



Greater Milwaukee Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

HOLY CONVERSATIONS

OPTIONS FOR CONGREGATIONS CONSIDERING
A VITAL AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

GREATER MILWAUKEE SYNOD
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PASTORAL LETTER

“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. 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 the mainline protestant church. However, seen on the grand scale, these changes are nothing that Christians haven't faced before. Our ancestors in the faith have lived through wars, natural disasters, plagues, and the rise and fall of whole empires. Christian congregations have been birthed, and others have closed, in a cycle that has passed on the faith to the next generation for 2000 years now. And through it all, Christ is still proclaimed! God continues, through every change, to bring a new creation, even though the passing away of the old ways is painful.

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. Better yet, you have other Christians who you work together with in the Church who are similarly empowered. As followers of Jesus, we are never alone. **As followers of Jesus, we always have one next healthy 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 fit 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. You do have options, and the Greater Milwaukee Synod staff is here to accompany you as you follow the leading of the Spirit.

God bless you in your discernment. We look forward to walking this path with you.



- Rev. Matthew Short, Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission



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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

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 be walking with and guiding you as you discern and live into the option that is most faithful for your congregation. When possible, an outside facilitator or consultant will be chosen to walk closely with the congregation through the process. 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 goal. 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.

The options are categorized in three ways:

- **Choosing Transformation:** making significant change to current context from within to connect with God’s mission and to grow in congregational vitality. Options include intentional vitality process and redevelopment.
- **Choosing Partnership:** engaging in shared ministry with another congregation(s) for the sake of the gospel in order to grow in congregational vitality. 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.

Vital congregations are described as **communities of Jesus** where there are **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. If you desire to learn more about the Congregational Vitality Survey tool, and how to use it in your congregation, please visit milwaukee-synod.org/holyconversations.
2. The congregation council discusses this reality and alerts the synod staff inviting further conversation.
3. The synod staff works with the congregation council, directing them to the tools in this guide and beyond, to help them in their discernment.
4. The discernment is prayerful time apart to study Scripture and create a real picture of the congregation. Tools for this include:
 - a. History Exercise - guides congregations in remembering and retelling their history
 - b. 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 times 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 a synod staff member for more guidance through these steps. Depending on the need, this may mean an outside facilitator or consultant would be helpful. 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. In consultation with synod staff, the congregation council completes the discernment and chooses an option.
7. The journey of entering into that option is accomplished in partnership with the synod staff.

Tools mentioned in this sample process can be found online at milwaukee-synod.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 Assistant to the Bishop 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 are partners with you throughout this 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 Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission 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 and grow in congregational vitality.

Options include: intentional vitality process and redevelopment.

Choosing Partnership

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

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 and growing in congregational vitality.

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

CHOOSING TRANSFORMATION

making significant change to current context from within to connect God's mission and grow in congregational vitality.

Read Acts 9:1 – 22

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

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 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 the 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?

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 synod staff
- A redevelopment team that will work with the new pastoral leadership, the assistant to the bishop for evangelical mission, and the congregation to lead the redevelopment 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, 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 their 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

Selling a church building can sometimes provide financial assets that allow a congregation to continue on a path of steady decline without the needed systemic changes described in the "Intentional Vitality Process" or "Redevelopment" sections above. Thus, we encourage you to read through this section and consider entering into conversations about possible sale of your building **only if** the conversations in one of the preceding sections makes it clear that this move will empower the renewed and reimagined mission of the congregation.

To consider whether it might make sense to talk about selling the building, consider the following questions:

- Are the maintenance or repair expenses keeping you from living fully into your mission?
- Are volunteers who help maintain or repair the church scarce and hiring out the work outside of the budget?
- Are you struggling with issues related to handicap accessibility?
- Has the church has sustained significant damage and rebuilding and/or the insurance payout is questionable?

All of these are good reasons to consider continuing the ministry of the congregation from a new location if this would serve a renewed sense of mission as identified in the preceding two sections on "Intentional Vitality Process" or "Redevelopment." 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. Remember, every single decision needs to serve the mission of the congregation to share the gifts with which God has entrusted you with members of both the congregation and the wider community.

CHOOSING PARTNERSHIP

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

Read Nehemiah 1:1 - 2:18

“Then they said, ‘Let us start building!’ So they committed themselves to the common good.” Nehemiah 2:18

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 Greater Milwaukee 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 a hurting world.

- *What are some of the challenges your congregation is facing as it thinks about its mission in the world?*
- *How would sharing pastoral leadership, 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?*

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, 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 milwaukee-synod.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 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. 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 more 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 healthier 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 larger anchor congregation, turning over all assets. Together they share the same mission, budget, staff, council, resources, and membership as the anchor church, but 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

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. Endings always precede 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 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).

- Re-read the quote from Frederick Buechner at the top of the page. What’s the “worst thing” about this conversation for your people? Discuss this, then re-read the quote.
- 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 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 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:

- 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?

Word and Service Mission Post

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 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 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 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 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.

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 Greater Milwaukee 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 “Innovation 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 Greater Milwaukee Synod to continue ministry.

For steps in this process, please refer to the ELCA’s booklet *Leaving a Legacy of Mission and Ministry*. (A link is available at milwaukee-synod.org/holyconversations)

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 5 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 Assistant to the Bishop 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. They also cannot make the decision to 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. For a list of other topics you will want to discuss and make decisions regarding, see the tool “Shared Ministry Logistics & Finances” at milwaukee-synod.org/holyconversations.

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 Greater Milwaukee Synod can help draw together partners in *yoking*, *merger*, *consolidation* and *anchor church* agreements. This work is done in partnership with one of the assistants to the bishop. 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 Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission.

Where can I go for more information? Visit the Greater Milwaukee Synod website milwaukee-synod.org/holyconversations for more information and resources including sample covenants and agreements, sample tools, and clear steps for processes like *holy closure*.

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

The Greater Milwaukee 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 **follow Jesus, form communities, and love all.**

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



Greater Milwaukee Synod
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