



North Carolina Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

HOLY CONVERSATIONS

10 OPTIONS FOR CONGREGATIONS CONSIDERING
A VITAL AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

NORTH CAROLINA SYNOD - NCLUTHERAN.ORG/HOLYCONVERSATIONS

The God we know in the risen Christ Jesus is constantly not only promising to do but actually doing a new thing.

Dozens, scores, of our congregations in the NC Synod are lamenting the downward swing of the cultural pendulum away from its high point of the mid-1950s. For two generations, many of our congregations are experiencing declining membership, worship attendance, and plain old relevance in the lives of their parishioners. Leaders are fewer and wearier year by year. Staunch and faithful congregational supporters are dying infinitely faster than we can replace them. Young people are sparse in many of our congregations. Upwardly spiraling insurance costs have driven numerous congregations in our synod to conclude that they'll never be able to afford a full-time pastor of their own again. Council meetings digress into endless deliberations on staying open for another few months or years and members despair that they are merely rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. In short, they feel that all their options are exhausted.



20th century Lutheran theologian and pastor Reinhold Niebuhr is widely known for a prayer he wrote in 1937. At the time, it had nothing to do with Alcoholics Anonymous, which was founded right about that time, but quickly his prayer was adopted by that group and others in the face of helplessness: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." The key and hopeful thing is that there ARE things we can change, even though our focus is so often all the things we can't. Empowerment is in focusing on and applying ourselves to the things we CAN choose, CAN do, CAN change. This booklet is about at least 10 things our congregations that are struggling to **move from at risk to risking for mission** CAN choose. You have options, and the NC Synod staff is here to walk with you in discerning and pursuing those.

Of course, all choices have consequences. All choices involve change and giving up something for the sake of a greater good. We have to be willing to adapt. If God in Christ is always doing a new thing, that includes in our congregations. But for those who feel they have run out of options, choices, or hope, this booklet is for you. **You are not alone.** You have options. God bless your discerning and your choosing!

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Timothy M. Smith". The ink is dark and the script is fluid.

Bishop Tim Smith

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 4
Sample Discernment Process	Page 5
Key Discernment Questions	Page 6 & 7
Three Categories of Options	Page 8
Choosing Transformation	Page 9
Intentional Vitality Process	Page 10
Redevelopment	Page 10
Sale of Building	Page 11
Choosing Partnership	Page 12
Yoking	Page 13
Merger	Page 13
Consolidation	Page 14
Anchor Congregation	Page 15
Choosing Resurrection	Page 16
Close & Re-Open	Page 17
Word & Service Mission Post	Page 17
Holy Closure	Page 18
Frequently Asked Questions	Page 19

Holy Conversations was created to help congregations discern and live into a vital and sustainable future

Synod means "walking together."
The synod office will be walking with you as you discern the best option for your congregation and as you live into that option. Our partnership together is essential

—○ INTRODUCTION

For everything there is a season. Ecclesiastes 3:1 NRSV

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. We will be walking with 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. As you discern, know that **financial sustainability is not the same as vitality**. We are praying that your congregation considers its future with **vitality as your primary factor**. As with all discernment, **this process should be steeped in prayer and Scripture** keeping us focused on God's mission.

The 10 options are categorized in three ways:

- **Choosing Transformation:** *making significant change to current context from within to connect with God's mission.* Options include: intentional vitality process, redevelopment, and sale of building.
- **Choosing Partnership:** *engaging in shared ministry with another congregation(s) for the sake of the gospel.* Options include yoking, merger, consolidation, and anchor church models.
- **Choosing Resurrection:** *embracing the end with belief in the promise that God is doing a new thing.* Options include closing and re-opening, word & service mission post; and holy closure.

Any of these options require wrestling with questions 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 a full communion partner. ELCA full communion partners are The Episcopal Church, The United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, and the Moravian Church in America.

Congregational vitality is defined as **communities of Jesus** that have **life-changing relationships with God, each other and the world.**

—○ SAMPLE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

All processes are unique. We included a sample to give an idea of steps that may be included.

1. The congregation council, pastor, or ministry team discerns a need to do something different. This is usually the result of an assessment (ie. Congregational Vitality Survey) that the status quo is not sustainable or is not outward-focused because of resource limitations.
2. The congregation council discusses this reality and alerts the synod staff inviting further conversation.
3. The synod staff provides the “10 Options Workbook” and directs the council to online tools to help them in their discernment.
4. The discernment is prayerful time apart to study Scripture and create a real picture of the congregation. For example:
 - a. History Exercise - guides congregations in remembering and retelling their history
 - b. Percept - is an outside report that provides population data and trends
 - c. Mapping Community Assets - engages in the congregation in rediscovering their immediate community
5. In addition to what is learned in the previous step, the congregation council uses the workbook for deep conversation and an exploration of options. It could be a series of midweek study time or it could be dedicated time on the monthly agenda. This can be guided by a lay leader or a rostered leader. The congregation council can ask for a synod staff member to guide them through these steps. It may take a few weeks or it may take a year. Each discernment is different. The goal is the same--to hear clearly God’s plan for mission.
6. The congregation council completes the discernment and chooses an option. The congregation council president contacts the synod staff.
7. The journey of entering into that option is accomplished with the synod staff walking along beside.

Tools mentioned in this sample process can be found online at nclutheran.org/holyconversations



KEY QUESTIONS

Instructions: Using attendance figures for the previous 10 years, chart your congregation's average attendance. Then use the following questions as a springboard for further discussion, answering each with a simple "yes" or "no."

1. Do we have a pattern of growth in attendance?
2. Will our trend of growth, plateau or decline allow us to thrive and develop ministry for the future in this place?
3. Can we maintain our own existence as a congregation and provide ministry in the community, synod, and across the ELCA?
4. Can we survive without some form of life support from bequests, special gifts?
5. Do we have sufficient numbers of people to volunteer for ministry within the congregation and outreach into the community?
6. Are new efforts in evangelism and Christian education feasible?
7. Are there sufficient funds and interested membership to do ministry within the congregation as well as outreach and evangelism into the community and world?
8. Are we experiencing the presence of first-time visitors on a regular basis?
9. Do they return for a second or a third visit?
10. Do 20-25% of our first-time visitors eventually join the congregation?
11. Is the congregation's main focus on outreach/evangelism?
12. Is the congregation striving to do more than trying to survive/keep the doors open?
13. Has the congregation grown in the last five years?
14. Do we have enough members to do ministry well?
15. Does giving in the congregation enable "Great Commission" work, or does most of the giving go towards maintenance and survival?
16. Are there young families active in the church?
17. Has the congregation maintained a good level of stewardship including several families (10-12) who tithe faithfully to the congregation?
18. Is the congregation willing/able to adapt its ministry and lifestyle in order to develop the ministries that will meet the needs of a changing community?
19. Is the present facility physically adaptable for use?
20. Can the congregation afford the repairs that are needed to use these facilities for ministry?

If you marked five or more answers No, we suggest you contact the Director for Evangelical Mission to discuss the trends that are revealed. If you marked eight or more answers No, this may suggest a serious condition of decline for your congregation. It is time to look courageously and honestly at your situation, and consider what options you have as a congregation.

— REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What exciting thing has God done in your midst in the last year?
2. Where is your congregation afraid?
3. What is your dream for your congregation?

The synod staff is a partner with you throughout the process. We are walking together for the sake of the gospel witness in your context. After some initial prayerful discernment, we suggest that you schedule an appointment with the Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) or the Associate DEM within 30 days to process, answer further questions, continue to flesh-out options, and plan for how to invite the whole congregation into the conversation.

THREE CATEGORIES OF OPTIONS

Choosing Transformation

making significant change to current context from within to connect with God's mission.

Options include: intentional vitality process, redevelopment, and sale of building.

Choosing Partnership

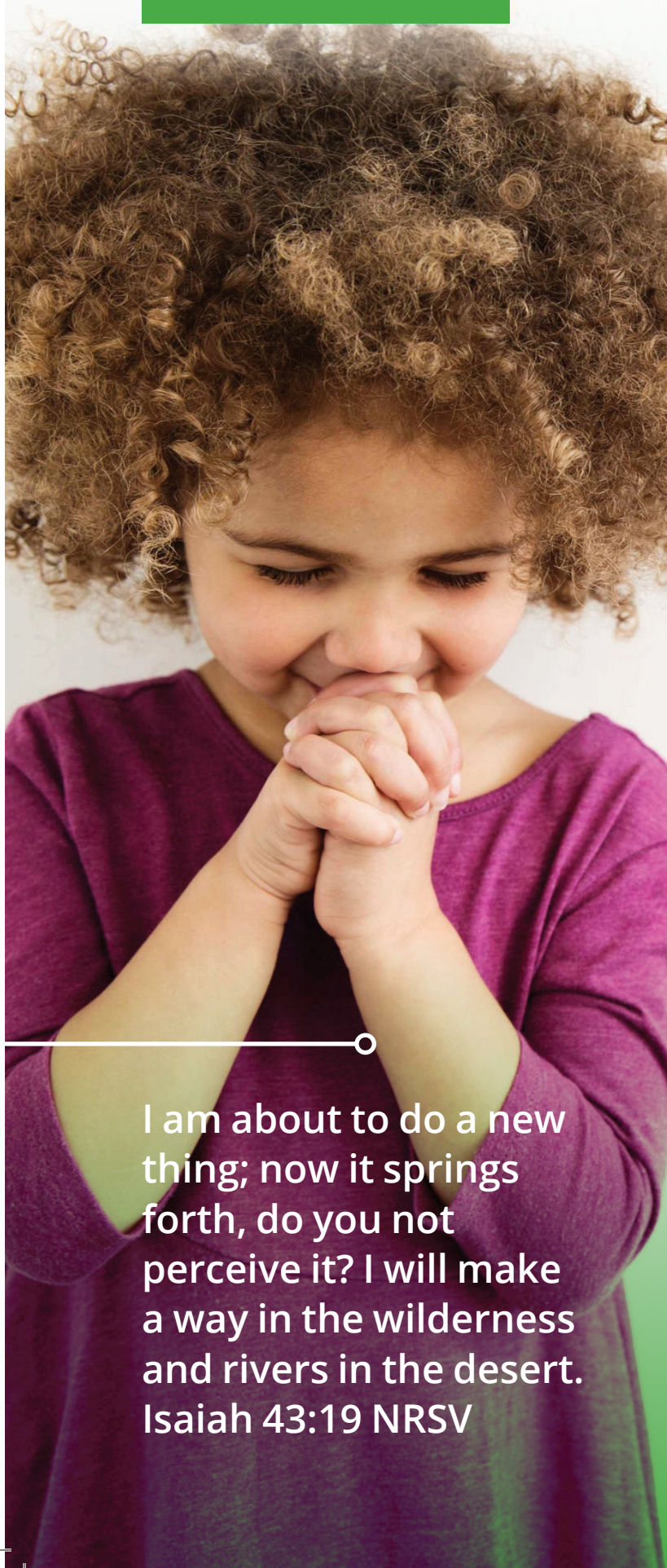
engaging in shared ministry with another congregation(s) for the sake of the gospel.

Options include: yoking, merger, consolidation, and anchor church models.

Choosing Resurrection

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

Options include: closing and re-opening, word and service mission post and holy closure



I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43:19 NRSV

CHOOSING TRANSFORMATION

making significant change to current context from within to connect God's mission.

Read Acts 9:1 – 22

**And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.
Acts 9:18 NRSV**

Transformation is a God-driven process that takes something that exists and makes it anew. We see evidence of God's transformation throughout creation. We see it in the beautiful green leaves that take away the starkness of winter's naked branches. We see it in the array of colors that come every autumn as the leaves change to red, yellow and orange. We see it even 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.

In a similar way, we witness Paul's transformation. He was passionate for the Lord and was steeped in a fight to protect the God he knew – the theology he had embraced. He was a warrior who defended God by killing followers of Christ with zeal and fervor because he believed it was righteous.

God literally stopped Paul in his tracks with a brilliant light and took away his sight so that he might see. Now that God had his attention, Paul heard Jesus clearly.

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, God is the transformer. Churches are transformed by God's amazing grace.

Scripture does not give us insight on how Paul experienced his three days of blindness. It had to have been a scary reality not to mention he must have wrestled with the cultural understanding that illness meant someone had sinned. Paul may have questioned what he did to receive God's wrath. Congregations have similar experiences of the loss of something they once had – members, a beloved pastor, deterioration of the building, financial crises, etc. They often want to return to a point in time when things were good.

Through God's transformation, Paul was ready to believe something new – to become someone new. He was no longer the Paul of verse one who was “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” No he was not only becoming a disciple of the Lord, but was making new disciples. His former faith was now irrelevant. A flash from heaven stopped him on the road and he met Jesus and began his transformation. He had to embrace a new understanding of who God was 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.

- *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?*

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 is led by an outside facilitator generally lasting 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 a congregation
- telling the story of how God's story reshapes your community
- discovering gifts and assets you can use to serve their neighbors and follow Jesus
- learning how to lead change effectively so that the congregation can grow
- developing an action plan specific to their 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?

Redevelopment

Congregational redevelopment 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. Redevelopment 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 director of evangelical mission;
- a redevelopment team that will work with the new pastoral leadership, the director of evangelical mission, and the congregation to lead the redevelopment process;

- a willingness on the part of the congregation to focus on spiritual development/discipleship; 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; and
- lots of change around church structure, finance, and leadership as the congregation discerns its missional direction, utilizing resources to fulfill it.

Churches that want to consider the redevelopment option need lots of support in terms of training and ongoing coaching provided by the churchwide organization. Redevelopment involves covenants that are affirmed through congregational vote. A redevelopment pastor will spend no less than 50% of his/her time in the community. This intentional outreach focus often requires that lay leadership help with pastoral care and administration to free up the pastor's time. The benefit of a redeveloping congregation is that it rekindles its spirit and sense of mission and becomes linked to the community around the congregation.

One deterrent to redevelopment is the time that it takes for the redevelopment to occur. The redevelopment of a ministry typically takes three to five years and requires determination and use of resources. The risk is high but the payoff is great, as a congregation is reawakened to God's mission and adapts to new mission strategies and strengthens ministry partnerships. Congregational redevelopment is not a one person project, it involves the majority of congregational members actively collaborating and working together toward mutually-discerned goals.

Sell the Building

Are any of these statements true about your congregation?

- Are the maintenance or repair expenses for the church no longer affordable?
- Are volunteers who help maintain or repair the church scarce and hiring out the work outside of the budget?
- Are your church buildings handicap accessible?
- Has the church has sustained significant storm damage and rebuilding and/or the insurance payout is questionable?
- Is the church building the only financial asset?

All of these are good reasons to consider continuing the ministry of the congregation from a new location. If the building impedes mission or is the only financial asset, consider selling your building. The synod staff provides contacts and a clear process regarding sale. With those funds and the existing membership, the congregation would find a new place to worship and be in mission.

Explore the idea of moving in with another congregation, sharing the building, negotiating a worship schedule, and other ways to share the space. Alternately, consider secular places where you could meet, like schools and community halls. In rural areas, fire stations often have meeting/community rooms. Consider chapels at hospitals and/or senior living facilities. Make sure the location is handicap accessible; strive for good visibility and excellent signage. Think about acoustics and aesthetics.

As with the other options in this category, careful attention to God's mission in your new locale and changes in leadership are important. This option works best when it is paired with a commitment to an intentional vitality process when in your new location. New pastoral leadership for the congregation in the new locale is strongly recommended.

CHOOSING PARTNERSHIP

engaging in shared ministry with another congregation(s) for the sake of the gospel.

Read Nehemiah 1:1 - 2:18

Then they said, 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good. Nehemiah 2:18 NRSV

Nehemiah was set. He had the King's favor by serving as his cup bearer. He did not have to worry about food, housing, money, or safety. He could have lived his whole life in comfort and not suffered in the least.

But Nehemiah was a part of a community with a common mission to serve God and love their neighbors. When Nehemiah learned of the wall lying in disrepair, he repented. 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.

Many congregations in this day and time operate as silos. It is easy to focus on one's own mission without considering the work of the neighbor. Congregations feel as if they have to rebuild the wall alone when in fact God gave us each other.

It is the very meaning of the word *synod* which defines the relationships of the congregations in the North Carolina Synod – we are walking together. It is a powerful thing for a congregation to hear clearly God's call to mission *and realize to accomplish it, they will need to have partners*.

Nehemiah assessed the wall. Nehemiah prayed and made plans – plans that were risky and could have cost him literally his livelihood or his life. He took those plans to the people – God's chosen people – and the people joined the work, even those who were living in another land.

God wants us to work together for the sake of the broken world – for the sake of the kingdom.

- *Is your congregation at a place where mission is hampered because there isn't enough of something?*
- *Would sharing pastoral leadership, collaborating in ministry, or receiving guidance from a stable partner in ministry help?*
- *Is God calling you to be like the people in Nehemiah and collaborate for the sake of the kingdom?*

Yoking

A yoking 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 their 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, having regular and intentional communication should occur well in advance of events

In considering a yoked situation it is very important to weigh the benefits and challenges in your particular setting. This option is open to full communion partnerships in which congregations may be served by clergy of full communion partner denominations and/or yoked congregations may be full communion partners. A memorandum of understanding can clarify expectations of shared staff. It is also helpful for elected leadership groups to meet together several times a year to ensure a strong and trusting partnership. Sample yoking covenants are available at www.nclutheran.org/holyconversations.

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 Merger Math. 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 in which there are limited resources and obvious duplication of buildings and efforts. 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.

This option may work well for full communion partnerships as long as all parties are fully informed and aware of issues around pre-existing and shared assets. Federation agreements allow for making distinctions between pre-existing assets and assets that are established as a merged congregation.

Consolidation

A 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.

Consolidation offers possibilities for full communion partnerships between congregations that choose to federate or become union congregations for the sake of reaching the mission field with greater emphasis and clarity. Working with judicatories of the denominations involved takes time and energy, but can have powerful long-term benefits that allow for focused resources and greater impact on the mission field.

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.

● **The Accompanying Model**

In this model, both partners remain independent but come alongside to leverage resources. The healthy 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 healthy 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. Thinking of closing or being assimilated into another congregation can be a stumbling block to redevelopment. The Accompanying Model allows a struggling congregation to maintain its autonomy while being accompanied by a vital congregation that is also engaging in a visioning and strategic development process of its own. The process includes a covenant for ministry together and supervision/coaching provided by the pastor of the healthy congregation. 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.

● **The Adoption Model**

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 healthy anchor congregation, turning over all assets. Together they share the same mission, budget, staff, council, resources, and membership as the anchor church, but in that arrangement allow room for different expressions of worship, programming, and service. This model requires the following:

- the congregation must be located in within a reasonable distance of the anchor congregation – less than half an hour;
- 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 *pay the price*. The price tag includes:
 - name and cultural change
 - financial management by the anchor congregation
 - potential change of worship style and time
 - move from a council to a local discernment team

CHOOSING RESURRECTION

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

Read 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. Psalm 23:4 NIV

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. And yet not the last. No, God was still writing a story in the darkness of the tomb. 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. Ends always precedes new beginnings.

The end will not be without grief. The grief will be palpable because this congregation has been a place of manna. This congregation has fed people with scripture and sacrament. This congregation has been the embodiment of Christ's love. Jesus weeps with you in your grief. And yet, Jesus redeems even grief, writing a new legacy in 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.

Often at funerals we read together Psalm 23. We read it as a reminder that the thing that scared us the most, death, has come. And yet, we fear it no longer, but instead give way to gratefulness for God's welcome into new life. Today we cling to the truth again; "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's 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. Endings and closure are not failure, they are faithful. Choosing one of these options is bold and is done by Easter people. As the Psalmist writes, through it all, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (verse 6).

- What is the worst thing for your congregation?
- What is the legacy you would like to leave through this congregation?

"O God, you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." – ELW Evening Prayer

Close and Re-Open as a New Church

When a congregation that 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 through closure makes possible a new mission start in that community.

In this option, a congregation chooses to end its ministry, to close the doors for 12 to 18 months and then re-open as a new mission start. Existing members are commissioned to join other congregations while the synod staff works to identify the new mission focus, leadership, and potential plan. 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:

- Is the area growing or experiencing a new sense of vibrancy?
- Are you willing to turnover your assets to the synod for the purpose of the new faith community?

Word & Service Mission Post

Congregations with a significant existing social ministry may choose to close as a word & sacrament community and find a future as a word and service mission post. 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 sustainability 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 word and service post?
- Are there any funds/endowments that could give the mission post 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 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 includes sober realization of the existing situation and a period to grieve the loss of the church 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.

Throughout the North Carolina Synod we have congregations that have cemetery properties. 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 North Carolina Synod to continue ministry.

For steps in this process, please refer to the ELCA's booklet *Leaving a Legacy of Mission and Ministry*.

Key steps for the process include:

- creation of a dissolution council that will oversee the closure process and the work of teams/ individuals attending 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 9 Crumley 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

—○ 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 of – 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 upon, you will likely be accompanied by the Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) or the Associate DEM who focuses on vitality and partnership ministries.

Can the synod staff or bishop choose an option for us? Or close us? Our polity allows the congregation to make decisions for their future. Neither the synod staff nor the bishop cannot choose your option, nor can they 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*, *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. For other areas to discuss and make decisions regarding change, see the tool "*Shared Ministry Logistics & Finances*" at nclutheran.org/holyconversations.

Can we keep our pastor? When you enter into or experience significant transformation it is a new call. We encourage pastors to enter the call process and discern if they have the gifts to lead the congregation into their next season of ministry. Further, we ask the congregation to discern what type of leader they need to accompany them on their transformation journey.

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 North Carolina Synod can help draw together partners in *yoking*, *merger*, *consolidation* and *anchor church* agreements. This work is done with the Associate DEM. 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? The synodical expression is committed to helping congregations move into vital futures and does provide some partnership assistance. Funds are given at the recommendation of the Director of Evangelical Mission (DEM) and Associate DEM in conversation with congregational leadership.

Where can I go for more information? Visit the North Carolina Synod website nclutheran.org/holyconversations, for more information include video devotionals, sample covenants and agreements, sample tools, and clear steps for processes like *holy closure and sale of a building*.

This guide, *Holy Conversations: 10 Options for Congregations Considering a Vital & Sustainable Future*, is provided courtesy of the North Carolina Synod. It is intended for use by congregations wondering about next steps for their faith community in a changing landscape.

The North Carolina Synod is called to cultivate and celebrate vital congregations; identify, equip, and nurture whole and healthy leaders; embrace and engage in collaboration; and proclaim the resurrection with a prophetic voice.

Please visit nclutheran.org/holyconversations for more tools to help your congregation discern, dream and live into God's vision.



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God's work. Our hands.

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