

Appendix 3D: The Three Great Listenings

Especially during this transition, the entire congregation is encouraged to listen carefully and intentionally to God, one another, and the surrounding community.

Placing ourselves within God's mission

We humans have this tendency to imagine that we are the center of everything. (Actually, that's a good description of sin. Martin Luther described it as our "inward curve.") So, it's not surprising, that when we plan for the future of our congregation, we often start with a picture of our congregation at the center of it all.

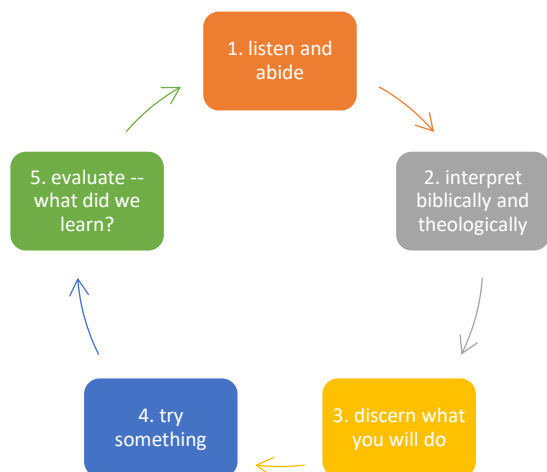
But that's not how it works.

As you navigate this transition time, pledge to keep reminding each other how it really works: *God has a mission.* God's mission is to bring a new order to this world, where greed and violence give way to love and justice. *God's mission has a Church.* The Church is one way that God is working to usher in this new order (sometimes called the reign of God, or kingdom of heaven). That's the good news that Jesus proclaimed and it's what we bear witness to in all that way say and do. So, when we plan for the future, *all we're doing is asking, "how can we join in what God's doing in this time and place?"*

Memorize the paragraph above and make it your leadership mantra. You might get tired of saying the same thing over and over; however, *keeping this reality in the forefront is your most important leadership task.*

A way of being God's people in the world

"God has a mission. God's mission has a church. All we're doing is asking how we can join in." Those are lovely words to memorize and say out loud, but what are we to *do*? Here's a picture of the actions we can take in order to discover what God is doing in the world and join in -- powerfully and effectively.



Here's the thing: This pattern of listening, interpreting, discerning, trying, and evaluating isn't just a once-in-a-while thing for congregations. It should be our way of being God's people in the world all the time. It's how we join in the divine flow of our triune God—Creator, Savior, Spirit--moving in love for the sake of the world.

How do you start? Ok, let's go!

Listening to God

This is something to invite everyone in the congregation to do. Here are some practices to consider:

Form a prayer team. There are some people who have the spiritual gift of intercessory prayer. Identify them and ask them to pray daily during this transition. Ask them to pray for your congregation to be faithful to God's leading, even if it means changes; for courage to make bold decisions for the sake of the gospel; for a sense of love and goodwill among your people; for the council and transition team and the call committee; and whatever else you see is important.

Practice dwelling in the word. Choose a scripture passage and invite everyone who can read to dwell in it every day. It sometimes helps to tape it to the bathroom mirror. Stay in the same scripture for a long while. Let it work in you until it changes your way of thinking and seeing.

Incorporate prayer into every get-together. These can be like the prayers the prayer team is praying.

Invite testimony in worship and other get-togethers. Invite people to share stories about where they saw God at work this past week. Invite stories about how peoples' faith in the presence and activity of God made a difference during a challenging time. Invite stories where people are rejoicing and thankful about the goodness of God because of something in their lives. This can be done in worship; by pairing up and sharing; or by inviting one person up to share a story. This can also be done at other kinds of get-togethers. Make it a common practice, so that an awareness that God is living and moving in the world and in peoples' lives is part of your collective consciousness.

Introduce a "Stop and Pray" time. Choose a time of the day – such as 3:44 p.m. – and have people set their phone alarms, as a reminder to stop and pray. It can be as simple as, "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening." Or, "Teach us your ways, O Lord. Show us your paths."

Practice silence. Perhaps one of the most powerful ways to pray is by sitting quietly, in silence, simply practicing the presence of God. Breathe deeply. It will change you.

Listening to one another and the surrounding community

One-to-one relational meetings within your congregation and in the surrounding community are powerful ways to strengthen and start relationships. If you do enough of them, themes bubble up -- which are critical to pay attention to. A 1:1 is a unique kind of conversation that's designed to go deep, fast, uncover peoples' stories, and discover what matters most to them.

Many people in the church have been trained how to do 1:1s, and find it to be life-giving, even holy time.

During your congregation's transition time, it will be important to set aside a "season of listening," during which trained listeners conduct a large number of 1:1 conversations in the congregation and in the surrounding community and then gather together to share what they heard. This is when themes start bubbling up, which are key to the next steps of interpreting and discerning.

Billboards from God

If people in your congregation do 150 1:1s, and you hear over and over how it's hard to raise kids these days, that might be a billboard from God, telling you that you can be a gift to your community by supporting families in some way. If you keep hearing how the high cost of housing is making it hard for people to make it financially, that might be a billboard from God, telling you to work for affordable housing. If you hear from several people that they love to cook and gather people for meals – you've discovered a community asset that you can incorporate into the life of your congregation. All of this can inform what kind of pastoral leader your congregation needs next.

First step

Do you have someone in your congregation who can train a group of listeners how to conduct 1:1s? Great. If not, connect with a nearby congregation, your local community organizing network, or the synod office.

Interpreting and discerning

The best way to describe how the next steps work is by telling a story.

Pastor Jorge Espinoza wanted to discover what kind of ministry would be best for connecting with Latinx neighbors. He spent time in grocery stores and at soccer fields. He attended community festivals and events. (abiding) He did 1:1s with community leaders. He connected with people in areas where a lot of Latinx people live. (listening) Here's what he discovered: The current anti-immigrant climate makes them scared. Living conditions are difficult. Most of the children are struggling at school.

What's the *biblical and theological interpretation*? Pastor Jorge heard that these neighbors came here to escape extreme poverty and violence. They came out of love for their children, in the hope that they would have a chance at life. He knows that Jesus, who challenged systems of oppression, is in solidarity with people living under oppression; those who suffer; and those who live in poverty. This solidarity was how Jesus lived his life and this solidarity was revealed on the cross. That biblical and theological interpretation led Pastor Jorge to name his ministry *Cristo Obrero* – Christ the Worker. He hopes that it connects with people who work long hours, and that it helps to tell the story of Jesus, and that this story will bring them strength and hope.

What's the *discernment*? Pastor Jorge realized that it doesn't make sense to invite people to leave their homes and come to church under these conditions. Therefore, he will practice the ministry of accompaniment, and go to where the people are. He will help people plant

gardens, start a soccer team for kids, and build relationships and gain trust. Then, he'll invite people to Bible study and start to identify and develop leaders.

At the right time, Pastor Jorge will *evaluate* – is this approach helping to connect with people and build trust? Is he identifying people who may have interest in Bible study or prayer gatherings? Are there indications that a community of faith could emerge? What is he learning? What should be changed?

Gaining clarity

Deep listening, praying, and reflection can help to refine your understanding of God's unique purpose for your congregation, which then leads to knowing what gifts and experience your next pastor needs. It helps to focus leadership energy, giving wisdom for what you say yes to and what you say no to. It makes it easier to decide what new things to start, and what activities you can let go of. Above all, these practices are essential for discovering ways you can join our loving God, who's on the loose in your congregation and in your community.

