

# Discerning the Future of Our Church

Discovering God's Call  
Developed by Bart Brenner

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect." Romans 12:2

## Preparation

- Letter to Congregation presenting overall plan and dates for Discernment Process
- Article(s) in church newsletter
- Bulletin announcement(s) and/or insert(s)
- Sermon(s) on discerning God's call

## Sunday 1 — Presentation on Sunday morning

- a two-week process
- done as part of personal devotions
- written outline and sample materials

## Sunday 2 — Commissioning the Participants

- Distribution of Participant's Packets
- Liturgical process for Commissioning the Participants

## Between Sundays 2 & 4 — *Faithful Listening*

- reading a brief scripture lesson (10 days)
  - a different scripture each day
  - each scripture will present a 'picture' of the church
- praying for openness to God's leading
- reflecting / musing
  - What does this tell me about God? (2 or 3 descriptive words or phrases)
  - What does this tell me about God's desire for our church? (2 or 3 descriptive phrases or sentences)
  - What will we be doing differently if we were to live into this image of the church? (2 or 3 descriptive words or phrases)
- writing down briefly any other ideas that came during the time of reflection and musing

## Last Saturday — Personal Summarizing

- What are 3-5 **key** ideas about God's desire for our church that I discerned as I prayerfully reflected on the scriptures of the past 2 weeks?
- What are the 3-5 strongest ideas or impressions which I thought /felt about what we would be doing differently in order to be the kind of church God wants us to be?

## Sunday 4 — Gleaning

- each participant brings the results of his/her time of Faithful Listening
  - participants share their data in small groups
  - small groups identify 3 key ideas for the two areas
- whole group hears **key** ideas from small groups:
  - kind of church God is calling us to be ...
  - changes needed for us to be that kind of church ...
- **key** ideas are written on newsprint

## Next Steps —

- Writing team selected from among the participants in the Gleaning process.
- Writing team drafts statement of the congregation's discernment.
- Statement is presented to Session and communicated to entire congregation.

## Questions / Answers for Participants in *Faithful Listening*

### Who Participates?

- All members of the congregation willing to let God help them focus their concerns for the future of the church.

### How do I become involved?

- by receiving this packet of information...
- by agreeing to spend at least 15 minutes a day for the next two weeks reading Scripture, praying and reflecting on the future of our church...

### What am I expected to do?

- read a brief scripture lesson (10 days)
  - a different scripture each day
  - each scripture will present a 'picture' for the church's life and mission
- pray for openness to God's leading
  - ... such as: "Dear God, open my heart and mind so that I might hear your desires for our congregation."
- spend time prayerfully reflecting upon the scripture by asking three questions
  - What does this tell me about God? (2 or 3 descriptive words or phrases)
  - What does this tell me about God's desire for our church? (2 or 3 descriptive phrases or sentences)
  - What will we be doing differently if we were to live into this image of the church? (2 or 3 descriptive words or phrases)
  - (Note: if done in preparation for the search for a new pastor, the third question would be: What kind of pastor would help us live into this image of the church?)
- write down the key ideas that came during this time of prayer and reflection
- prepare a Summary Sheet at the end of the process
- come to the meeting designed for the gathering and discussing of *key ideas*

### What will happen to the *key ideas* that I have written down?

- They will added to the key ideas from other members of the congregation. These ideas will become input for the Session's strategic planning/ visioning process.
- The meeting for gathering and discussing these key ideas will be announced.

### What happens if I miss a day or two?

- Start again tomorrow with the scripture lesson that is appointed for the day. This will keep you together with the rest of the congregation.
- If you want to go back and spend a little time with a scripture text that you missed, you can do that... just make sure that you have completed the regular work for today before going back to do one that you missed.
- Whatever you bring to the meeting for gathering and discussing the *key ideas* will be blessed by God for the good of the congregation.

### What if I'm not able to be at the meeting where the *key ideas* are gathered and discussed?

- Ask another member of the congregation to bring your **Summary Sheet** to the meeting. That way, your *key ideas* can be represented and included.



The purpose of the **Faithful Listening** discernment process is to find the congregation's center by listening through scripture and prayer for God's Call.

We approach Scripture not to master the text, but to allow the text to master us... to move from information to *transformation*.

We approach prayer as serious work, because we believe that each time we pray God can change us.

## Some Basic Principles of *Faithful Listening*

- 1 The church has a better opportunity to be faithful when focused on God's Word (Scripture) rather than when its members operate primarily out of personal opinions.
- 2 When a church agrees to use a discernment process (such as **Faithful Listening**) the participants in the process should have greater voice in the church's discussion of its future than those who choose to withdraw from the process.
- 3 The decision to "follow where God leads" must be made before the discernment process (**Faithful Listening**) begins, not after the results are in. (This is the *riskiness* of discernment... God doesn't always lead where and how **we** desire.)
- 4 Discernment happens when we are indifferent to everything except the Word (leading) of God.

## The Gleaning Process

(Gathering, Discussing, Prioritizing the Key Ideas generated by individuals during the **Faithful Listening** process):

- 1 Give participants the opportunity to share their *Key Ideas* in small group discussion. Each small group has a recorder who writes down (and reports back to plenary) those *Key Ideas* that have higher-weighted support from group members
- 2 Group discusses and priorities *Key Ideas*.
- 3 Go with the flow of **energy** in the group! Ideas that have been mentioned by many people without great enthusiasm probably are less important than an idea that only one person thought of prior to the meeting and which many in the group seem energized by.
- 4 **Important** ideas that are extraneous to the task at hand are noted and sent on to the appropriate group/person for follow-up.

## Possible Scriptures for *Faithful Listening*

Note: Each of these scripture texts was chosen because they offer a generative 'image' of the church. Other texts could be used as well. That is a matter for Session to decide. A caution – don't choose texts because you think they lend themselves to a specific answer that you want the congregation to arrive at. That would put serious roadblocks in the way of discerning God's call.

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

#### Ephesians 4:1-3

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

#### Ephesians 4:11-13

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

#### Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

#### 1 Thessalonians 5:15-22

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

#### Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

#### Hebrews 13:1-3

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

#### Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

#### Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

#### Matthew 10:38-39

Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.