give answers to the questions or suggest where comments and questions can be directed.
- “What is the most important value or interest that guides your perspective in this conversation about the future of our church?”
 - This could be done in a medium-group or small-group format.

- Either way, allow participants a minute or two to write down answers to these questions before engaging in conversations. Participants should be invited to place their answers in a basket before receiving Communion.

Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant (Part 1: Renounce, Reject, Repent ... and Surround One Another with a Community of Love and Forgiveness)

- Use Baptismal Covenant IV or the 2008 General Conference version (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/new-service-of-reaffirmation-of-the-baptismal-covenant>)

Closing Exercise for Online Participants (10 Minutes)

- Read over the baptismal covenant. Remind participants of the vows they made to nurture one another and be an example of the Christian life. Refer to any insights from the centering time.

Closing Comments

- Reinforce that this is slow work. While it would be easy to think nothing was accomplished in this meeting, more was achieved than at first glance. Explain that participants are working slowly to allow the work of the Holy Spirit to bond people closer to one another and closer to discerning God's voice.

Blessing and Dismissal

Our work is slow, but it has begun.
May the one who has begun this good work in us
bring it to completion.
And however it comes to completion,
may we know ourselves loved by God
and one another.

Go forth with the courage of the Spirit,
the truth of Jesus,
and the heart of God.
Amen.

Approximately 120 Minutes Total

Session 2 Outline

Setting

- See Session 1

Materials

- See Session 1
- A/V equipment or link to show YouTube Video from UM Communications

Meal/Snacks

- As participants show up, it is best to have snacks or—even better— a meal to provide the opportunity for casual conversation and relationship building before the event.

Introduction (5 Minutes)

- Housekeeping items (restrooms, snacks, audiovisual, etc.)
- Review the covenant. One option is to read each line of the covenant as a group. Another option is to randomly assign parts of the covenant to different participants.
- Explain the purpose of the random table assignments (or the random assignments to breakout rooms). The hope is that participants will hear different perspectives. People grow in learning when their own perspective is expanded and when they are challenged to think through divergent understandings.
- Opening Prayer (See samples at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/prayer-guide-for-courageous-conversations>)

Hymn— Upbeat Song or Hymn (5 Minutes)

- Singing together reminds us that although we do not think alike, we all worship the Triune God together. (See Session One, if you are using a videoconference platform.)

Centering: James 3:8-12 (5 Minutes)

- Lectio Divina-style centering exercise
- Have as many as three different readers read the passage. Before each reading, the reader should prompt those listening to reflect on these questions:
 - Before the first reading: What word or phrase sticks with you from the passage?
 - Before the second reading: Keeping that word or phrase in mind, what is God calling to your attention in this passage?
 - Before the third reading: What is God calling you to do or be? What is your next step?

Opening Question (5 Minutes; 1 Minute Per Person at the Table)

- "What, if anything, makes you fearful or anxious in this conversation?" (5 minutes; 1 minute per person at the table)
 - After reading (or posting on a slide) the question above, pause for one minute of silent reflection. A time of silent reflection allows everyone time to process before speaking. It will also enable participants to listen more instead of concentrating so much on what they will say when it is their turn to speak.
 - Around the circle, allow each participant no more than one minute to answer the question. Whoever would like may begin.

- (If using a videoconference platform, have the host share the screen to display the question or type the question in the chat panel for all participants to see. Then break into breakout rooms.)

Expressing Emotions (5 Minutes)

- Have colored circles (at least green, yellow, and red) in the middle of the table or circle of chairs.
- Participants should choose a color and, in one minute, explain why they chose that color:
 - “Faced with the idea of an impending division of The United Methodist Church, I chose the color _____ because...”
- Another option is to use cutouts of emoticons to help participants express their emotions.
 - Before engaging directly in the issues, it is helpful to engage our emotions. If we jump too quickly to dialogue, it will be tempting to engage based on emotions alone.

Small-Group Dialogue (40 Minutes)

- As in the practice dialogue, one minute of silence precedes the dialogue for each question. Talking sticks should guide the conversation. Post the questions for all to see. (See above recommendations if you are using a videoconference platform for the order of conversations and posting the questions.)
 1. Where do you believe God is involved in this issue? (20 minutes)
 2. What Bible stories or passages shape how we might view this? (20 minutes)

Break (5-Minute Stretch Break)

(Use this time to set up for spiral)

Spiral Dialogue (35 Minutes)

- If possible, watch the approximately two-minute video clip below from United Methodist Communications together.
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCnqDcYVIG0>
- Following the video, allow time for dialogue using a spiral (below) or some other small-group structure. Use one or more of the questions below. (Allow time for silence before beginning the dialogues. It is advised to make use of talking sticks.)
- Place four or five chairs in a circle in the middle of the room. Invite participants to position themselves to hear the conversation that will take place in the circle. (If possible, make this transition during the break.) The guideline for a spiral is to ask for volunteers who are willing to begin the dialogue to choose one of the seats in the circle. Only the participants in the circle can speak. Everyone else is invited to listen. The speaker must use the talking stick while speaking. Establish a time limit for each speaker (one to five minutes normally). After speaking once (or twice), that participant will leave the circle, which opens a chair for a new participant to join the circle. Continue until the conversation has run its course or until the time is completed. Having speakers use microphones will help all hear.
- (If doing this in a virtual setting, instead of using chairs, allow for participants to volunteer to sit in a virtual chair by unmuting. A facilitator will be needed to monitor who is in the virtual spiral, how long each participant speaks and how many times before leaving the virtual spiral.)

- Do you find yourself more of a “compatibilist” (allowing for a wide range of disagreement) or “non-compatibilist” (needing more unity in beliefs)?
- When might relationships be more important than “stances”?
- When is something an opinion versus a conviction?
- We worship together each week with people with whom we disagree on a wide range of issues. When does it become too much of a disagreement to stay together?

Written Exercise (5 Minutes)

- “What do you need to move forward? What do you still need to resolve?”
 - Allow participants a minute or two to write down answers to these questions. Participants should be invited to place their answers in a basket before receiving Communion.
 - Participants could share these with design team leaders or other leadership team members as possible insight or guidance in how to best proceed in the next session(s).

Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant (Part II— Accept/Resist and ... Community of Love and Forgiveness)

Closing Exercise for Online Participants (5 Minutes)

- Read over the baptismal covenant. Remind participants of the vows they made to nurture one another and be an example of the Christian life. Refer to any insights from the centering time.

Closing Comments

- Reinforce to participants that this is slow work. While it would be easy to think that nothing was accomplished in this meeting, more was achieved than at first glance. Explain that participants are working slowly to allow the work of the Holy Spirit to bond them closer to one another and closer to discerning God’s voice.

Blessing and Dismissal

Our work is slow, but it progresses.
 May the one who has begun this good work in us
 bring it to completion.
 And however it comes to completion,
 may we know ourselves loved by God
 and one another.

Go forth with the courage of the Spirit,
 the truth of Jesus,
 and the heart of God.

Approximately 120 Minutes Total

Session 3 Outline

Setting

- See Session 1

Materials

- See Session 1

Meal/Snacks

- As participants show up, it is best to have snacks or — even better — a meal to provide an opportunity for casual conversation and relationship building before the event.

Introduction (5 Minutes)

- See Session 1

Centering: Colossians 2:16-19 (5 Minutes)

- Lectio Divina-style centering exercise
- Have as many as three different readers read the passage. Before each reading, the reader should prompt those listening to reflect on these questions.
 - Before the first reading: What word or phrase sticks with you from the passage?
 - Before the second reading: Keeping that word or phrase in mind, what is God calling to your attention in this passage?
 - Before the third reading: What is God calling you to do or be? What is your next step?

Opening Question (5 Minutes; 1 Minute Per Person at the Table)

- "What gives you hope within this conversation?" (5 minutes; 1 minute per person at the table)
 - After reading (or posting on a slide) the question above, pause for one minute of silent reflection. A time of silent reflection allows introverts (and extroverts too) time to process before speaking. It will also enable participants to listen more instead of concentrating so much on what they will say when it is their turn to speak.
 - Around the circle, allow each participant no more than one minute to answer the question. Whoever would like may begin.
 - (If using a videoconference platform, have the host share the screen to display the question or type the question in the chat panel for all participants to see. Then break into breakout rooms.)

Small-Group Dialogue (30 Minutes)

- As with the practice dialogue, one minute of silence precedes dialogue for the response. Talking sticks should guide the conversations. Post the sentence for all to see. (See above recommendations if using a videoconference platform for the order of the conversation and posting the questions.)

- Have each participant finish one (or both) of the sentences below. Guide the conversation by determining who will start (they always have the option to pass) the conversation (the person closest to the bathroom or the person with the shortest hair or some other designation). The conversation then moves either to the left or right. It is advised to use talking sticks and a time limit for each answer (two to five minutes).
 - What is at stake for me in this conversation is ...
 - The value that is guiding me the most in this conversation is ...
- If there is time remaining, have participants, one at a time, ask another participant one question based on the responses to the above sentence. Allow a response of one to two minutes before moving to the next participant's question.

Break (5-Minute Stretch Break)

Monologue World Cafe Style (45 Minutes)

- Discernment will be needed as to when to move to this level of conversation. Some groups will take longer than others to be ready for this conversation. A design team can help be part of the discernment process concerning when to move to this conversation.
- Process/Rules
 - In small groups, participants speak one at a time for no more than two minutes.
 - Each group should elect one person to take notes for the group.
 - Participants should begin their sentences with either the word "I" or "My." For example, "My concern is..." "I feel that..."
 - Participants should express their perspectives on the following question: What do you believe is the best way forward for this church? (15 minutes)
 - Following each participant's monologue, the group sits in silent contemplation for 20 or 30 seconds (using a timer is recommended – this will feel awkward.)
 - Participants should not comment on what other participants are saying (the point is listening, not debating).
 - Participants cannot speak a second time until everyone has spoken once.
 - After 15 minutes, ask participants (who are able) to randomly change tables. The hope is that participants will now be at tables with different people. Repeat the monologue process. (If there is time available and enough participants, the process could be repeated a third time.)

Monologue World Cafe Style – Via Videoconference (45 Minutes)

- Process/Rules
 - In breakout rooms, participants speak one at a time for no more than two minutes.
 - Each group should elect one person to take notes for the group. One way to do this is to share a Google document (make sure the permission is set for each person with the link to be an editor) through the chat panel with all the participants before breaking them into groups. The Google document could have the instructions for the groups and breakout room numbers where note takers can type. Be sure to have enough areas for as many times as groups rotate.
 - Participants should begin their sentences with either the word "I" or "My." For example, "My concern is..." "I feel that..."
 - Participants should express their perspectives on the following question: What do you believe is the best way forward for this church? (15 minutes)

- Following each participant's monologue, the group sits in silent contemplation for twenty or thirty seconds. (Using a timer is recommended – this will feel awkward.)
- Participants should not comment on what other participants are saying (the point is listening, not debating).
- Participants cannot speak a second time until everyone has spoken once.
- After 15 minutes, recreate or reassign participants to new breakout groups. The hope is that participants will now be in a group with different people. Repeat the monologue process. (If there is time available and enough participants, the process could be repeated a third time.)

Large-Group Talk Back (10 Minutes)

- What did you learn? What did you hear that was new? or What did someone else say that you would like to affirm? What did you hear that has you thoughtful?
 - This is a time for participants to hear from different groups. It is a time to share what they have learned or are still wrestling with. This is not the time for monologues.
 - One best practice is for this time to be facilitated by a trained facilitator or moderator. Facilitators keep the group focused on the process and enable participants to hear what is being expressed in the best possible light.
 - If using a videoconference platform, one option would be to combine two or three groups instead of doing this activity as one large group.

Reaffirmation of Baptism (... In Union with the Church ... Community of Love and Forgiveness)

Closing Exercise for Online Participants (5 Minutes)

- Read over the baptismal covenant (or parts of the communion liturgy). Remind participants of the vows they made to nurture one another and be an example of the Christian life. Refer to any insights from the centering time.

Closing Comments

- Reinforce that this is slow work. While it would be easy to think nothing was accomplished in this meeting, more was achieved than at first glance. Explain that participants are working slowly to allow the work of the Holy Spirit to bond them closer to one another and closer to discerning God's voice.

Blessing and Dismissal

Our work is slow, but it progresses.
 May the one who has begun this good work in us
 bring it to completion.
 And however it comes to completion,
 may we know ourselves loved by God
 and one another.

Go forth with the courage of the Spirit,
 the truth of Jesus,
 and the heart of God.

Approximately 120 Minutes Total

Session 4 Outline

Setting

- See Session 1

Materials

- See Session 1

Meal/Snacks

- As participants show up, it is best to have snacks or — even better — a meal to provide an opportunity for casual conversation and relationship building before the event.

Introduction (5 Minutes)

- See Session 1

Centering: Phillipians 2:1-4 (5 Minutes)

- Lectio Divina-style centering exercise
- Have as many as three different readers read the passage. Before each reading, the reader should prompt those listening to reflect on these questions:
 - Before the first reading: What word or phrase sticks with you from the passage?
 - Before the second reading: Keeping that word or phrase in mind, what is God calling to your attention in this passage?
 - Before the third reading: What is God calling you to do or be? What is your next step?

Opening Question (5 Minutes; 1 Minute Per Person at the Table)

- "What has been most meaningful from these conversations to this point?" (5 minutes; 1 minute per person at the table)
 - After reading (or posting on a slide) the question above, pause for one minute of silent reflection. A time of silent reflection allows introverts (and extroverts too) time to process before speaking. It will also enable participants to listen more instead of concentrating so much on what they will say when it is their turn to speak.
 - Around the circle, allow each participant no more than one minute to answer the question. Whoever would like may begin.
 - (If using a videoconference platform, have the host share the screen to display the question or type the question in the chat panel for all participants to see. Then break into breakout rooms.)

Small-Group Dialogue (15 Minutes)

- As with the practice dialogue, one minute of silence precedes dialogue for the response. Talking sticks should guide the conversations. Post the sentence for all to see. [See above recommendations if using a videoconference platform for the order of the conversation and posting the questions.]
- Have each participant fill in this sentence
 - Based on my values of _____ and _____, I believe God is guiding this church to.... (5 minutes)

- Have participants, one at a time, ask another participant one question based on the responses to the above sentence. Allow a response of one to two minutes before moving to the next participant's question.

Large-Group Dialogue (15 Minutes)

- Use the following question to guide the dialogue. (If more time is dedicated to this exercise, you could break participants into groups of approximately 10 people. Have one group discuss the question, while other participants listen. Then allow the next group to discuss, while others listen. Repeat as often as needed.)
- (If using a videoconference platform, you could break into two or more groups of 10 to 15 participants.)
- What do we hope the community hears from this local church? What is our witness to the community during this time?
 - Explain to participants that, before arriving at a decision, answering this question can give context to our relationship with the community God has entrusted us to serve.
 - Post or project this question for all participants to see. Offer a minute of silence before allowing responses.
 - One option is for participants to spend two minutes in silent reflection, writing down their answers before opening a large-group dialogue.
 - It would be ideal for this time to be facilitated by a trained facilitator or moderator. Facilitators keep the group focused on the process and enable participants to hear what is being expressed in the best possible light by all participants. Use the principle of charity – assume participants' comments come from good intentions and try to interpret their responses in the best possible light (not the worst.)

Break (5-Minute Stretch Break)

Polarity Management (50 Minutes)

- See Polarity Management Worksheet below. There are two options below. It could be that neither will fit your situation exactly. Adjust as needed. This exercise can help raise awareness of the interests and values that often go unaddressed in decision making. While limited time in this session is given to this exercise, it could be an entire session or even multiple sessions by itself, if that is needed. Do not feel rushed to complete it.
- There are a variety of options to use this tool. One option is to divide the room into four quadrants; then have group members walk from quadrant to quadrant as each is discussed. For groups that are less mobile, designate a corner of the room and allow participants to point to designated areas. Another option is to assign smaller groups to work on one or two sections at a time and then report to the whole group. It is helpful for all participants to hear the strengths and weaknesses or costs and benefits that are involved in a potential decision.
- (For those using videoconference platforms, you could divide into four breakout rooms. Or divide into two or three larger groups, with each group moving through the quadrants and then reporting to the whole group.)
- Either as a whole group or in smaller designated groups, work to write as many points and ideas as possible for each (or the designated) section. Once the list seems complete, go back, and rank each point or idea based on its importance for each section.

- The topic can vary as needed. The topic below is a sample only. When using Polarity Management, be mindful that this is not a decision-making tool as much as it is a helpful precursor or tool of discernment to making a well-thought-out decision. One dynamic to notice is how the lower left quadrant relates to the upper right quadrant and the lower right quadrant relates to the upper left quadrant, and so forth. Noticing this can help with brainstorming.
- If this exercise is completed as a whole group, spend five or more minutes in each quadrant listing the benefits or costs of the topic under discussion. If needed, add comments to a previous quadrant if new ideas emerge.
- Once completed, follow up by discussing the questions below as a large group. One option is to have the completed charts in large print to have participants place stickers to indicate which points are most important. Use a microphone for all to hear. Give a limit on how long each speaker can reply.
 - What values or interests have emerged that will shape our decision?
 - What challenges will be faced, regardless of the decision?

Downloads

- [Download Polarity Management Worksheet 1 \(PDF\)](#)
- [Download Polarity Management Worksheet 2 \(PDF\)](#)

Reaffirmation of Baptism (... Remain Faithful Members, Serve as Christ's Representatives ... Community of Love and Forgiveness)

Closing Exercise for Online Participants (5 Minutes)

- Read over the baptismal covenant (or parts of the Communion liturgy). Remind participants of the vows they made to nurture one another and be an example of the Christian life. Refer to any insights from the centering time.

Closing Comments

- If it is deemed appropriate, find a proper way to celebrate and grieve together. Grieve what has been lost. Celebrate what God has done and will continue to do. Even when we are faithless, God is faithful (2 Timothy 2:13). God's mercy is endless (Isaiah 30:18).

Blessing and Dismissal

This part of our work is done.
 Our time to discern will soon bear its fruit
 in a time to decide.
 May the one who has finished this part of the work in us
 be blessed.
 And however we now decide
 may we ever know ourselves loved by God
 and one another.

Go forth in peace.
 Thanks be to God.
 Amen.

Approximately 120 Minutes Total