

Invited to Abundant Life

A discernment guide for 21st-century parishes, minsters,
and new expression communities in The Episcopal Diocese of Kansas



The Right Reverend Cathleen
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An Invitation from Bishop Cathleen Bascom

*"I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."
John 10:10b*

Dear Beloved Members of the Diocese of Kansas,

Our complex experiences in the first decades of the 21st century make clear the need of all people and the creation itself to realize the Abundant Life God desires for us. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, invites us into this Abundant Life; commands us to bear the invitation to others; and sends us into the places we live and work to transform them into places of Abundant Life.

We invite parishes, minsters, and new expression communities alike in our diocese to engage in reflection about your identity and your unique calling. We are blessed in Kansas with vital communities of all sizes and shapes. Parish worshipping communities are primary in our call to experience and share Abundant Life. We pray this study may help parishes discern their unique identity and empower their gifts to share Abundant Life in their context. In this century, some local parishes may find that they are called to collaborate more fully with the nearby parishes of their minster to bear Abundant Life more fruitfully in their part of Kansas. Bands of faithful followers – whether they have been a parish or are a new community -- may discern God calling them to become a New Expression Community, living their life in Christ not centered in a church building but in homes, outdoors, or in other settings.

The study that follows borrows heavily from a resource created by the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont (which also owes material to the Episcopal Diocese of Spokane), but it is adapted to fit the history and ministry realities of the Diocese of Kansas.

This guide offers a process of discernment for you to ask timely and critical questions about the vocation and future of your parish, minster, or new expression community. We believe this resource can help us discover a vibrant future of ministry together as the Body of Christ in the Diocese of Kansas.

Peace and blessings,

Bishop Cathleen

Finding a New Way: Purpose of this Guide

This guide is for parishes in the Diocese of Kansas that are:

- Wondering what God might be calling them to in the next phase of their congregational life. (It can be a helpful tool to use in times of transition between clergy leaders.)
- Deciding to enter more fully into collaboration with the parishes in their Minster.

As followers of Jesus, we learn from our scriptures that God calls people into new lands, new ways, new promises. This guide will not give you all the answers; the hope is that it will help you to begin asking the right questions. We want to help congregations engage in the process of renewal. Our purpose is to engage in the process of congregational development.

Congregational Development is the development of congregations of all sizes, locations, and conditions into more faithful, healthy, and effective communities of faith that are:

- Focused on and faithful to their unique reason for being—local expressions of the Body of Christ.
- Connected to and expressive of their unique ecclesial tradition, ethos, and character.
- Self-renewing and responsive to the challenges and opportunities before them.
- Sustainable or working toward greater sustainability in terms of a fit between the elements of their organizational life: vision for ministry, leadership, culture, size, property, finances, etc.

We are completely committed to the process of congregational development. We also realize that there are congregations that are struggling with their identity, their mission, and their sustainability. We want to help these congregations to think through their options. Through intentional and prayerful discernment, the congregation might decide that it has the necessary resources and energy for a deliberate renewal effort. Other congregations might decide that the best option is to join with the other congregations of their minster in sharing clergy leadership, merging ministries, or even congregations.

God's promise to Joshua as he faced an unknown future is still God's promise to us: "Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9)

Ever-present God, you call us on a journey to a place we do not know. We are not where we started. We have not reached our destination. We are not sure where we are or who we are. This is not a comfortable place. Be among us, we pray. Calm our fears and save us from discouragement and help us stay on course. Open our hearts to your guidance so that our journey to this unknown place continues as a journey of trust. Amen.

- The Rev. Canon Kristi Philip, from *Women's Uncommon Prayer*

This manual is intended to be used as a discussion guide. Taken chapter by chapter, a congregation and its leadership can use this manual to explore what comes next in their life and ministry together. The first three chapters invite reflection and inquiry. At the end of the third chapter, the next steps in discernment – toward revitalization or restructuring — will emerge and this will dictate which chapter to go to next.

Remember that you are not alone in your efforts: our bishop and diocesan staff members are always available to help you at any point in this process of discernment.

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Chapter 1: Called into a New Life

The story of Abraham is a story of God's call to go from a settled and comfortable existence into one of uncertainty, change, and movement. God told Abram "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1, NRSV)¹ And Abram set out, and in his faithfulness, his name would change, he would experience tragedy and joy, life and death, his time would be one of movement and change, and God was always with him.

Israel had become a great nation while in Egyptian captivity; then God called Moses to lead them out of Egypt into the promised land of Canaan. Moses led the people through the wilderness for forty years. He led them to capture the land east of the Jordan. Then Moses died in sight of the Promised Land and Joshua was called to take over leadership. The people of Israel had to learn faithfulness amid great change, and God was always with them.

The exiles in Babylon were uncertain about whether God was with them, but the prophet Ezekiel had a vision from God that showed the presence of God moving from the temple in Jerusalem, now destroyed, with the exiles into Babylon. The people would endure great hardship and suffering, they would learn what it meant to be faithful followers of God in a new and different land. They would come to understand that God was the Lord of all the earth and gain a new understanding of their role in salvation. The exiles experienced tremendous change, and God was always with them.

The disciples also were called to move from their normal lives into the new way of being, a way of journeying "on the way" with Jesus. We hear that they leave boats and nets, leave families, leave the tax booth, and leave much of the comfortable and familiar to answer God's call. Life for the disciples would continue to be a journey in faith. It would always be an experience of change, and God would always be with them.

Change can be hard, but take heart, God is faithful and will always be with us!

The lessons in Scripture about change and call, the lessons about moving through difficult times are relevant for us today. Over the centuries, the ways in which Jesus' followers have organized themselves to experience and share Abundant Life have been varied: the communities Paul planted; monastic communities of men and

¹ All scripture references are from the NRSV

women; Gothic cathedrals; village chapels; mega-churches with rock bands. You are invited to discern the form of faithful worship and transformative service you are called to in this era.

The temptations of the “Good Old Days.”

The good old days! Have you ever longed for the “good old days,” even though we know that they will never return, and that maybe they weren’t really all that good anyway? Our churches also reminisce about how wonderful it used to be back in the “good old days.” For some that was in the 20th century, for others it may be those times just before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is understandable that we would want to return to a time that we perceive as more secure, easy, and fun. If only we could develop a new program, launch a better Christian formation class, entice families to start attending, or call a more enthusiastic (and younger) priest, then maybe everything would be better. Many of us would rather long for the “good old days” or “the way it used to be” than face difficult realities in the present.

Jesus said that no one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. God wants us to look forward, not back. God wants us to prepare for the future that we cannot see or yet imagine.

The dream of reliving the “good old days” by returning to a period of growth and glory is strong in many of our congregations. Again, this is understandable, for God has done wonderful things through our congregations. Faith has been nurtured and lives changed in our congregations. God is telling us: “Don’t look back at the way things were but look forward to see what I will do.”

Be strong and courageous for God is with you.

Consider the story of Joshua after the death of Moses. Joshua, who had served as Moses’ personal minister for years, was confused and caught in an extremely difficult situation. If Joshua was expecting consolation and sympathy from God, he was mistaken. God told Joshua: “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land that I am about to give them—to the Israelites.” (Joshua 1:2)

God’s brutal honesty with Joshua can be a lesson for us today. God’s people have always had great responsibilities. When we face/embrace these responsibilities, there is no greater encouragement than the assurance that God will help us accomplish them.

God instructed Joshua what to do and how to do it. God told him to observe the law as revealed to Moses, to study it diligently, and obey it. It is much easier to be brave when you have received proper guidance and instruction. We often speak of people who act out of the “courage of their convictions.” It is hard to act courageously when we’re not sure what is the right thing to do.

When we face the realities many congregations face in the 21st century, we may feel overwhelmed. Were we not faithful enough? Will a new building program or a new priest return us to the “good old days?” As we ask these questions, consider: Was God’s plan for the Israelites completed once Moses died? Or was God preparing for a new era, a different beginning?

God said to Joshua, “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised Moses” (Joshua 1:3). God promised that God would be with Joshua, just as God had been with Moses. God would not leave or forsake him. As with Joshua, we too need encouragement and assurance that we can succeed in God’s work.

We are here because of the legacy of congregations that have come before us. Perhaps, God is telling us to pass that legacy forward in a new fashion, a new form, a new ministry. As God said to Joshua, “Don’t live in the past. Prepare for the future. Move on.”

Preparing for the future and moving on may mean letting go! Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). These words should remind us that preparing for the future may be difficult. The Church has faced tough times throughout its history. In the life of a church, no issue can be tougher than considering the end of an era. Will this experience cause pain, anxiety, confusion, and doubt? Yes. Will you become discouraged and fearful, thinking that you cannot succeed? Possibly. But as you travel through this process, remember to celebrate all that God has accomplished through your ministry. And remember that, as with Joshua, God will never forsake you.

God has given us all that we need to be successful in serving God. As the psalmist writes, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear” (Psalm 46:1-2).

God’s goal for Joshua was to lead the people into the land of Canaan. God promised Joshua he would not be alone, that God would be with him. Three times in three verses (Joshua 1:6-9) God tells Joshua to be strong and courageous – was Joshua so

filled with fear that God needed to say this to him three times? Perhaps, but with hope and the promise of God's presence, Joshua was able to be strong and courageous.

Questions for Discussion

Read the story of Joshua.

- What about wanting the “good old days” holds you back?
- Are you looking forward or backward? Give examples of both.
- Do you think your work as a church is done or does God still have plans for you? What makes you think that? Your energy, your resources, your growth?
- Think outside the box...think big...think creatively...what could we be doing as a church, with God's help? What ministry could we pursue to address the future?
- Does a deeper level of sharing between the congregations in your minister offer resources to empower you to fulfill the call from God you imagine?
- What realities are you struggling with in your congregation/community?
- What ministry drains your energy and resources?
- What ministry energizes you and your members?
- Can you identify God's goal for you and your congregation?
We can face the tough times of our unknown future knowing that God has offered us the Promised Land of eternal life—God assures us that we can successfully reach it. This alone gives us the Spirit to be strong and brave enough to face our future together. God is with us!

Chapter 2: The Life Cycle of a Congregation

God's kingdom lasts forever, but individual congregations may not. Congregations come into being, live, change, renew, and *might even* eventually, die. This is normal. The stages in the congregational life cycle are birth, formation, stability (both healthy and stagnant), decline, disintegration, and death. (See picture below). In the Diocese of Kansas at the beginning of the 21st century, we have vital congregations of every size. Many congregations feel anxious because, while still places where people find the Abundant Life in Christ, they are smaller or more aged than fifty years ago. It is a new era and a fine time to prayerfully ask for God's vision.

Times of transition can provide especially good opportunities for a congregation to return to the basic questions:

- What is God calling us to do at this time and place?
- What is our purpose?
- Why are we here?

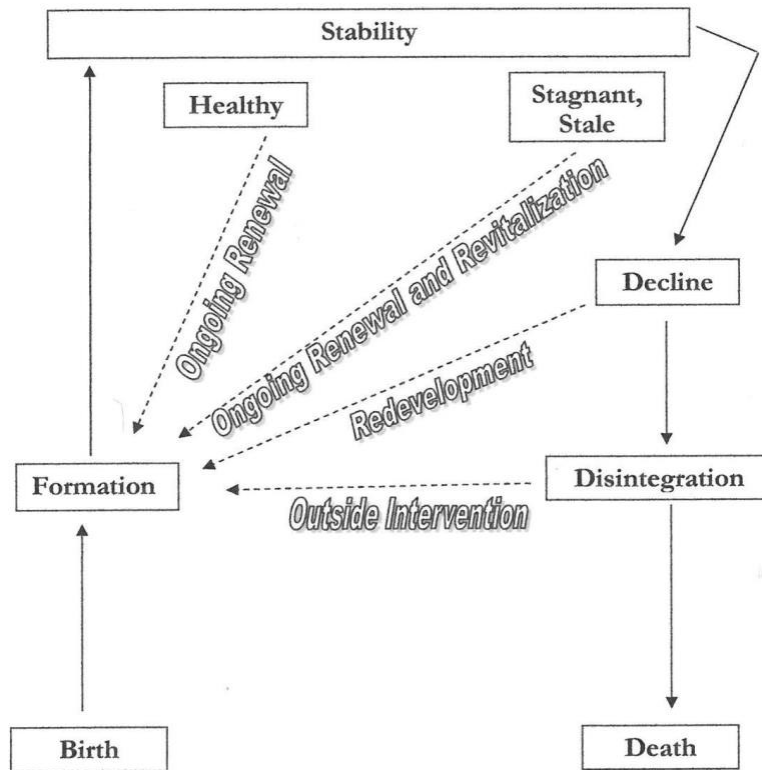
It is dangerous and tempting to avoid wrestling with these questions until it is almost too late. It is better to ask these questions when a congregation is in the healthy stability stage, or even in the stagnant stability stage of the life cycle. By the time a congregation is slipping from decline into disintegration, people may be too scared and fatigued to do the hard work of corporate discernment. By that time, financial and material resources may be waning or worn. Sometimes such a band of believers may discern the call to become a New Expression Community that lives their Abundant Life not connected to a church building.

Prayer is crucial

Sustained prayer and conversation about the congregation's mission can lead to new directions in ministry and a new sense of focus and purpose. Sometimes, such prayer and conversation can help a congregation to identify assets and resources it didn't realize it had, so that ministry can continue for a time in new ways.

In a number of settings, sustained prayer, and conversation lead to the realization that God is calling a congregation to enter into full partnership with nearby minister parishes. Shared Ministry Ministers discern that deeper sharing of financial resources and clergy leadership will best move them forward in mission. On occasion, collaboration with an ELCA Lutheran or other church is identified. Then the Bishop's staff (or other judicatories) will need to be contacted and become more involved.

Definitions and descriptions of the various stages of the congregational life cycle



Birth: A founder or founders, an idea, a dream.

Formation: Identity. Who are we as a faith community? What are we here for? Who is our neighbor, and how are we related to our neighbor?

Stability: Fruitful and sustainable ministry, institutionally and spiritually. A time when the elements of organizational life fit together (money, vision for ministry, property, people). This can be a **place of health** or can tip into feeling **stagnant or stale**, with growth stalling and new opportunities ignored. This stagnant or stale stage can sometimes be experienced as a membership plateau followed by declining numbers.

Healthy Stability and Ongoing Renewal: Healthy stable congregations stay healthy either through leadership that instinctively raises and acts on formation-related questions in the overall congregation or through processes that continue to renew the entire congregation or important parts of the congregation that need attention. Some leaders organically recognize and act on areas in a congregation that need improvement; some leaders/congregations have in place processes that scan the life

of the congregation, listen for and act on areas that need improvement. These congregations engage the formation questions, seek to understand their life cycle and consider God's mission and kingdom.

Stale, Stagnant Stability, and Renewal/Revitalization: When stability becomes stale and stagnant, a congregation and its leadership will need to look at formation questions in a more focused way:

- Who are we (identity)?
- What are we here for (purpose)?
- Who is our neighbor (context)?

These are typically system-wide work and actions that when done skillfully also introduce and teach the congregation language and models or frameworks that help to focus the discussion. Sometimes the self-study before the calling of a new priest-in-charge/vicar/rector can be the context within which at least some of this work is done.

Decline: Numbers fall off, energy declines, fear and blame in the system, confusion, focus on small things rather than central issues.

Decline and Redevelopment: The further down the path a congregation goes in declining numbers, finances, energy, and flexibility, the more costly it becomes for a congregation to engage the formation questions that have the potential to activate what it will take to return to stability. Redevelopment is a possibility when serious declines have occurred in a congregation, but significant effort will be needed to increase the likelihood that redevelopment efforts will bear fruit. Often third-party help or a dramatic change in leadership is needed to face the situation, to let go of old patterns of doing things and to face into what will be needed to turn things around.

Disintegration and Outside Intervention: Conflict, hopelessness, feeling stuck, and internal leaders unable to affect change are symptoms of disintegration. When disintegration begins and things start to fall apart, conflict or paralysis can set in. At this point a diocese will often intervene, taking charge of the decisions as there is probably no capacity/leadership to do what may be needed.

Death: The end of life, the total and permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an organization.

Questions for Discussion

Revisit the definitions and descriptions of the various stages of the congregational life cycle above: birth, formation, stability (healthy v stagnant), decline, disintegration, and death.

- Tell a story about the “birth” of your congregation?
- Identify places of stability in the past and current life of your congregation. What key elements were/are present? What did stability look and feel like?
- Where do you believe the congregation currently is on the life cycle? Share your reasons for placing your mark where you did.
- Describe past times of renewal/revitalization/redevelopment in your congregation. How did you experience those times? What started them? How long did they last?
- Discuss the challenges that hinder renewal/revitalization/redevelopment from happening in your place.
- What are the tensions in your congregation that take up energy and focus that could be spent on ministry with our community?

Chapter 3: The Discernment Process: What is God calling our congregation to do?

Helping a congregation make decisions about its sustainability and future form of ministry

Through this exercise, we want to help a congregation engage in prayerful and intentional discernment centered on the question: **“What is God calling this congregation to do in this place and at this time?”** This is the core question of ministry.

Vocation

Why am I here? What is God's will for my life?

We all want to know the answer to the questions of vocation. The word “vocation” means “call.” As Christians, we believe that God calls each one of us by name. God calls us to a life of discipleship which is how we live in today’s world as a follower of Jesus Christ. Discernment is the way we try to seek and discover God’s call, God’s will, for our life as individuals and as communities. It involves reflecting on the deep questions of baptism, prayer, self-exploration, and awareness of the circumstances of our life, our gifts, and our abilities. One aspect of this process is learning how to listen to God’s voice and the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture and through other voices. It relies on deep relationships with others to help discern what might truly be God’s voice, not just our own desires.

Why are we here? What is God's will for our life together?

These are also important questions for a congregation to ask. Although the mission of a congregation is different from an individual’s vocation, the process of discovering that mission has a lot in common. When your church writes a mission statement or invites someone to attend worship with you, you respond to a similar question: What is God calling this congregation to do in this place and at this time?

Discerning God’s purposes for the congregation is the foundation of what we are doing when we conduct a church planning or re-visioning effort. We find few congregations are intentional about nurturing the practice and language of discernment. Simply using the word “discernment” is not enough, especially if it is not the normal practice of your congregation. In fact, it could make the planning and

visioning effort feel alien or intimidating. How do we seek to know God's will in concrete ways in a planning process?

One helpful way is to compare it frequently to the ways we try to understand God's will in our individual lives.

- Consider the “givens,” the unique gifts that God has provided.
- Look back to see how we have developed over time; review our history.
- Consider our strengths, what feels “natural” to us.
- Look at the ways we have grown and gained understanding through adversity.
- Change the question “What kind of person am I?” to “What kind of congregation are we?”
- Most of all, remind us to ask the right questions.
 - “What should *we do*?” **becomes** “What might *God have us do*?”
 - “How can we *benefit*?” **becomes** “How can we best *serve our neighbor*?”
 - “Where do we *want to be in five years*?” **becomes** “What does *God have in store for our future*?”

A discernment process requires the active, firsthand engagement of those who have a *real interest in*, and *commitment to*, the congregation's future.

Three sets of prayerful questions describe this process of discernment:

- Lord, who are we? What are the strengths that you have gifted us with?
- Lord, who are our neighbors? What are their needs and gifts?
- Lord, after listening to your voice, how shall we respond?

St. Ignatius of Loyola has handed down to us some principles of discernment which are quite useful as we engage in this process.

- 1) *Christian spiritual discernment leaves the outcome of the discernment in God's hands.*
This is the hardest principle to put into practice, yet it is crucial to good discernment. As you discern, ask yourself if you can really be at peace with whatever comes from this time of sifting, sorting, praying, studying and choosing. Opening ourselves to new possibilities is spiritually freeing. Anyone who already has their mind made up and cannot be open to any possible outcome is not engaging in discernment. All need to pray for God's grace to practice openness.
- 2) *Good discernment takes all the facts and practical issues into consideration.*

Spiritual discernment about God's will for our personal lives and the life of our congregation does not, and must not, ignore the realities of life and practical considerations.

- 3) *Good discernment does not go on forever, at some point we make a choice and take action.* Although good discernment takes time, it is not an excuse to procrastinate. If you are waiting for certainty, forget it. Seek clarity instead. And just because we discern well does not mean we never make mistakes. Having prayed, studied, sifted and sorted to the fullest, we need to take a leap of faith and act.

You are not alone in your efforts: your bishop, canons, and diocesan staff are always available to help you in this process of discernment.

Questions for Discussion

If your congregation has a mission statement, read it out loud then answer these questions:

- Does our mission statement accurately reflect our current understanding of ourselves? Why or why not?
- How is the congregation living out our current mission statement?
- What barriers exist that hinder the fulfillment of the stated mission of our congregation? Imagine and share how those barriers might be overcome.

Look at the demographics of your community and congregation (Diocesan staff can help you access this information).

- In the past ten years what has happened to the demographics of your town and surrounding area?
- Has the population grown, shrunk, stayed the same?
- What is the ethnic and age demographic in your community and what changes have taken place?
- Is your school district growing or shrinking?
- In the past ten years what has happened in your congregation with respect to membership?
- List your congregation's average Sunday attendance for the past 10 years.
- List your congregation's financial giving average for the past 10 years?
- What is the age demographic of the congregation?
- What is the ethnic demographic of the congregation?

- Given the trends of the above two questions, what predictions can you make or hunches do you have regarding the demographics of your community and your congregation in the future?

Consider your town, suburb, or city neighborhood:

- What are the greatest needs/challenges currently in your context?
- What have been the changes you have seen in your town in the past year? In the past 5 years? In the past 10 years?
- If someone were to ask at the local gas station for directions to your congregation, would the clerk be familiar with/know your congregation to give those directions?
- What would your community miss the most if your congregation were no longer present?

Consider the resources available to you if you were to share ministry more fully:

- How close are the churches of your minister?
- Do you have a relationship, formal or informal, with any other congregation in the area/community?
- Has the congregation ever been in a shared ministry setting in the past? What are the stories from that time?
- How could you partner with the other congregations in your minister or neighborhood to share resources?

Consider your physical plant resources:

- Take a tour of your physical plant. Describe in detail its condition.
- Is there deferred maintenance? If yes, list those items and estimated costs.
- Can you afford to make the needed repairs/upgrades to the facility?
- How old is the current furnace/air conditioner?
- How old is the roof?
- Is there a loan on the building? If yes, how much remains on the loan?
- Is the present facility physically adaptable for use?
- Is it accessible to those with physical limitations?
- Does any other organization use your building during the week? If yes, list those organizations and how often they are in the building during the week.
- How often are other people (in addition to those on your list of organizations) in the building during the week?

Consider your people resources:

- Do you believe you have enough people who are active and committed to the work of the congregation, who can help address your mission?
- Do you offer regular Christian formation programs?
- What are your current outreach ministries? Do you have sufficient funds and interested members to do the work of outreach? Explain.
- Does the financial giving of current members meet the needs of the congregation, or do you need to rely on bequests, special gifts etc. to pay expenses?
- Does the current level of financial giving allow us to do anything new or is it merely enough to maintain what we are already doing? Explain.
- What percentage of the active membership pledges? What is your congregation's average pledge?
- How many members tithe?
- Describe your pledge drive and describe your stewardship formation.
- Are there endowment or other designated funds?

Remember the Bishop, Diocesan Canons and other diocesan staff are always available to answer these questions if needed.

Naming the reality and planning the next steps

After you have prayerfully worked through the questions above, take some time to consider these further questions:

- Do we have the resources of people and finances to realistically commit to the work of renewal/revitalization/redevelopment, to Abundant Life?
If the answer to the above question is “yes,” see Chapter 4.
- Do we discern a call to enter into a relationship more fully with the other congregations of our minster? Together, supporting one another, do we have the resources of people and finances to bear Abundant Life in our geographic area?
If the answer to the above questions is “yes,” see Chapter 5.
- Is there an ecumenical partner congregation, like an ELCA Lutheran church, in which it makes sense as part of our minster? If so, who? Have they expressed an interest in being in relationship with us?
If the answer to the above questions is “yes,” see Chapter 5.

- Do we have a vibrant less traditional mission and ministry? Not necessarily anchored in Sunday morning worship? If so, maybe we should consider becoming a [New Expression Community \(NEC\)](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/new-episcopal-communities/)? In coordination with the Diocesan Missioner, begin work to embark upon a renewal process including starting a new and innovative ministry responsive to community and focused on mission, such as one of TEC's New Episcopal Communities (NECs). NECs are distinct and different from existing churches and institutions: NECs are not programs of existing churches or dioceses or restarts. NECs have entrepreneurial leadership, a pioneering and creative spirit and seek to bring into being a ministry that was not there before. More information about NEC's is available here: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/new-episcopal-communities/>

If the answer to this question is yes, communicate to the Bishop or Canon and they will have our Diocesan Missioner work as a short-term consultant with you and your minister to guide you.

- Finally, in rare cases, we may come to accept the reality that we are being invited by God to close. Are we being called to close our building or our congregation?

If the answer to the above question is “yes,” communicate this to the Bishop or Canon to the Ordinary and they will provide you with the document entitled Manual for Closing a Congregation.

Chapter 4: Deciding for and steps in “Renewing/Revitalizing/Redeveloping” your congregation

After completing your communal work of discernment, your congregation feels God is calling you to commit to the work of renewal, revitalization, and/or redevelopment as a parish.

The exact process of renewal, revitalization, and/or redevelopment will depend on many things, including where you have discerned that the congregation is on the lifecycle. Nonetheless do not be fooled: all work of renewal and development is hard work.

A healthy parish renews its mission and ministry regularly

There are parishes who organically and systematically renew themselves, change, and thrive. It is usually easier, and requires less energy, to engage in the process of developing your congregation earlier in its life cycle than later in its life. There are various models that may serve to revitalize and energize your congregation for its work as the body of Christ in the world.

Canon for Congregational Life

Our Canon for Congregational Life is an experienced priest, knowledgeable about many models of church growth and revitalizing congregations. Let us know if you would like a virtual or in person session. Choosing this path is not the “easy way out.” This work will require a great deal of time and energy on the part of congregational leadership, and indeed the whole congregation.

A parish that has become stagnant or in conflict but seeks renewal

Diocesan Staff consulting

The Canon to the Ordinary or Bishop will work closely with you. Because the work of renewal, revitalization, and/or redevelopment will depend on the needs of the congregation, it is impossible to say what specific steps will take place next. Each congregation will develop a detailed plan in partnership with Diocesan staff.

If you have chosen this option, you must realistically have the people and finances to give it 2-3 years of focused and sustained effort.

Another option to consider:

Assemble a team, including your cleric (if you have one), to attend the College for Congregational Development. This is a two-year program that aims to equip congregational clergy and lay leaders with the knowledge, skills and practices needed to develop their congregations into healthier and more faithful communities of faith and organizations. Your commitment to send a team to the College also requires a financial outlay on the part of the congregation (and possibly its team members, depending upon how you structure paying the registration fees). Note that the bishop has approved the use of your investment pool funds for this purpose if necessary. To learn more about the College for Congregational Development, see <http://www.cdcollege.org/about-the-college/program/>.

Chapter 5: Deciding on the “Shared Ministry Minster” model

If you are reading this chapter, you have already discerned, through the work of chapter 3, your desire to enter more fully into minster sharing of ministry and resources. For the purpose of this chapter, the word “cooperation” will be used at times to describe all the various options for congregations working together.

Every parish in our diocese is part of a Minster of two or more congregations in geographic proximity. Clergy and lay representatives meet regularly for mutual support; to assure sacraments to all members of the minster, and to work together on initiatives that bear Abundant Life to their communities (projects of mission). Although affiliated, the congregations retain their own identity.

Special note: Bearing Abundant Life in an unchurched society is complicated and is changing. In the latter half of the 20th century, many parishes answered this challenge by hiring part-time priests or permanent supply clergy. The reality today is that many priests once available for long-term supply or part-time work have aged out of the ability to travel or to continue working. In the larger Episcopal Church today, there are far fewer clergy searching for work than there are open positions, the majority of whom are looking for full-time work. Congregations may be better able together to recruit talented clergy than they can separately.

What is a Shared Ministry Minster?

The Shared Ministry Minster model seeks to share energy, finances, and systems more fully than do Minsters who remain more parish-centered. The Shared Ministry model is especially good when parishes share a sense of common mission.

The Shared Ministry Minster model imagines a combination of full-time priests, deacons, bi-vocational priests, and lay leaders working together to support the long-term vibrancy of the Episcopal faith in their region.

Shared Ministry Minsters decide to pool resources together, often with financial help from the diocese, to hire a full-time priest to serve all the churches of the minster as Minster Shepherd. The priest may be seminary-trained or locally formed. Clergy are often more able to empower mission and ministry if they live in or near to the communities they serve.

Devoted bi-vocational clergy, usually centered in one parish, will continue to be an important part of the fabric of the minster and diocese. They can supply on Sundays and accept part-time positions as their other jobs allow. Devoted Deacons, while usually centered in one parish, offer and encourage servant leadership in all parishes of the minster. Lay leaders are actively involved in mission and ministry through both minster and parish, serving on the Minster Team.

Identifying and addressing issues

There are a variety of reasons which lead congregations to consider a cooperative ministry with one another. Ideally, congregations approach one another about cooperation out of a desire to strengthen the mission and ministry of the church in their wider community.

Those who are helping provide leadership to the efforts of congregational cooperation, need to understand that initially some members may perceive the idea of a new cooperative arrangement as less than desirable, and as giving up something valuable. Whatever the initial motivation, for the venture to succeed, it is necessary that the congregations who enter this new cooperative arrangement view the arrangement as a way of strengthening their congregation's mission and ministry.

A Covenant between the congregations is an important step. It is a clear statement of expectations and tasks/roles for the priests, deacons, and the other leadership—vestry, worship leaders, preachers, outreach ministers, etc.

Our Missioner for Transitions, Chancellor, and Canon to the Ordinary will help advise and finalize all Covenants.

Merging congregations

Different than Minster ministry sharing, merging congregations is a result of an organic union or merger of two congregations. The original congregations are dissolved, and a newly named congregation is established.

The process can be within the same denominational structure or among members of different denominations. When the process includes denominations other than the Episcopal Church, there are additional complications to be considered.

Alert the Canon to the Ordinary or Bishop if you believe you are called to merge. They will guide the next steps (not part of this guide.)

Worship scheduling in leadership sharing

A critical issue when sharing leadership is the scheduling of worship. For the cleric to conduct services in each congregation, distance and driving time needs to be considered.

Changing the time of worship is one of the most difficult changes for congregations to make. If new times are selected, they should be maintained for substantial periods of time and evaluated for effectiveness.

The value of having the cleric available for interacting with members either prior to worship or following the service also needs to be considered. It is often necessary to consider having the cleric at worship on an alternating Sunday basis. Some consider having a weekly service on Saturday or midweek as an alternative.

Skilled deacons and trained lay worship leaders, lay liturgists, and lay preachers are usually part of a sustainable and equitable long-term solution. Communion in the Absence of a Priest (COMAP) and the Daily Offices are important worship options.

As a final analysis, when considering conflict regarding worship scheduling, you may want to ask yourself: how might these differences be included in a healthy cooperative relationship? It is important to remember that the challenge of scheduling does not outweigh the benefit of collaboration.

Worship forms and Christian formation

Successful cooperative arrangements between congregations require a certain degree of theological and liturgical compatibility among them. The need for pastoral adaptation to very different theological viewpoints and diverse worship forms and practices should be kept to a minimum. The cleric should not be expected to prepare for and conduct completely different worship services for the cooperating congregations.

Because music and Christian formation are two parts of the congregational life that are highly emotional, as well as reflective of theology, issues related to them need to be explored if worship and formation are to be shared experiences. Clear expectations of the cleric's role and responsibilities for oversight in these areas should be mutually agreed upon during the formal discussion time and included in the final agreement.

From informal to formal conversation

When the conversation moves from an informal discussion of possibilities to more formal exploration, there are several principles to follow: The Diocese must be notified and will assist when parishes ministers discern a call to become a Shared Ministry Minister.

The bishop and other diocesan leaders will help with estimates of what each congregation can contribute to this process and will have final (legal) approval of any mergers of mission, ministry, property, or assets. The diocese may also be a financial partner.

After the decision has been made, it is important to celebrate the process and the decision. A special liturgical service can be planned and held for all the congregations involved to celebrate their anticipated future and offer it to God.