



HOLY CONVERSATIONS

For Congregations Considering
a Viable and Sustainable Future



**Western
North Dakota
Synod**

Evangelical
Lutheran
Church in America

A WORD FROM THE BISHOP

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” 2 Corinthians 5:17

Ever since the time of Christ himself, God has been active in Christian communities of all shapes and sizes to bring about the new creation spoken of in the verse above. These Christian communities have taken many different forms; from small gatherings that met in the home to larger communities that chose to erect grand cathedrals over the course of many generations. There is not now, nor has there ever been, one way to be the Church in the world.

This thought can give us great hope, even as we face a time of great cultural change in the United States and in every corner of the world. The 20th century, and in particular the 1950s-1970s, saw the tremendous growth of the mainline protestant church. Those returning from war had many children. Cultural norms still sent the message to many people that church attendance was expected. Many congregations erected large education wings and new sanctuaries as their buildings swelled with children and new members.

It’s an understatement to say that much of that has changed. Countless books have been written about the cultural changes that have led to the decline of nearly every faith tradition, not just the mainline protestant tradition. However, these changes are nothing that people of faith haven’t faced before. Our ancestors in the faith have lived through wars, natural disasters, plagues, and the rise and fall of powerful empires. Christian congregations have been birthed, and others have closed, in a cycle that has passed on the faith to the next generation for more than 2000 years.

We are living through such a time now, just as our ancestors in the faith have done. Institutions are changing. Budgets are changing. Cultural norms are changing. And yet, you, the one reading this, are empowered to be a follower of Jesus in your everyday life, right where God has placed you. And you are not alone. You have other Christians are also empowered by the Holy Spirit to walk with you along this faith journey. As followers of Jesus, we always have one next healthy, faithful step we can take as God brings new creation to us and through us.

What follows in this booklet are some tools that can help you and other leaders at your congregation learn more about the options you have. It lists many different paths you may discern are the right path for your congregation at this time. This booklet is meant to be an early tool on the journey, but we encourage you to walk closely with the synod staff during this time. You do have options, and the Western North Dakota Synod staff is here to walk with you as you follow the Holy Spirit's guidance.



The Rev. Craig A. Schweitzer
Bishop, Western North Dakota Synod, ELCA



Synod means

“walking together.”

Synod staff will be walking
with you as you discern the
best option for your
congregation and as you
live into that option.

Our partnership is essential.



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INTRODUCTION

As you discern, know that financial sustainability is not the same as vitality.

Vital congregations are described as communities of Jesus where there are life-changing relationships with God, each other, and the world.

“For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.” Ecclesiastes 3:1

Discerning the season of your congregation’s life is a crucial step both in regard to vitality and to sustainability. It is important to look at a wide range of options and to prayerfully discern what direction God is calling the congregation.

Because “synod” means walking together, no congregation goes on this discernment journey alone. The synod staff will walk with and guide you as you discern and live into the option that is most faithful for your congregation. There is no right or wrong answer but rather the goal is to be faithful to the situation facing your congregation and the unique setting of your ministry.

Each option listed has significant benefits and challenges. We are praying that your congregation considers its future with vitality as your primary goal. As you discern, know that financial sustainability is not the same as vitality. Vital congregations are described as communities of the Body of Christ where there are life-changing relationships with God, each other and the world.

Together, we have a much deeper mission beyond merely “keeping the doors open.” Through all parts of this process, consider the description of congregational vitality below. As with all discernment, this process should be steeped in prayer and Scripture keeping us focused on God’s mission.

These options are categorized in three ways:

- Transformation: making significant change to the current context from within to connect with God’s mission and to grow in congregational vitality. Options include intentional vitality process and redevelopment.
- Partnership: engaging in shared ministry with another congregation(s) for the sake of the gospel in order to grow in congregational vitality. Options include parish alignment/realignment, merger, consolidation, and anchor church models.
- Resurrection: embracing the end with the belief in the promise that God is doing a new thing. Options include closing and reopening in a new way, and holy closure.

Any of these options require consideration of finances, property, leadership, mission, worship location and times, and legacy. Reflection can result in changes like changing worship times, pursuing part-time pastoral leadership, or the creation of shared ministries. Again, the synod staff will be accompanying as you discern and choose the option to move forward. Remember, options could include full communion partners with the ELCA: The Episcopal Church, The United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, and the Moravian Church in America.

DISCERNMENT PROCESS

“a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; .”
Ecclesiastes 3:2

All discernment processes are unique. There is no right or wrong way for discernment to happen. Each congregation will discover the process that works best for them. While each discernment process is different, the goal is the same: to hear clearly God’s plan for mission.

A pattern of entering into and working through a time of discernment could look like this:

- The council, pastor, or ministry team discerns that there is a need to do something different. This may be the result of an assessment such as the Congregational Vitality Survey that brings to light the fact that the status quo is not sustainable, or is ot outward-focused due to resource limitations.
- The congregation council discusses this reality and invites the synod staff into conversation.
- The congregation council and synod enter into an intentional time of prayerful discernment to study scripture and create a real picture of the congregation.
- The congregation council, with guidance from the synod, enters into deep and honest conversation to explore options for the future.
- In consultation with the synod staff, the congregation council completes the discernment process and chooses an option.
- The journey of entering into that option is accomplished in partnership with the synod.

If you desire to learn more about the Congregational Vitality Survey and how to use it in your congregation, please visit:
www.wndsynod.org/congregational-vitality-survey



***“For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up”
Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3***



Is your congregation ready for transformation?

Where has your congregation spent energy trying to return to something that was good?

Can your congregation be like Paul and lean into a new reality and lean into God's transformation?

CHOOSING TRANSFORMATION

Transformation: making significant change to the current context from within to connect with God's mission and to grow in congregational vitality. Options include intentional vitality process and redevelopment.

Transformation is a God-driven process that takes something that exists and makes it new. We see evidence of God's transformation throughout creation: it in the beautiful green leaves that take away the starkness of winter's naked branches, in the array of colors that come every autumn as the leaves change to red, yellow, and orange, and as those same leaves fall to the ground. We rest in the expectation that these leaves are in a cycle that includes life and death, growth and rest.

God often uses incredible things to help us enter into transformation. In congregations it looks different every time. God can use the presence of a new pastor or the loss of a familiar pastor, the gift of an endowment or the exhaustion of an endowment, an increase in attendance or a decrease in attendance, something we categorize as positive or something we categorize as negative. No matter what drives us into transformation, churches are transformed by God's amazing grace.

Considering the story of Paul's transformation in Acts 9:1-22, we see that through God's transformation, Paul was ready to believe something new – to become someone new. He embraced a new understanding of God and what God wanted him to do. He confessed his belief in Jesus Christ.

Transformation starts with faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our catalyst for transformation. Paul was ready to become the disciple of Jesus Christ who would bring the good news to Jews and Gentiles.

INTENTIONAL VITALITY PROCESS

An intentional vitality process is grounded in Bible study, prayer, conversation, reflection, and action. Congregations find new energy and direction while clarifying their part in God's mission. This process generally lasts 18 months to two years. An intentional vitality process seeks transformation in the life of the congregation through purposeful and radical change.

The process includes:

- Growing spiritually through a renewed emphasis on faith practices that deepen faith, strengthen commitment, and rediscover the purpose of the congregation
- Telling your story of how God's story reshapes the community
- Discovering gifts and assets the congregation can use to serve its neighbors and follow Jesus
- Learning how to lead change effectively so that the congregation can grow
- Developing an action plan specific to the congregation
- Building teams into well-formed and effective equippers and encouragers who know where to find support for the action plans they are living out

The process begins when the congregation council and pastor decide to participate. The congregation council names a team and has a coach who walks with them during the transformation process. The team attends between four to six training events. Between training events, the team helps the council and congregation create, adopt, and implement changes freeing them for new movement of the Spirit.

Key Questions

What is my congregation's readiness for change?

Are we willing to begin with spiritual transformation?

Do we have the leaders – lay and pastoral – to make significant change?

REVITALIZATION

Congregational revitalization is a spiritual and structural process. Transformation takes place when we are connected with Jesus, one another, and the world by aligning the congregation's purpose, identity, and work with God's vision and plan. Revitalization is an intentional process that engages the congregation in leadership, structure, and programmatic changes. The process has a heavy focus on re-rooting in your community.

Part of determining whether or not this option is right for your church includes looking at the size of the current congregation, the energy level and the mission field around the church. The synod staff and the congregation must be in agreement that this is a viable redevelopment site.

This process requires:

- A new pastor chosen to serve the congregation in conjunction with the bishop and synod staff.
- A revitalization team that will work with the new pastoral leadership, the Director for Evangelical Mission, and the congregation to lead the revitalization process
- A willingness on the part of the congregation to focus on spiritual development/discipleship, and an outward focus on the community around the church with the needs of those not yet in church taking priority over the needs of the current congregation
- Lots of change around church structure, finance, and leadership as the congregation discerns its missional direction, and utilizing resources to fulfill it.

***“For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;”
Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4***



What are the challenges your congregation is facing as it thinks about its mission in the world?

How would sharing a pastoral leader, collaborating in ministry, or receiving guidance from a stable partner in ministry help?

How might God be calling you to be like the people in Nehemiah and collaborate for the sake of the kingdom?

CHOOSING PARTNERSHIP

Partnership: engaging in shared ministry with another congregation(s) for the sake of the gospel and growing in congregational vitality.

Partnerships between congregations are a Spirit-led process that allows congregations to share resources to continue ministry and mission. It is the very meaning of the word synod which defines the relationships of the congregations in the Western North Dakota Synod – we are walking together. It is a powerful thing for a congregation to hear clearly God’s call to mission and realize to that accomplish it, they will need to have partners

The Holy Spirit is continuously calling to look at the world and find our place in it, both as individuals and as congregations. Considering the story of Nehemiah (1:1-2:18), we see that Nehemiah, as the king’s cup bearer, did not have to worry about food, housing, money, or safety. But he was a part of a community with a common mission to serve God and love their neighbors, so when he learned of the wall lying in disrepair, he recognized the corporate responsibility to be good stewards of God’s generosity.

The people of God had been restored to their homeland yet still the wall lay in disrepair. Nehemiah did not seek to blame those who were living in the area but saw his own holy responsibility. Just as he shared in the confession for leaving the wall in disrepair, he shared in the work of restoring the wall.

Nehemiah could not do the work alone, so he made a plan to work with other, even those who were living in another community. To accomplish God’s will for us in the world, we are stronger together than we are apart. The Spirit calls us to work together for the sake of God’s world.

PARISH ALIGNMENT/REALIGNMENT

Parish alignment/realignment occurs when two or more congregations agree to remain in their existing buildings, remain separately incorporated, and share one pastor (or pastoral staff) for the yoked congregations. This option can be helpful in terms of having a full-time pastor (or pastoral staff) and offers the opportunity for two or more congregations to, optimally, work cooperatively in ministry or, minimally, afford the services of an ordained pastor or a pastoral staff. This is the most viable option for a full communion partnership, as the merging of assets and shared ownership does not come into play.

The most challenging question in a yoking generally centers on worship time. There will be changes to worship times in a yoking situation. Additionally, it is important to consider the realistic compensation to time ratio of each partnership (ie. a yoke with one congregation that pays $\frac{3}{4}$ time and one congregation that pays $\frac{1}{4}$ time).

While this option offers flexibility for staffing creatively, there are challenges that need to be prayerfully considered as well:

- Congregations will have less time from their pastor, who now serves multiple congregations
- Congregation members must take on some of the tasks done by their pastor when the pastor solely served their congregation full-time
- Increased travel time and mileage expenses as the pastor goes between congregations
- When there is a pastoral staff, the need to intentionally work on staff dynamics and communication
- When programs are shared by the congregations, regular and intentional communication should occur well in advance of events

The Spirit calls us to work together for the sake of God's world.

MERGER

A merger is when two or more congregations move together into one of the existing buildings and share resources. In many cases, a merger allows two struggling congregations to share one pastor and to pool dwindling resources, enabling a continued presence in a community. Challenges of merging into an existing building include:

- Turf issues of "whose" congregation it is
- Questions about which pastor remains as leader of the merged congregations
- Feelings of one congregation winning and the other losing
- Power struggles
- No new sense of mission or energy

It is also important in your reflection to understand that if one congregation has 100 members and the other 50, it does not mean the merged entity will end up with 150 members. Usually, after two or three years, the congregation will be back to the size of the larger congregation.

Merger may be the best option in some settings however, prayerful consideration should be given to the long-range effects on ministry and mission rather than just the short-term advantages. The congregations need to ask candidly, "are we fulfilling God's vision for our mission field or are we simply postponing the inevitable?" Congregations that are considering merger should also be mindful of the advantage of entering that arrangement while they still have the energy and resources to have influence and impact on the mission and priorities of a merged congregation.

CONSOLIDATION

Consolidation is when two or more congregations sell their buildings, change their leadership, and move to a new location with a new sense of ministry and usually a new congregation name.

Advantages of a consolidation include:

- Elimination of turf wars
- A new location with new pastoral leadership can often give two or more former congregations a fresh start
- Budgets, buildings and resources are consolidated for one mission
- A new church building can help to launch a new sense of ministry and mission

This option can be very fruitful but does require a lot of prayer and strategizing by two or more congregations, as well as a clear understanding by all involved that, while history will be honored, the past will not be preserved. This is about mission for today and for the future. Unless all involved can adopt this attitude, consolidation is nearly impossible. Consolidation can also fail if there is turmoil when all financial resources are put into one pot and/or if congregations argue over keeping a former pastor in this new venture. People have to be ready to give up their old sense of identity and accept this consolidation as a new church. If one or more of the congregations view themselves as a closed club for their members and their own needs as paramount, consolidation will not work. However, if this option is done well, there is an opportunity to move to a new mission field or community and for a new venture to blossom.

ANCHOR CHURCH MODELS

A growing number of struggling congregations are looking to partner with healthy congregations as a way of leveraging resources for the sake of the gospel. In any anchor situation, the struggling congregation is the initiator of the discernment and conversation. If you discern that the anchor model is the right fit for your congregation, you will need to discern what model is right for your context.

In the **Accompanying Model**, both partners remain independent but come alongside to leverage resources. The healthier congregation provides accompaniment in visioning and strategic planning as well as coaching to the struggling congregation leader. The goal is to help transfer and create healthier DNA in the struggling congregation. Many struggling congregations possess a rich history and organizational memory of a day and time when they were vibrant and alive, and thinking of closing or merger can be a stumbling block to redevelopment. This model allows a struggling congregation to maintain its autonomy while being accompanied by a more vital congregation that is also engaging in a visioning and strategic development process of its own. The process includes a period for relationship and trust building, new guiding statements (developed in six-twelve months), creating a three phrase strategic plan, and accompaniment for three to five years.

At the core of the **Adoption Model** is the concept of both/and. This model provides a balance between autonomy and unity. The smaller congregation votes to become an extension of the larger anchor congregation, turning over all assets. Together they share the same mission, budget, staff, council, resources, and membership as the anchor church, but allows room for different expressions of worship, programming, and service.

This model requires the following:

- The congregations must be located in within a reasonable distance of one another
- The congregation must have a vacancy of a pastor or be anticipating a vacancy (ie. retirement is announced and impending). To change the culture of the church, new leadership which can embody the culture and values of the anchor congregation will be brought on.
- The congregation must be eager to go all in to this model. There is not a turn-back option in this model. The congregation must be willing to accept that there could be name and cultural changes, financial management

***“For everything there
is a season and a time for
every purpose under
heaven. A time to throw
away stones and a time to
gather stones together;”
Ecclesiastes 3:1, 5a***



**Endings and closure
are not failure;
they are faithful.
Choosing one of these
options is bold and is
done by Easter people.**

CHOOSING RESURRECTION

Resurrection means embracing the end with belief in the promise that God is doing a new thing.

Frederick Buechner writes, “Resurrection means that the worst thing is not the last thing.” Jesus’ death and resurrection have sealed the Easter promise that God will make dead things new. Good Friday was the worst thing, but not the last. As Easter dawns, we sing the truth, “Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.”

As Easter people, we too are invited to embrace endings, worst things, even death, believing that God is doing a new thing. Perhaps God is inviting you in this season to embrace an ending, too. As you discern through the option of closing and reopening, closing and focusing on a word and service ministry, or holy closure; do so as Easter people. Death always precedes resurrection. Endings always precede new beginnings.

The end will not be without grief because this congregation has been a place of manna, feeding people with scripture and sacrament and the embodiment of Christ’s love. Jesus weeps with you in your grief, but this is not the end of your story. These options allow your congregation to consider a new story, new legacy – not with the same building or old ways – but by being caught up in the creative and redeeming work of God.

Consider the words of Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Exploring these options can feel like walking through a dark valley. Take heart. God is offering you comfort as you discern. If being called to holy closure, embrace the ending so that God might write a new story through your legacy.

SAWC - SYNOD AUTHORIZED WORSHIPING COMMUNITY

When a congregation values a presence in the community over its own needs to maintain ministry, this option provides a vital entry point for a new congregation. This option is best when a congregation's demographics no longer match its surrounding community but closure may make possible a new mission start in that community.

In this option, a congregation chooses to end its ministry, to close the doors for a period of time, allowing the synod staff to work to identify the new mission focus, leadership, and potential plan in the community, and then re-open as a new mission start. Existing members are commissioned to join other congregations while the building and assets in full are turned over to the synod. The Easter promise is seen in the new faith community established for the sake of the gospel being shared in this changed landscape.

Key questions for this option:

- What are the strengths of the wider community?
- Are you willing to turn over your assets to the synod for the purpose of the new faith community?



SAOM - SYNOD AUTHORIZED OUTREACH MINISTRY

Congregations with a significant existing social ministry may choose to close as a word and sacrament community and find a future as a word and service community. Existing members would direct their energies to their social ministry alone while finding a new church home in another congregation. This option includes holy closure for the word and sacrament community, and makes space for a vital future for that particular social ministry. Often this includes organizing as an official non-profit organization.

Key questions for this option:

- Is there a vital and sustainable social ministry already a part of the congregation's ministry (i.e. preschool, food pantry)?
- If this ministry ceased to exist what would the impact be on the larger community?
- What is the congregation's readiness to join another faith family for spiritual nourishment and maintain a commitment to the current social ministry?
- Are there skills in your current congregation and in the larger community to administer this ministry?
- Are there any funds/endowments that could give the ministry a significant financial head start?



HOLY CLOSURE

Good Friday grief becomes Easter joy when congregations live into the promise of death and resurrection. Members of a congregation that has reached *holy closure* can often find a deep sense of satisfaction and faith in seeing their gifts blossom in a new way. *Holy closure* provides an opportunity to leave a strong legacy including paying forward financial resources for the sake of the gospel.

Holy Closure is a faithful response to God's ministry in your midst. It is not failure. It is faithful. Holy closure includes the sober realization that the existing situation is unsustainable. It also includes a period for grieving the loss of a congregation that many people have loved. If there is a vacancy in pastoral leadership, synod staff will work to provide interim pastoral leadership to walk with the congregation in this time of grief and closing.

Holy Closure is a faithful response to God's ministry in your midst. It is not failure.



A word of caution is important here. In every single congregation, generations of people have invested time, talents, and finances for the sake of the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. It is vital to consider this faith foundation when making decisions about how to distribute financial assets. The church is so much more than a social service agency with sacraments. It is the place where the good news of Jesus is proclaimed, and the sacraments are rightly administered. As assets are distributed, these priorities should remain central. The Western North Dakota Synod contains many forward-thinking leaders who are yearning to start new ministries to reach those who our current church models are not reaching, but they lack the financial resources to do so. The “Accompaniment Fund” of the synod may be a terrific place to invest in these new ministries and thus leave a legacy of ministry.

Some congregations may own a cemetery as well. The synodical recommendation is that once the building is sold, funds would be used to set up a cemetery endowment that would care for the cemetery in perpetuity. Remaining funds should be shared for the sake of the

gospel with all or a portion of the funds going to the Western North Dakota Synod to continue ministry.

Key steps for the process include:

- Creation of a Legacy Taskforce that will oversee the closure process and the work of teams/individuals helping with items of the closure
- Attention to legal requirements including dissolving state incorporation
- Attention to real estate matters
- Attention to the distribution of financial assets after the disposal of property and meeting of all financial obligations
- Attention to congregational records, preparing them for the ELCA's Region 3 Archives
- A final worship service to honor the rich legacy of the congregation and give thanks for the legacy the congregation is leaving for the sake of the gospel

Remember congregational closure is a congregational decision. The synod's role is to accompany congregations in this discernment.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How long should we discern options? There is no right answer to this. As you can read, the options all require change. Guided by the Spirit, discernment should lead you to a place of taking the next right step in one of the options. When you have clarity over the next right step, we invite you to share your decision with the synod staff. We will help you with tools for transformation, contact for potential partners, or clear processes for ending well.

Will the bishop be with us at each step? The bishop will certainly be aware that you are on this journey, and likely meet with your leadership and congregation during this time. The entire bishop's staff is equipped to engage your congregation in discernment regarding your options. Once your option is decided, you will likely be accompanied by the Director for Evangelical Mission who focuses on vitality and partnership ministries.

Can the synod staff or bishop choose an option for us or close us? In our polity, the congregation, through the council and congregational meetings, is empowered to make decisions for their future. The bishop and synod staff cannot choose your option or close your congregation. Your congregation's constitution makes this clear. We encourage you to read your constitution as part of your discernment. Options like *holy closure* or *sale of building* have a clear process in which the synod staff is a key partner.

Will we have to change our worship time? Maybe. Worship time is one of several things that could be impacted for the sake of the gospel. Synod staff can connect you with resources that direct you to the types of questions your congregation will need to answer as you discern your future.

Can we keep our pastor? All of the options outlined in this booklet involve significant change. While some situations may lend themselves to the same pastor serving in the new situation, this will be something you need to discuss with synod staff. In many situations, the amount of change is significant enough that it becomes important for the congregation to first discern what type of leadership they need to accompany them on their transformation journey. Then, the current pastor can discern if they have the gifts needed to lead the congregation into their next season of ministry.

Where do we find a partner? You know your community and it is often best to identify partners out of those with whom you already have some relationship and trust. Additionally, the Western North Dakota Synod can help draw together partners in *parish alignment/realignment*, *merger*, *consolidation* and *anchor church* agreements. This work is done in partnership with the Director for Evangelical Mission. If a full communion partner is the most natural fit, the bishop will work the judicatory head of that denomination to work through partnership details.

Are there funds to help? Depending on the option chosen, some funds may be available through the synod or through the Churchwide organization. Beyond all else, know that the synod staff is committed to helping congregations move into vital futures. These conversations would begin with the Director for Evangelical Mission.

Where can I go for more information? Visit the Western North Dakota Synod website wndsynod.org/holyconversations for more information and resources including sample covenants and agreements, sample tools, and clear steps for processes like *holy closure*.

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This guide, *Holy Conversations
for Congregations Considering
a Viable and Sustainable Future*,
is provided courtesy of the
Western North Dakota Synod.

It is intended for use by congregations wondering about
next steps for their faith community in a changing landscape.

The Western North Dakota Synod embraces
God's vision for a world that embodies the fullness of life:
justice, peace, equity, hope and love for everyone,
including all races, genders, identities, abilities, and social status.

Its mission is to encourage and equip the ministries
of the Western North Dakota Synod-ELCA
so that the Good News of Jesus Christ is proclaimed,
and all God's children feel welcomed and included
in the ministries to which God calls us.

Please visit [wandsynod/holyconversations](https://wandsynod.org/holyconversations)
for more tools to help your congregation
discern, dream and live into God's vision.

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