

Congregational Discernment Meeting

Where Are We At?

Introduction

The Congregational Discernment Meeting provides an opportunity for a focused conversation between members of a local congregation and a conference facilitator on the congregation's future. The facilitator does not come with a predetermined answer or opinion on the future. Rather, through this conversation and follow-up, the facilitator walks with the members as they discern their preferred future, their realistic future, and the best way to balance between them.

These conversations can be difficult because of the conflicting emotions people carry within them. The facilitator can help people make two important shifts:

- **From Shame to Grace:** Church members may feel a variety of emotions as they see their congregation get smaller: shame ("we've failed"), anger ("if not for that pastor" or "if only the conference had..."), judgment ("young people don't value church"), recrimination ("so-and-so did such-and-such"), and guilt or depression ("if only I could..."). Amid these feelings, we want to help people turn towards grace – with themselves and with others.
- **From Ambivalence to Agency:** We commonly think of ambivalence as a lack of feeling, but it really comes from the tension of conflicting emotions rooted in a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment ("there's nothing we can do"). Through the discernment process, we want people to claim their agency: they can make decisions and have options about their future. (But while there are always choices, choices do become more limited as time goes by).

Helping people make these two shifts reflects the nature of congregational discernment as a *pastoral conversation*.

Plan for the conversation to unfold over 60-90 minutes. Critically, ensure the people in the conversation commit to action steps at the end of the conversation. This may be as simple as a commitment to meet again in a month to revisit the discussion. Better, it can include commitments to gather additional information to inform decision-making.

Meeting

Introductions

Before the meeting, ask the pastor or moderator/president to call the meeting together and introduce you as a leader from the Wisconsin Conference here to help people think about the congregation's future. Remind the person introducing you to clearly state their understanding of the reason for the meeting, such as, "I've asked

[name] to join us because of our concerns about the future of our congregation because of our declining membership." Thank the person introducing you, giving a brief introduction of yourself, and underscoring that the conversation will be a chance for people to think together about the future of the church. Offer a short prayer. Then invite people to introduce themselves. To avoid introductions of how long they've been a member, suggest each person share a response to this question briefly, "What about your recent experience in this congregation brings you joy?" Alternatively, especially if the mood of the group seems heavy, ask, "Where do you find meaning and purpose in the life of this faith community?" (Encourage brevity by calling these 'matchstick' introductions – the person should finish speaking in about the time a match would burn out).

Setting Context

Explore the congregation's situation in relationship to other congregations (i.e., we're all facing the need to adapt). Begin by acknowledging all the positive ways this congregation impacts people's lives. Many congregations face challenges – members are older and fewer than in the past; finances might be tighter; missions and ministries of the congregation are more challenging to sustain. (If possible, review the congregation's 11-year report in advance of the meeting).

Depending on the time available, you might consider asking, "What about your life in this church concerns you—or what seems hard now?"

Close this section with an observation like, "We're learning an important lesson about the future of congregations across the conference. Churches can be strong at any size, with hundreds of members or just a few people, with lots of financial resources or barely any money. However, a congregation's strength depends on volunteers' energy level. Do we feel burned out? Or does volunteering feel meaningful and fulfilling? I mention this because what can happen for this church will largely depend on the energy in this room to volunteer to make it possible."

Proving Framework

Explain that you're going to turn the conversation to several ways congregations can work on their future. Note that each of these possible future directions has pros and cons. Affirm that the congregation can make choices about its future.

Distribute the handout with the church roundabout image and response sheet.

Say something like, "Many leaders feel like they are stuck, going around in circles, as if we're on a roundabout but can't figure out our path forward. We're finding that congregations uncertain about their future face three basic options:

- The congregation can close. In this path, we focus on how to sustain the congregation's legacy, ensuring that it can continue to make an impact even if people no longer gather for worship.
- The congregation can restore its ministry. Here, we focus on ways to restore previous ways of being church, a return to past vitality.

- The congregation can renew its ministry. In this future, we focus on significant ways to adapt the congregation to changes in the community, a new way of being church.

"You might notice that we don't list "merger" as one of the paths forward. That's intentional. It reflects the insight from across the UCC that mergers can be a tool toward any of these three paths. Churches can merge as a prelude to closing, to restore what they did in the past, or to renew their congregation with a new kind of mission and ministry.

"In the United Church of Christ, each local congregation makes the crucial decisions about its future. The conference can journey with you as you explore these paths, but the decision is yours."

Curiosity About Options

Engage people in considering the pros and cons of each path. Try to have people consider each option equally in turn. It may help to say, "Let's take 10 minutes to talk about the benefits (pros) and challenges (cons) of the 'restore' path."

After people brainstorm for a while, prompt them to consider the volunteer time required for each path: What are the volunteer requirements of each path, and which might require the most work and which the least work? What kinds of skills do we need among our volunteers for each? How would we need to change programs, ministry, choices, or traditions because of the path we take?

Similarly, ask them to evaluate any significant obstacles to a path if these have not already surfaced (which might include any unresolved issues or conflicts in the congregation).

Spiritual Grounding of Options

Move into the next section by noting that we can understand each option spiritually. You might say, "The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John each describe the disciples responding to Jesus's resurrection in different ways. These different responses are each faithful. And we can see how each option for the congregation connects to different endings of the Gospel.

"In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples to 'Go and make disciples of all the nations.' (Matthew 28:19). When a congregation closes, we want to prayerfully ask, 'How can we use our assets to further the making of disciples elsewhere?' We're still part of the work of God's Church when we support it through the gift of our legacy.

"In the Gospel of Luke, after the disciples see the Resurrected Jesus ascend to heaven, they return to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray (Luke 24: 52). They went back to something familiar – the Temple – but changed by the experience of Jesus' resurrection. How do we "return" to the past vitality of our congregation but with new insights and perspectives?

"Finally, in the Gospel of John, Jesus asks Peter, 'Do you love me?' Peter says yes, to which Jesus responds, 'Feed my sheep.' (John 21: 17). After going through this three times, Jesus adds, 'Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' Renewing our congregation – finding a new direction for our ministry – might involve changes to our worship, organization, and location where we meet (i.e., church building). How might we be taken to new places we'd never imagined? Could we give up what's familiar and comfortable so that we can love and engage people in our community in new ways?

"As you think about our three main options – close, restore, and renew – what do you see as the spiritual blessing of each path?" Or, where do you feel God in each of these paths?" (If people focus on one option, ask follow-up questions about another path).

Further Questions

Bring the brainstorming to a close. Ask questions like, "Is there anything that we are afraid to talk about—or don't talk about—regarding any of these paths forward?" Finally, "What would you like to learn more about regarding these paths?"

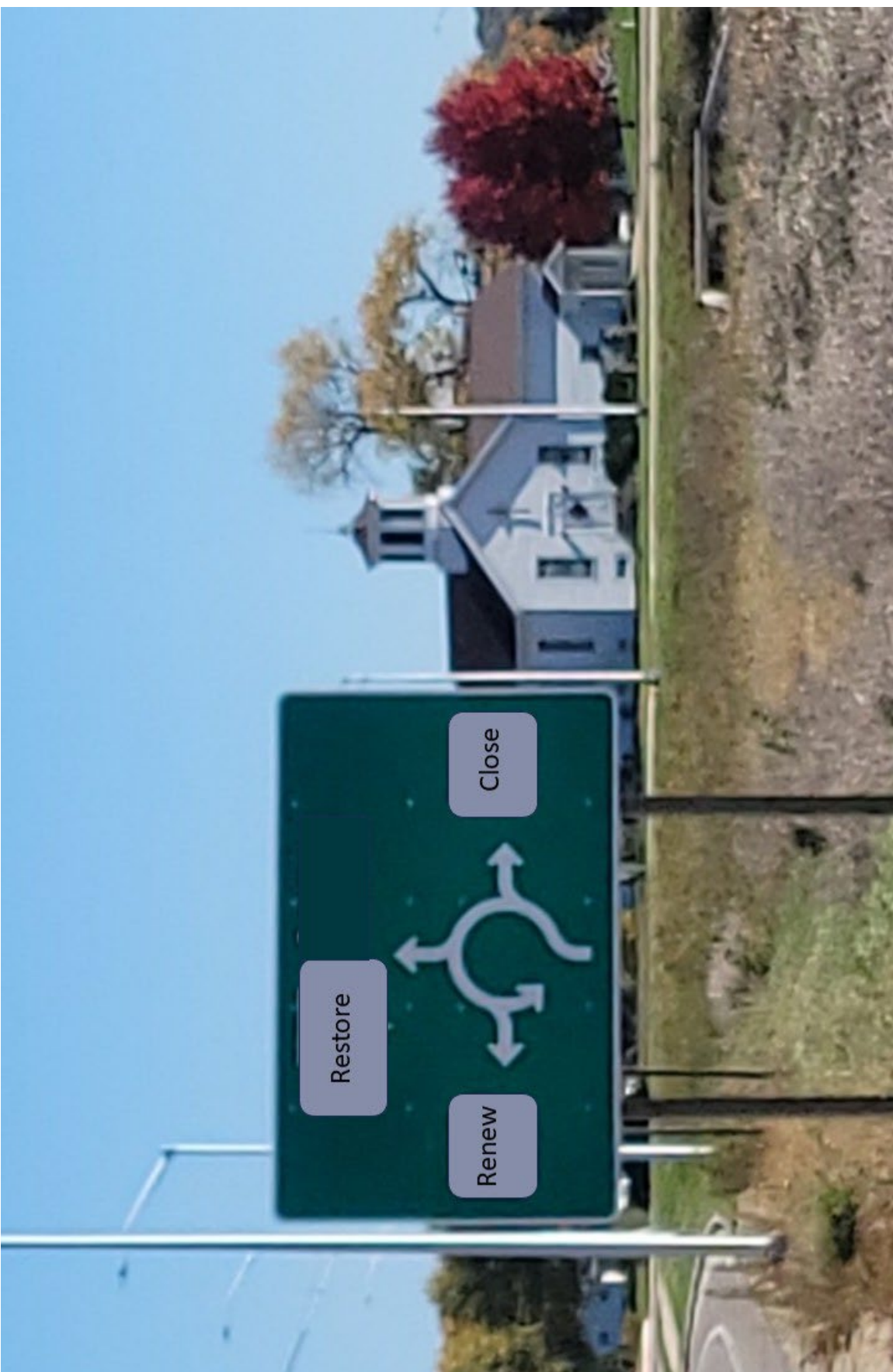
Affirm that the Wisconsin Conference can help with each path forward. For example, Andrew Warner can help with the steps of closing a congregation and creating a legacy. Catalyst Grants, the Identity Toolkit, and the Conflict Transformation Team can all be useful for congregations looking to Restore or Renew their congregation.

Next Steps

Invite people to think about their next step. Ask first if they have a consensus about a path forward. If they do, how would they like to test their idea with the rest of the congregation? If not, what could they learn that would help clarify a direction? Create a list of open questions or ideas. Suggest completing the "Congregational Self-Assessment" if they need to think more about their resources for the future. Congregations might want to take a month to think about the steps necessary to be successful on the path they've chosen or are considering (including the resources – people, and finances – essential for success). Set a date or timeframe for a follow-up conversation.

Reporting

Send a thank-you letter to the leader who set up the conversation. Email a summary of the conversation to Andrew Warner and the church's Associate Conference Minister. Be sure to note the next steps identified in the meeting.



	Close	Restore	Renew
Pros			
Cons			
Spiritual Blessing			