

# **SUMMARY: A Manual for Congregations in Discernment\***

A Resource for Congregations Facing an Uncertain Future:  
procedures for renewing, combining, and closing congregations

**DRAFT**

## **Setting the Stage: Introductory Comments from Bishop Shannon**

“The Church as an institution is bound by tradition, and we have lived for generations thinking that part of our mission is to protect the Church from change. However, we must no longer deny that constant change is part of our tradition.” I said these words at our Diocesan Convention in November 2021.

As we consider how new models of ministry and new collaborative relationships might offer our Diocese new ways in our future, I call upon all of our congregations to also enter discernment. I ask that you consider your current ways of life as God’s gathered people in your local communities and how—and whether—these ways of life will continue into our future.

This process of discernment of vitality and sustainability is a way for you to ask timely and critical questions about the future of our congregations... It is a time for us to “step out of the boat and go closer to Jesus. Let us answer Jesus’ call to step outside with hope and an openness to all things new.”

\* This summary is adapted by the Church of the Good Shepherd from [The Manual for Congregations in Discernment](#) by The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont, January 2022. The goal is to provide a working format as a partner to the full manual to facilitate the discernment process.

## **PREFACE: Finding a New Way**

### **Spiritual Reflection**

Be strong and courageous. God has led you this far, and God will never forsake you.  
(Manual p.4)

## **Key Points of Focus**

- Discernment is a prayerful process. It helps us ask critical questions regarding our congregation's needs, direction, and future sustainability to ensure our foundation as a faithful, healthy, and effective community of faith. The manual is to encourage the discernment process in examining all options to determine the best fit for each congregation at this time.
- The first three chapters of the manual invite reflection on and inquiry about our congregation's spiritual journey and how we have evolved to where we are today.
- The next 4 chapters look toward our current and future needs. Models of revitalization, restructuring, and closure are outlined as possible steps pending outcome of our discernment. Tools are offered in the appendices to help in planning these steps.
- Once we are ready to start the discernment process, we need to contact The Rev. Canon Susan Ohlidal, Canon for Mission Vitality.
- Requested timeline to complete our discernment is the end of 2022. A team from the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee will be available to assist us as needed.

## **Questions to Keep in Mind throughout Our Discernment:**

- What is God calling us to do next?
- Are we focused on and faithful to our reason for being?
- Are we sustainable in mission and ministry?
- Are we connected to and expressive of our ecclesial tradition, ethos, and character?
- Are we self-renewing and responsive to challenges and opportunities before us?
- Are we sustainable or working toward sustainability in terms of fit between vision of ministry, leadership, culture, size, property, finances, etc.?

## **Prayer Offered for Our Discernment Journey**

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 to be. 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 Payers"

## **CHAPTER 1: Called to a New Life**

### **Spiritual Reflection**

Change can be hard, but take heart, God is faithful, and God is always with us!  
(Manual p.4)

### **Key Points of Focus**

- Be brutally honest in discernment. As God's people, we have great responsibilities and need to be reality focused.
- Resist longing for the "good old days." Don't live in the past. Prepare for the future and move on.

### **Questions for Discussion**

- Share a time when the congregation experienced the most joy with fellow congregants.
- Tell a story when you think our congregation was/is most alive.
- Tell a story of a time when our congregation faced a great challenge. How did we meet that challenge?
- Consider the story of Moses, Joshua, and the Promised Land.
  - Who do you most identify with in the story & why?
  - Where do you see the story of our life as a congregation intersect with the larger narrative – still in Egypt, in the wilderness, about to cross the Jordan? Describe how it feels to be in the place you have identified – struggling, frustrated, overwhelmed? Fearful you might perish, wandering without a purpose, relieved at reaching the Promised Land?
- Think about the story of Abraham. What about it speaks to you today? What captures your imagination?
- As you ponder the story of the Israelites, where do you feel your congregation is – in exile or returning to Jerusalem after a long captivity?
- As you think about the disciples, how does their call speak to you? If you were to pick a biblical story that seems to speak best about our congregation, what story would it be?



## **CHAPTER 2: The Life Cycle of a Congregation**

### **Spiritual Reflection**

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1-2)

### **Key Points of Focus:**

- God's kingdom lasts forever, but individual congregations may not. This is normal. Stages of a congregation's life cycle include birth, formation/identity, stability (healthy & stagnant), decline, disintegration, and death. (Manual p.11) A schematic of the life cycle is provided on page 13 of the manual which illustrates the flow of different life stages and subsequent development activity needed.
- Healthy stability allows for fruitful and sustainable ministry, institutionally and spiritually. Elements of organizational life fit together (money, vision, people, property, etc.).
- Stability can become stagnant or stale, causing growth to stall and new opportunities to be missed. The further down the path a congregation goes in declining numbers, finances, energy, and flexibility, the more costly it becomes for the congregation to activate what it will take to return to healthy stability. Dying may be a more faithful response to God's call than stubborn survival.
- Prayer is crucial in helping to determine our congregation's new direction, sense of focus, and purpose.
- It is important to be proactive and start this discernment process before a congregation is in decline. Transition processes can take time, so it is wise to plan ahead.
- Throughout discernment, options to be considered may include congregational development, a shared leadership model or constellation with another congregation, or a call to close which may also include establishing an Episcopal community for worship or mission (still connected to the Diocese but not set in an established church).

### **Questions for Discussion**

- Tell a story about the birth of our congregation. Identify places of stability in the past and current life of the congregation. What key elements were/are present? What did stability look and feel like?

- Where do you believe the congregation is on the life cycle? Explain your rationale.
- Describe past times of renewal/revitalization/redevelopment in our congregation. How did we experience those times?
- Discuss the challenges that hinder renewal/revitalization/redevelopment from happening in our congregation.
- What are the tensions in our congregation that take up energy and focus that could be spent on ministry with our community?

**Notes:**

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## **CHAPTER 3: The Discernment Process – What is God Calling our Congregation to Do?**

### **Spiritual Reflection**

What is God calling us to do, at this particular time and place? What is our purpose? Why are we here? (Manual p.11)

### **Key Points of Focus**

- 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 circumstances of our life, our gifts, and our abilities. (Manual p.16)
- In discernment, it is helpful to prayerfully stop and look at what we know about ourselves as a congregation -- who are we, where have we been and how have we grown, what are our strengths, what are our barriers. From this and other critical questions, we can look to the future and assess new possibilities for growth. Chapter 3 outlines key questions to facilitate this process.
- All need to pray for grace to practice openness and listen to God’s voice to foster being at peace with whatever comes from the sifting, sorting, praying, studying, and choosing in the discernment process? In Christian discernment, the outcome is in God’s hands.
- Good discernment takes all the facts and practical issues into consideration. It does not go on forever. At some point we need to make a choice and take action, not procrastinate.
- Prayerful questions to guide our 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?

### **Questions for Discussion**

- **Mission Statement**

- Does our mission statement accurately reflect our current understanding of ourselves?

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- How is the congregation living our current mission statement?

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- What barriers exist that hinder the fulfillment of the stated mission of our congregation?

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- Imagine and share how those barriers might be overcome.

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- **Demographics of Our Community & Congregation:**

- In the past 10 years, what has happened to the demographics of our town and surrounding area?

1. Has the population grown, shrunk, stayed the same?

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2. What is the ethnic and age demographic in our community and how has it changed?

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3. Is our school district growing or shrinking?

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- What has happened in our congregation with respect to membership?

1. List our congregation's average Sunday attendance for the past 10 years.

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2. List our congregation's financial giving average for the last 10 years.

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3. What is the age demographic of the congregation?

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4. What is the ethnic demographic of the congregation?

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

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- **Our Town**

- What are the greatest needs/challenges currently in our town?

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- What changes have you seen in our town in the past year?

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5 years?

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10 years?

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- If someone were to ask at a local gas station for directions to our church, would the clerk be familiar with or know our church in order to give them directions?

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- What would our town miss the most if our church was no longer present?

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- **Resources Available if We Were to Share Ministry**

- How close is the next Episcopal congregation?

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- Do we have a relationship, formal or informal, with any other congregation in the community/area?

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- Has the congregation ever been in a shared ministry setting in the past? What are the stories from that time?

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- **Physical Plant Resources**

- Describe the condition of our physical plant (in detail).

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- Is there deferred maintenance?

1. If yes, list items & estimated cost.

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2. Can we afford to make the needed repairs or upgrades?

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- Age of current furnace & air conditioner

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- Age of roof

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- Date of last building audit

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- Is there a loan on the building? If yes, how much remains?

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- Is the facility physically adaptable for use? Accessible to those with physical disabilities?

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- Is the building used by other organizations during the week? List organizations & how often they are in the building per week.

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- How often are other people (in addition to the list of organizations) in the building during the week?

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- **People Resources**

- Do we believe we have a sufficient number of people, who are active and committed to the work of the congregation, that we can meet our mission?

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- Do we offer regular Christian formation programs?

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- What are our current outreach ministries? Do we have sufficient funds & interested members to do the work of outreach? Explain.

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- Does the financial giving of current members meet the needs of the congregation, or do we need to rely on bequests, special gifts, investments and/or loans, to pay expenses?

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- 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.

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- Percentage of active membership that pledge

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- Congregation's average pledge

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- Number of members who tithe

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- Describe pledge drive.

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- Describe stewardship formation.

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- **Naming the Reality & Choosing the Next Steps**

After prayerfully completing the questions above, consider these next questions:

1. Do we have the people & finances to realistically commit to the work of renewal/revitalization/redevelopment?
  - If yes, see Chapter 4: “Deciding for and Steps in Renewing/Revitalizing/Redeveloping Your Congregation” to review expectations/requisites for moving forward with this model.
2. Would we consider entering a relationship with another congregation such as shared leadership or constellation?
  - If yes, see Chapter 5: “Deciding for and Steps in Joining Another Congregation – Constellations, Plus!” to review expectations/requisites for moving forward with this model.
3. Has the time come for us to accept the reality that we are being invited to close the congregation? Do we have a vibrant enough mission and ministry that we should/can consider becoming an Episcopal community?
  - If yes, see Chapter 6: “Deciding to Close and Steps in Closing a Congregation” and Chapter 7: “Making Closure, Ending in Hope: Planning a Final Service”

At this time, it is important to communicate with the Canon for Missional Vitality regarding our next steps and discuss a possible request for a Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee Team to assist us if needed. See Appendix A for more details.

## **CHAPTER 4: Deciding for and Steps in “Renewing/Revitalizing/Redeveloping” Our Congregation**

### **Spiritual Reflection**

What have we discerned as the most empowering aspect of God’s call for our ministry? (Manual p.22)

#### **• Exploring Next Steps per Outcome of Discernment**

- Are we ready for the expectations of Chapter 4 as outlined below?
  - Ensure we have the finances to give 3 to 5 years of focused and sustained effort.
  - Ready to Renew/Revitalize/Redevelop by investing in one of the following:
    1. Work with the Canon for Cultural Transformation to start a new and innovative ministry responsive to our community and focused on mission beyond what we are already doing.
    2. Have a congregational team participate in a two-year program at the College for Congregational Development.
    3. Restructure our own Clergy Leadership model to ensure full time clergy availability to promote sustainability and sound stewardship for long term vibrancy. Note: “Time has proven that part-time clergy leadership is not the answer to being a thriving and vibrant church in today’s unchurched society... continuing to act as though part-time leadership will save us is simply managing decline.” (Manual p. 22)
    4. Create a model per our own unique focus for renewal and revitalization. This must be approved by the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee.
- If ready for this model, our congregation needs to develop a working plan in partnership with Diocesan staff and a team from the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee for approval.
- Some reimbursement may be needed for the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee team as they assist us in determining and carrying out our plan.

## **CHAPTER 5: Deciding for and Steps in Joining Another Congregation – Constellations, Plus!**

- **Spiritual Reflection**

God wants us to prepare for the future that we cannot see or yet imagine.  
(Manual p.8)

- **Exploring Next Steps per Outcome of Discernment**

- Do we have another congregation that is willing and interested in working with us or are we interested in finding a congregation with which to work?  
Per Chapter 5, there are a few different models we could look at:

1. Constellations

- a. Two or more congregations, in geographic proximity, enter into a formal agreement of collaboration. At the very least, clergy leadership would be shared. Other things such as resources, programming, ministries, etc. may be included.
- b. Two congregations, in geographic proximity, formally affiliate themselves in an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding). They agree to share financial resources in order to support a clergyperson or persons. Although affiliated, the congregations maintain their own identity. Facilities, budget, etc. are typically separate but sometimes vestries decide to merge. The covenant between congregations would clearly designate expectations, tasks, roles, etc. as agreed upon.

2. Merging

- a. A union of congregations wherein the original congregations are dissolved & a newly named congregation is established.
- b. Decision may be made to retain one of the church buildings for ongoing services. If it is too emotional for a congregation to be at home in another congregation's church, consideration may be given to dissolving ties with both church buildings and finding another neutral site to start over as a new and unified congregation.

### 3. Worship/Mission Community

A congregation or part thereof would meet for worship and mission activity outside of an established church and still be connected to the Diocese. This would mean meeting in private homes, public places, other non-church facilities, online, etc. as orchestrated by members of the group. This would be a community grounded in faith and guided by love to assess God's call for the group's ministry.

- General Considerations for Restructuring
  - The Canon for Missional Vitality needs to be notified before we pursue any activity, formal or informal, to explore possible options with another congregation. There are Diocesan policies to be followed if we are interested in exploring such options. There must be a record of all meetings, including minutes. No final decisions can be made without input from the Bishop, Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee, Canon for Missional Vitality, and others identified per the circumstances. The Diocese has final legal approval of any type of cooperative activity.
  - Restructuring can be with another Episcopal Church or church of another denomination.
  - When considering restructuring with a possible congregation, it is important to develop an exploratory experience that allows us to see how the congregations work together.
  - It is imperative that members of the congregations involved in restructuring see the effort as a cooperative and faithful response to God's call to service in order for the union to be successful. All members must acknowledge and own this understanding to enhance cooperative identity as the Body of Christ and act as such in the wider community.
  - Cooperation between denominations should consider theology, worship style, mission commitment, sharing of clergy, availability/schedule of building, standing of the clergy, scheduling of worship, openness to Christian formation and music, housing for clergy, etc. A detailed plan of action will be required in writing as a starting point for Diocesan consideration before moving further in the exploration process.
  - If any sale or acquisition of property is involved in any of these proceedings, we must follow Diocesan policy in having a member of the Diocesan Standing Committee in concert with the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee be involved in any decision-making.



- If moving forward in restructuring with another congregation, a transition team of members from both congregations should meet to work out the details. It is critical to keep both congregations and the Diocese informed as that process progresses. It is also important to continue to find ways for the congregations to get to know each other.
- If final approval is given for restructuring with another congregation, the decision should be celebrated with a special liturgical service.

## **CHAPTER 6: Deciding to Close and Steps in Closing a Congregation**

### **Spiritual Reflection**

Closing the doors does not stop God's plan. God can use the seed found within a closing to produce more fruit and enable one's church to provide an eternal legacy.

(Manual p.30)

### **Exploring Next Steps per Outcome of Discernment**

- The decision to close a congregation is not easy and it does not signify failure. If you are called to this decision, please contact the Canon for Mission Vitality immediately.
- It is important to remember that for Christians, dying is not the end.
- It is normal to grieve. Grieving evokes a wide range of emotions including feelings of denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance. It is a process over time, unique for each person.
- A Chaplain may be assigned by the Bishop to assist members with any pastoral care needs regarding closure of the congregation.
- It can be helpful to look at how to leave a congregational legacy, and in so doing, provide for the start of a new life in closing. If it involves items/property of the church, the Dioceses needs to be part of the decision.
- A closing liturgy of celebration should be held. Details for such are outlined in Chapter 7: "Making Closure, Ending in Hope: Planning a Final Service."
- Good communication regarding the closure process is important. It must be clear and allow all to be heard. Minutes should be kept for any discussions/meetings regarding such. Key decisions about when to close, what to do with property, who needs to be notified of the closure and how, etc. must be determined & coordinated with the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee before taking any action.
- Matters regarding the physical plant, records, leases of equipment, etc. will need to be addressed. A Diocesan checklist for such is provided in Appendix B.
- To best accommodate the closure activities, it is recommended that a small team from the congregation be identified to work with the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee.
- In the Episcopal Church, the Diocese has ownership of and control over all assets. The Board of Trustees and the Chancellor of the Diocese have oversight of the sale of any Diocesan property. Generally, proceeds from the sale of a building is funneled into Diocesan investments to supply grants and loans to further the mission of our congregations across the state, spiritual formation for congregations, congregational development, and lay leader development. Congregations that are closing are invited to share ideas regarding disbursement

of remaining congregational funds that would continue the mission and legacy of the congregation.

### **Information Provided in the Appendices**

- Appendix A
  - Description of the Diocesan Congregational Committee/Teams
- Appendix B
  - Checklist for Steps in Closing a Congregation
- Appendix C
  - Diocesan Support for Dissolution of Congregations by the Diocesan Congregational Discernment Committee