

# HOLY DISCOVERY

Listening for God's calling after COVID-19

A workshop for clergy and laity

Designed by the Leadership Ministry of TMF

## **Welcome!**

We are all looking for the book entitled, "How Every Local Church Can Recover from the Effects of COVID-19 in Ten Easy Steps." The trouble is that there is no such book, and if one were to appear on Cokesbury.com or Amazon.com, it couldn't be trusted. There's nothing easy about being in a situation we've never been in before.

Though the Christian church has faced many crises over the centuries, few, if any, have caused the church to re-shape the practice of ministry so quickly. One Sunday we sat in the sanctuary or worship center and the next we sat at a computer screen. One Sunday we sat in familiar Sunday school classrooms, passed familiar offering plates, and drank coffee in familiar gathering places. The next Sunday we began to re-think how to pray and study together, how to receive tithes and offerings, and how to be God's missionaries while much of the population was told to stay at home.

Soon we will find our way back into the patterns of daily living, and that will be a huge relief. But we will be different people because we have witnessed this worldwide crisis and its effect on people we love. We will have experienced new ways to be together, new ways to care for each other, and new ways to participate in the ministries of the church.

We'll need to re-discover who we are and what we've learned. This experience has made many ask, "What are the things that are really essential in church life, and what are the things we just don't need to do anymore?"

We may be tempted to plan all sorts of activities to prove that we still know how to 'do church.' But the one thing that is essential to moving forward as the church after COVID-19 is to TRUST: to trust God with our future and to trust each other as we look to that future.

The best way to establish deep trust is to have real conversation:

- The conversation with God which we call **prayer** in which we express joys and concerns, hopes and dreams to God
- The conversation with each other which we call **discernment** in which we tell each other what God has been doing in our midst during the crisis, and what we believe God is calling us to be and do after the crisis.

This is a workshop to help you have the **discernment** conversation.

### **Why do this? What are we trying to accomplish?**

When we're not sure what to do next and we're feeling a little disoriented, we often return to what's familiar, to what we've always done. But if we do that, we may miss out on the beautiful, life-changing conversation in which we slow down enough to turn our attention to God and ask, "God, what are you asking of us now? What is your call upon our lives now?" This goes beyond planning what activity to do next. This is the honest, urgent work of **discernment**; the work of asking God for help and guidance.

### **What's Needed**

- 15-30 church folks and the pastor (larger churches should have closer to 30)
- enough tables so that there are 4-5 at each table
- pads of newsprint and masking tape OR big, adhesive Post-it notes; markers
- a wall on which all the newsprint can be put up so it is easily seen

### **Who Should Come?**

The group should be a representative sample of the congregation including elected leaders, wisdom-givers (folks everyone trusts whether they are elected leaders or not), dreamers and doers, young and old, and some who are really new to the church (because they know best what the church is actually like NOW, not what it used to be like).

### **Who Should Lead?**

The pastor can certainly lead this, but it may be more helpful for a member of the congregation, whether an elected leader or not, to lead. It may also be someone from the community, a pastor or lay leader from another community, or a conference official.

### **What is the Time Commitment?**

Not less than 3 hours and not more than 5, depending on how much time you might need at the end to assess what you've learned.

### **Yikes, 3-5 hours of talking?**

The sample schedule below suggests ways to allow for worship, snacks, informal conversation and even fun and games.

### **The Method**

There will be 4 separate conversations lasting 15-20 minutes each. Care must be taken to see that everyone at each table (not more than 5 to a table) is given the chance to speak. One person is designated to write down the observations and comments of the group on the big sheets of paper. Those leading this workshop will choose how many questions to discuss and which questions to use.

### **Questions for the Conversations**

- What Bible stories come to mind when we think of where we are as a congregation right now?
- What skills and abilities did we discover as we adjusted our ministry to meet the circumstances? What are we better at doing now? What was really hard about adjusting things?
- What did we miss the most by not being together? What did we discover isn't as important to the life of our church as we thought?
- Every congregation must answer the question, "Who is our neighbor?" How different is our answer to that question now than it was before COVID-19?

### **Why These Four?**

1. We ask the first question to see how similar we may be to people in the Bible and how God was active in their lives. So, for example, if someone says, "We were wandering in the wilderness...", you can ask, "What did we face that is similar to what the Israelites faced? How is God's care of us similar to the way God cared for the Israelites?"
2. We ask the second question to determine how flexible we are as a congregation; how able to change to fit our current circumstances. We also need the chance to say out loud what was hard about making so many changes.
3. We ask the third question so we can discover what gives us the most energy and unites us as a congregation. It invites us to ask "Is there anything in the life of our church that doesn't help us make disciples? Is there anything we do that if an outsider said, "Why do you do that? Who does it help?" we wouldn't have an answer?
4. We ask the fourth question to see whether the COVID-19 crisis gave us the

opportunity to meet and befriend anyone we hadn't previously known, and if we did, to ask how meeting those new friends has changed us.

### **What happens after each conversation**

(see below the part of the schedule called "de-brief conversation)

After we have each of these conversations, each table puts their newsprint sheet on the wall, and someone from each team briefly summarizes what happened in their conversation. Then, when all tables have reported, the leader asks these questions:

- What was common to the stories we named and the answers we gave?
- What is surprising?
- What is missing?
- As we told these stories, how can we see that God was at work?

### **Questions that you might prefer to ask**

Every church and its leaders must have the freedom to choose which questions to use during the course of the day. Here are some others that might also work.

- How are we different as a community because we went through this together?
- What are the things we do in our church that don't lead to changed lives?
- Considering what we've experienced and learned, what would enhance our worship?
- Based on our recent experience, what did we learn about how people give? What practices can help us enhance our giving?
- Who did we reach that we had not reached before? Who benefitted from having much of our ministry online?

### **Suggested schedule (this presumes a Saturday morning)**

- 8:45- Gathering/ coffee and breakfast snacks
- 9:00- Welcome/ Prayer and Devotion
- 9:15- Explanation of the Process\*\*
- 9:30- Table conversation #1
- 9:45- De-brief conversation #1
- 10:00- Table conversation #2
- 10:15- De-brief conversation #2
- 10:30- Break
- 10:45- Ice-breaker game for the group
- 11:00- Table conversation #3

11:15- De-brief conversation #3  
11:30- Table conversation #4  
11:45- De-brief conversation #4  
12:00- Lunch  
12:45- Singing/ Prayer walk outside  
1:00- Asking together, "What we have learned?"\*\*\*\*  
1:25- Asking together, "What has God been doing **among us** as we've had these conversations?"\*\*\*\*\*  
1:30- Sending forth

### **\*\*When we explain the process, what do we say?**

-We're here to discover together what we've learned about ourselves and our congregation during the COVID-19 crisis. We're here to share where we've seen God working among us and in our community.

-Conversation is a really powerful thing. It helps us know each other better and leads to deeper trust. Some people think that just talking is a waste of time, that what we need is action. But great conversation always helps lead to better decisions. Great conversation, and the trust it creates, is actually what makes any significant change possible.

-This isn't a planning session. We don't **have** to make any decisions today, but we might discover that God is doing something powerful in our midst that we want to affirm as a future direction.

### **\*\*\*\*How do we go about the 'what we've learned' part of the day?**

-We include the whole group. Whoever is leading, whether the pastor or someone else starts by saying, "What we're about to do isn't to see who is the smartest in the room, or who has the 'right' answers. What we're doing is working together to discover what we've learned in the last few months. So, let's see what we've learned." Then the leader points to all the pages of newsprint on the wall and says, "I want you to look at all the things everyone has said. What is really jumping out at you about what you see?"

-The leader must be comfortable with the fact that people may not speak immediately. It's wise to wait, and even to say, "This may be a new experience to some, and we're going to take the time we need so that we can hear from as many of you as possible."

-After the 'what's jumping out at you' question, the leader may ask other questions, such as:

- What feels exciting?
- Is there anything that worries you?
- Where do you see similarities in the answers to all four questions?
- Where do you see the hand of God?

It will be wise to have these questions on a sheet of paper on the wall so that everyone can see them as the leader is introducing them. Someone should be designated to take notes on this part of the day.

We are looking for the collective wisdom of the group. Not everyone may agree on what we've learned, but we need to hear everyone. Everyone has something important to add.

**\*\*\*\*\*How do we go about the "what has God been doing among us" question?**

-The leader might say, "We began with prayer and devotion, and now we end by asking what our gracious and eternal God has been doing among us. Who will begin?" Again, it's important to allow the question to rest in the group if no one speaks immediately. It's also important not to be judgmental if no one speaks. No scolding allowed (as in, "Wow, how sad it is that no one sees God working"). Sometimes people need time to understand how they've seen God working, and that is OK.

Questions?

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