

# Connecting

## A Leader's Guide For Congregational Reflection using The U.S. Congregational Life Survey Connections Report

### Preface

*Connecting* is for the whole congregation. Who are you? How does your life together deepen your faith? How do you build community within your congregation and with the world around you? These questions precede thinking about your mission statement and mission goals. Congregational leaders and members interested in their congregation's future are asked to use *The U.S. Congregational Life Survey* as the basis for discerning answers to these questions.

The *Connecting* process can be used in a series of meetings spanning several weeks. You can also use it in a retreat that includes an evening and the following day. It will be helpful to have a few people new to the congregation take part in the process. They often see a larger picture of your congregation that those who have been around longer miss. Invite a person who is not a member of the congregation to sit in and ask questions about the picture you will be developing of your congregation. This will keep you in touch with how you communicate.

An experienced facilitator who is not a member of your congregation is needed to lead your discussions, although it is possible in some cases that your pastor(s) or priest(s) or a lay leader can lead the process – *if* he or she can stay out of the discussions while facilitating. Most judicatories provide trained people who can help. Clergy leaders and the governing boards of your congregation must support this reflection process and recruit participants for it to work. Staff members of your congregation should “sit in” on the process as listeners, not speakers.

The *Connecting Resource Kit* (available at [www.USCongregations.org/leaderguides.htm](http://www.USCongregations.org/leaderguides.htm)) provides handouts and other materials for use by the facilitator during the *Connecting* process.

*Connecting* can work in a group of eight to twelve participants. Forty or more participants (working in small groups of six to eight people) can also creatively use it. The results of these sessions will be shared with the entire congregation. Since you begin with the perceptions of congregational members, it is important that you check out your conclusions with them. They will learn from your work and they will be able to challenge as well as own your conclusions about who you are and how you connect.

Prepared by The Reverend Kenneth B. Byerly, formerly Associate Executive Presbyter of Baltimore Presbytery, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), currently serving in interim ministry. To contact Mr. Byerly about the guide's content or for consultative services, please call the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at 1-888-728-7228 ext.2040 or email [USCongregations@pcusa.org](mailto:USCongregations@pcusa.org).

## Introduction

*Thus says Yahweh,  
Who made a way through the sea,  
A path in the great waters;  
Who put chariots and horse in the field  
And a powerful army,  
Which lay there never to rise again,  
Snuffed out, put out like a wick:*

*No need to recall the past,  
No need to think about what was done before.  
See, I am doing a new deed,  
Even now it comes to light; can you not see it?  
Yes, I am making a road in the wilderness,  
Paths in the wild.*

(Isaiah 43: 16-19; from *The Jerusalem Bible*)

Isaiah speaks of the future – new hope, new verbs, new risks, and new possibilities. He knows God arrives on our scene from the future that is to be. Only dead or dying institutions keep looking back. Congregations experiencing death and resurrection need to talk about Isaiah’s “paths in the wild” – those roads through the desert toward the water and bread. Gene Peterson renders the text like this:

*Forget about what’s happened; don’t keep going over old history.  
Be alert. Be present. I’m about to do something brand-new . . .  
I’m making a road in the desert, rivers in the badlands. (1)*

These **four sessions** for youth and adult discussion groups are based on scriptural insight into transition. They are about letting go of old images and being grasped by new images. In this case, the images are the perceptions of the persons in discussion groups as they talk about their congregation and the community surrounding the congregation.

The first session asks participants to share their perceptions with a certain amount of humor and imagination. The material from I Peter 2:9-11 and Luke 4:6-19 provide background for making lists of descriptive images that are neither right nor wrong – things are how people see them. Sessions two, three and four use results from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey to provide an opportunity to discuss your worshipers’ responses on how they connect with God, how they connect with each other and their community, and how they see the future in light of the present. The **video** version of **A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations** is designed to assist your group in processing their congregation’s report and will be used in sessions two, three and four. All four sessions ask participants to think about the difference between what “is” and what the vision calls for.

The outcomes of these sessions are to be recorded on newsprint and transcribed onto 8.5 by 11 sheets of paper. Each group’s work needs to be kept in sequence – from session one through session four.

This is not the time to “fix” anything or “recommend” anything. This is the time to share perceptions and to use descriptive language. Prescriptive work comes later in the process.

The following **assumptions** undergird this course of discussion.

- Perception is reality. The congregation, a human organization, understands itself to be established by God as “the people of God,” “the body of Christ,” and “a priesthood of believers.” These theological concepts make the congregation different from not-for-profit organizations.
- Congregations are founded not only by “founding mothers and fathers.” God founds congregations *in the community where they have their building*. Perceptions of that community and of “outsiders,” as well as perceptions of peripheral members living on the margins of the congregation are as valuable as the perceptions of active leaders in discovering ministry and mission. Leadership has no privileged perception of where and how the congregation ought to be in mission.
- During a congregational study the language of perception – how people see what “is” – is more important than “should/ought” language. Disagreement, divergence of perception, and diversity of opinion are valuable and are to be pursued. Premature consensus and unanimity are major deterrents to wider ownership of ministry.

The most difficult words in the dictionary may be “is” and “are.” We cannot entirely grasp what something is. We cannot describe what the depth of a relationship between two persons is. We cannot definitively describe what a congregation of people who call themselves Christians is. But we can form provisional pictures. The purpose of these four sessions is to help you coach members of your congregation as they share their perceptions of who your congregation “is.” You will ask them to talk to one another while interacting with your congregation’s responses to the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. You will help them discern who is attending your congregation and why they come.

This Leader’s Guide asks you to put off strategic planning until you have taken time to develop a portrait of your congregation as a prelude to discerning what God is up to in your congregation and community. The greatest temptation congregations have in pondering what God is up to is to short circuit *discernment* in a rush to set goals and objectives. This is a modest invitation to spend four sessions of 75 to 90 minutes each talking about “Who are we?” and “What is our identity?”

### **Resources essential to this process**

- Tabulated results of your congregation’s responses to the U.S. Congregational Life Survey
- A copy of the book *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press: 2002) written by Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce
- The video *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations* that accompanied your survey results
- Space for participants to operate in both plenary and break-out sessions with one pad of newsprint on an easel along with markers and masking tape for every six people participating

- Intense prayer
- A valuable extra resource, to be used as a supplement to Session Three or as a separate session in itself, would be demographic information about the community surround your congregation's building or worship site. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services office provides a free demographic package on their Web site. MissionInsite or Percept (which also has a mission statement and goal setting process called *ReVision*, which it sells to congregations) can also provide such information. (See Appendix A for sources.)

Goals and objectives are easily produced from large and small amounts of material. It is the sharing of mental maps that must come first.

*. . . mental maps direct congregations as much as road maps direct the traveler. The destination points and plotted highways leaders have constructed for congregational life send them on guardedly charted journeys that too often are resource consuming and unsatisfying. What if parish and congregational leaders revised their mental maps? What if they made new maps based on an accurate picture of the current landscape? (Woolever and Bruce, A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations)*

These four sessions are an invitation to share mental maps.

## Connecting – Session One

### How Do We See Our Congregation And Our Community?

#### Session objectives:

1. To list, in small groups, the various descriptive words and phrases you use to describe your congregation and community; and
2. To note and talk about the group's *diverse* and *similar* perceptions of your congregation and its surrounding community.

Whether working with six or sixty participants, these sessions *must* be planned for people to work in small groups of six to eight persons. With planning and skill, one person can facilitate a group of sixty people, but it is better to keep the overall group size to 16 to 24 persons.

After introducing the session, you will ask the small groups to work with newsprint on easels, and they will be asked to post their results on a wall for all to see. These sheets of newsprint will be collected and transcribed onto 8.5 by 11 inch sheets after the session.

#### Background material for your preparation and your comments to the group

Scripture is rich with diverse images of the congregation. I Peter 2: 9-11 is a case in point.

*But you are a chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession, to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into (God's) wonderful light. Once you were a non-people and now you are **the people of God**; once you were outside (God's) pity; now you have **received pity** . . . as **strangers and nomads** . . . keep yourselves free . . .* (from *The New Jerusalem Bible*, bold print mine)

There are also a great variety of images for the people who are “out there” as the congregation’s focus of mission and service. Luke, for instance, (4: 16-19) takes one passage from Isaiah and shapes it into the “why” and “who” of the ministry of Jesus.

*The spirit of the Lord is on me,  
for God has anointed me  
to bring good news to **the afflicted**.  
God has sent me to proclaim liberty **to captives**,  
to let **the oppressed** to go free,  
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.* (from *The Jerusalem Bible*, bold print mine)

Momentous ministries happen when a congregation takes the surrounding community seriously, knowing it has been called to such a service.

## Process

In this session participants will creatively and playfully – yet accurately – name your congregation. You will ask them to generate as many labels that describe your congregation as possible. Do not be afraid to play with the names your congregation might have if the truth were told. Imagine driving through a city and seeing *Received Pity Presbyterian Church* or *Strangers and Nomads Community Fellowship*.

- You could offer the following names of congregations to the group and ask what group members think the particular congregation’s strength is.

### Naming your congregation:

<i>Library and Academy Christian Temple</i> .....	study groups
<i>Boot Camp Baptist Church</i> .....	social action
<i>Clinic Methodist Church</i> .....	counseling and therapy
<i>Park Bench Presbyterian Church</i> .....	peace and quiet
<i>Music Hall Episcopal Church</i> .....	great choir and organ
<i>Museum Community Church</i> .....	artifacts from six generations
<i>Allsport Metropolitan Church</i> .....	jazzercise and aerobics
<i>Gourmet United Church</i> .....	phenomenal potluck dinners

- There are other serious contemporary images of congregations being suggested by experts who study how congregations live:

<i>Once and Future Church</i> .....	Loren Mead/Alban Institute (2)
<i>Erotically Capacious Household of God</i> .....	James Hopewell (3)
<i>Laboratory Experimental Church</i> .....	Celia Hahn/Alban Institute (4)

- You may want to hand each participant a copy of the biblical passages on page 5, and have the group read them aloud. The “game” of naming congregations by their identifiable behavior – you give the descriptive name and the group guesses the behavior – might follow a look at the biblical passages. On the back of the page of passages you might print the assumptions underlying the entire process listed in the first section titled “Connecting” in order to emphasize the importance of perception and diversity.
- Have the participants number off to assure groups of six to eight persons. Have in place a pad of newsprint on easel with markers for each group. If you do not have small group work areas already set up, ask them to take their chairs and form quickly into their work groups. When the participants are in their small groups, have them first of all introduce themselves to one another and mention what congregation they were baptized in (and in what year, if you want to live dangerously) to break the ice. Be assertively direct and keep the participants focused on the task.
- Your instructions to the participants: On the first page of newsprint make a list of all the descriptive names you can come up with that *describe your congregation* – no description is too facetious, too outrageous or too serious! Have some fun doing this – do not be afraid to note your foibles and weaknesses, as well as your strong points. (Note: This is **not** a list of

programs. You are asking for descriptions of the congregation – its being, its people, its reality, its image.)

- On the next page, make a list of descriptive terms for the *community surrounding the congregation's building or worship site*. Again, think creatively!  
(Define “community” as a three-mile radius around the building. Do not let participants derail the process by claiming this is not “our” community, etc. – stay focused on the *images*. It will be helpful to have information about a larger radius, since many of your members probably drive fifteen minutes or more to get to congregation's worship services.)
- Using the two lists already created, on a third page of newsprint list words that describe the *differences* between the congregation and the community as you have described them.
- Allow 30 to 40 minutes for the group to work on all three sections. Then ask each group to vote on which image of congregation, community and differences is their “favorite of the day” (tomorrow usually brings new images). Have each group share these favorites with the larger group. Take a few minutes to discuss in the larger group themes that were mentioned in more than one group. If you are working with only one small group, this process is obviously simpler, and there will be more time to discuss more images.
- To assist those who will compile the results, make sure each group's newsprint is labeled (Group 1, Group 2, etc.) and each sheet is numbered in sequence (1 = our congregation, 2 = our community, 3 = differences).
- Close with a prayer for the ongoing life of the congregation and for important insights to come from this process.

## Connecting – Session Two

### Seeking and Celebrating God

#### Session objectives:

1. To discuss the handout “Building Spiritual Connections” (the first two pages of your congregation’s results from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey); (Note: Show the introduction and first section of the video, “Building Spiritual Connections,” until you reach the first “pause” point. This portion of the video is about 10 minutes long.)
2. To list on newsprint participants’ perceptions of your congregation’s strengths and areas for growth in nurturing spirituality; and
3. To develop a “needs” list by which the participants can express without comment what they need to grow in faith.

Do not be sidetracked by a discussion on whether the congregational survey summary and the demographic data are “right” or not. Assume that it is right for these sessions. This is not a time to talk about what “ought” to be. Have the participants use their best textual interpretation abilities to talk to one another about what the summary actually says. What are their “findings”?

#### Background material for your preparation and comments to the group

*Yahweh, you search me and know me.  
You know if I am standing or sitting  
You perceive my thoughts from far away.  
Whether I walk or lie down, you are watching;  
you are familiar with all my ways.*

*Where could I go to escape your spirit?  
Where could I flee from your presence?  
If I climb to the heavens, you are there;  
there, too, if I sink to Sheol.*

*You created my inmost being and knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
For all these mysteries –  
for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works –  
I thank you.*

From Psalm 139, *Psalms Anew*, Nancy Shreck and Maureen Leach (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1986)

The congregation's life is dependent on its members knowing and celebrating how God has found them in the midst of their search for God. Theology and spirituality come before the demographic, sociological and psychological make-up of your congregation. And theology and spirituality will follow your congregation's social dynamics as well. Your identity as a congregation and your vision of the future precede any programming and goal setting. Congregational studies often produce program goals and sometimes a change in the climate of human relationships happening within the congregation. It is a sense of identity, articulated in terms of the reality of God and the disciplines of the spirit, which is most difficult and absolutely essential.

James Hopewell, in *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (5), writes about congregational life as an erotic shaping of community.

*Eros is the overpowering, softening, possessive energy that give things their shape and linked significance.* (p. 169)

He combines a biblical image of the congregation as *household* with the human interaction of searching for God and for each other within the congregation. Your congregation's identity depends on your members' erotic capacities to respond to God and relate to each other.

*Congregations are the church's erotically capacious households. Other organizations are specialized for particular ends. Seldom do other social organizations include both children and the aged; seldom do they rely upon members with diverse careers and educational preparations. Once joined, the noncongregational bodies of the church often gently pressure members into uniform patterns of behavior or attitudes. Among the structures of the church, only the congregation persistently addresses the diverse personal goals of its members.* (p. 171)

Metaphors stressing experimentation, provisional thinking, and shared power are also relevant to who you are. Celia Hahn, in *Growing in Authority, Relinquishing Control* (6), describes a congregation as a human relations lab, built on the members acknowledging what "is." When members ask about *what is* rather than trying to impose on others what they think reality is, congregations can mobilize themselves for mission. One thing Jesus did was liberate his disciples from "the bottom-line concerns of the world" and free them up to consider new possibilities. (p. 149)

*At its best, the experience of "church" is set up to enhance the possibility that people will experience those transforming moments when love and truth flash together. When my life has been changed, I love those people! We have been through despair and joy together, and, like Mary and the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross, we suddenly know: "This is my family." Our discovery creates community . . .* (p. 153)

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* the community slogan is "Community. Identity. Stability." A congregation's ability to articulate its relationship to God builds community and identity, and it often shakes up stability. God is always doing a new thing, and the church is often the last place people find out about it.

## Process

Every participant should have the printed material “Building Spiritual Connections” in their hands. If possible, they should also have the results from Session One, as typed on 8.5 by 11 sheets, for their use.

- Begin this session by breaking the group into quartets and have each quartet talk about how the passage from Psalm 139 is relevant to their experience as an individual and as a member of or participant in your congregation.
- After introducing the group to the idea of your congregation’s identity that precedes all of its programs, give a brief overview of what the U.S. Congregation Life Survey is and how it pushes for data driven perceptions of your congregation (and noting that data driven and Spirit driven realities are closely related, since the Spirit always pushes for truth – cf. *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations*, p. 7). View the introduction and first section of the video, “Building Spiritual Connections,” until you reach the first “pause” point. (This portion of the video is about 10 minutes long.) Then have a time of silent reading and reflection while participants review your congregation’s results (up to ten minutes).
- Form small groups of six persons, with newsprint on easel available to each group, and ask them to make a list of their “findings” from the summary. Their key findings may not match their own experience in the congregation. *What does the report say?* This is the question.
- Then have the small groups arrange the findings into “strengths” and “areas for growth” columns. When this is done, have each group post their newsprint on the wall and note similarities of perception *and* differences of perception. Experiences with congregational music often generate heated expressions of what is worshipful, etc. This is not the time to discuss the worship wars going on in every vital congregation.
- Facilitate the entire group by listing on newsprint everyone’s expressions of what they “need” in the congregation to grow in faith. Remind the group that they are free to say what they think, and that no one will challenge them. Encourage those who might be hesitant to speak in a large group to share their needs as well. Also remind them that even though someone else has expressed a “need” similar to theirs, you want them to express theirs as well. The number of times a “need” is mentioned is important.
- Close this session by asking if any learnings in this session connect with the discussions in Session One. Read the passage from Psalm 139 as a closing prayer.

# Connecting – Session Three

## Inside/ Outside Connections: Congregation and Community

### Session objectives:

1. To review “Building Inside Connections” and “Building Outside Connections” (pages three to six from your congregational survey results) and list perceived strengths and weaknesses in each area. (Note: Show the second and third sections of the video until you reach the third “pause” point. This portion of the video is about 5 minutes long.); and
2. To “brainstorm” ideas about how to build on your congregation’s relationship strengths inside and outside the congregation.

### Background material for your preparation and comments to the group

Again, do not be sidetracked by a discussion on whether the congregational survey summary and the demographic data are “right” or not. Assume that it is right for these sessions. This is not a time to talk about what “ought” to be. Have the participants use their best textual interpretation abilities to talk to one another about what the summary actually says. What are their “findings?”

Community is defined here as the population surrounding the congregation’s building, not necessarily the communities in which some or many of the participants live. Remember, the premise is that the founding fathers and mothers built the congregation where it is, God placed it where it is as well, and God expects congregations to be in mission with their surrounding communities.

Paul writes:

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;  
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.  
Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.  
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.  
Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.  
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.  
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.  
Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;  
do not claim to be wiser than you are.  
Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.  
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all . . .  
If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink . . .  
Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.*

From Romans 12, NRSV

There is a direct relationship between your members connecting with each other and with the community surrounding your congregation's property. Reaching out into the community depends on the affirmations of people living within the congregation, and those affirmations are fruitful only if your members reach out as affirmed people.

The people of God have a mission. They exist with a purpose that is greater than affirming each other in their faith. Their purpose that God has established for them is to be in the world.

## Process

- Give each participant a copy of "Building Inside Connections" and "Building Outside Connections" and the passage from Romans copied onto an 8.5 by 11 sheet of paper.
- Break the participants into quartets and ask them to share with each other how the passage from Romans 12 applies to their experience of your congregation and community. Ask them to quickly list (on newsprint on easels which you have provided) how they think Paul sees the congregations to which he writes and the culture in which the congregations live. Post the results of the groups on a wall where all can see them.
- Show the second and third sections of the video until you reach the third "pause" point. (This portion of the video is about 5 minutes long.)
- Next, break the participants into groups of six, and ask them to review the "Inside Connections" and "Outside Connections" results of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. Ask them to list on one page of newsprint their findings in *two* columns as shown below:

### Based On The Survey Information

**Our Inside Connections**  
**Findings Are . . .**

**Our Outside Connections**  
**Findings Are . . .**

- It is important for the groups to list all findings including those on which they have doubts, questions or comments. Ask them to list on a second page these concerns in two categories:

**Comments and Questions**  
**on "Inside Connections"**

**Comments and Questions**  
**on "Outside Connections"**

- Finally, post all newsprint on a wall and have each group quickly read what they wrote, without comment or elaboration. Ask the participants to pray for understanding into the diverse perceptions people have about congregation and community, and ask them to mull over what they have found. Collect all newsprint and transcribe onto 8.5 by 11 paper, and hand the typewritten results to the participants as they gather for Session Four.

# Connecting – Session Four

## Now and Then: Current Snapshots and Future Vision

### Session objectives:

1. To look back over the first three sessions;
2. To review and discuss “Building Identity Connections” (Note: Show the final portion of the video on “Building Identity Connections” and the conclusion. This portion of the video is about 5 minutes long.); and
3. To create and honor a brief Vision Statement created by each participant.

### Background material for your preparation and comments to the group

All the perceptions of these group discussions are relevant to discussing the relationship between vision and mission. Each participant should have the results of the first three sessions in hand, as well as “Building Identity Connections” (pages 7-8 from your congregation’s survey results).

Congregational leaders invested in a congregation’s life often have difficulty seeing how *death and resurrection* apply to their congregation (7). This is due in part to the fact they do not see how it applies to their own lives. Scripture’s witness is this: the old must die for the new to be born (refer back to the Isaiah passage at the beginning of this study guide). Paul puts it this way in II Corinthians 5:17:

*Everyone in Christ becomes a new person altogether –  
the past is finished and gone,  
everything becomes fresh and new.*

Modified from *The New Testament in Modern English*, J.B. Phillips (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996)

Such hope is built on a different faith than one that keeps looking back and trying to keep what was. Trying to “save” the past is to miss the current action of God in the present as God brings the future. Only this attitude of risk can offer a healthy perspective on the past.

Do not let participants avoid talking about change by making “quick fixes” on what is already part of the past tradition. Ronald Heifetz, in *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (8) warns against avoiding our real work by changing truly open questions into mechanical questions that have quick, technical answers (e.g., “if we only could call our pastor, everything will work out”). Some problems have no clear-cut solutions. Some problems are themselves not so clear-cut. Often both the questions and answers are open and not clear. But they can be *perceived* and discussed. Your congregation needs to discuss these questions in order to seek God’s will for the future.

## Process

- Give each participant a copy of the Isaiah passage from page one of this guide, along with the passage from II Corinthians above. Break the participants into quartets and ask them to discuss how *letting the past go* and *welcoming fresh new things* applies to their experience of the congregation.
- Show the final portion of the video on “Building Identity Connections” and the conclusion. (This portion of the video is about 5 minutes long.)
- Give each participant a copy of “Building Identity Connections.” Share with the group (with the *Guidelines* box on page 23 of *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations* copied onto 8.5 by 11 paper) who a “typical” worshiper is according to the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. On newsprint record what participants’ responses are to the question: “Who is a typical member of **our** congregation?” Ask them to think about this in light of the three previous sessions as well as the results in “Building Identity Connections.”
- Have each participant write two phrases on an 8.5 by 11 sheet, using printed letters large enough to be read easily. The first phrase should describe the greatest need the congregation has in the eyes of the participant. The second phrase should describe the greatest need the community has in the eyes of the participant.
- If the number of participants is less than 12, have each one hold up his or her sheet and say what is on it, and then post it on a wall. With larger groups, break into groups of six participants each, have all participants share their statements, and note any statements that are similar. Then have all participants post their phrases on a wall.
- Hand a copy of *A Very Brief Vision Statement* exercise (see Appendix B at the back of this guide) to each person, and ask him or her to do the exercise in silence. This will take 10 or more minutes. Then ask each participant to read his or her vision statement, without comment, to the whole group.
- If there is time, ask each participant to say (as you record it on newsprint) what he or she perceives to be the congregation’s *single most important issue*.

Assure everyone that the session and other leaders of the congregation will take all comments and documents from these discussions seriously, and that a printed summary will be provided for any member of the congregation to read. This summary will make every attempt to highlight the diversity of perception and will draw no conclusions about what needs to be done.

Thank them for their work, close with prayer, and let the group applaud your hard work as a leader.

## Suggestions For Follow-Up Steps

- Organize the report by listing your findings into four categories.

Spiritual Connections Findings  
Inside Connections Findings  
Outside Connections Finding  
Identity Connections Findings

These findings could be written in paragraph form or by using bullet lists.

- Follow these findings with all of the brief visions statements. There could be another session in which participants would, by noting the similarities and differences in the statements, work toward a brief *group* vision statement incorporating the common themes as well as the divergent perceptions.
- Before setting goals for the future work of your congregation, it would be necessary to use demographic data (see Appendix A for sources) to see if “who is out there” in the community around the congregation fits the perceptions of your leaders. Listing the findings in the data can be a group session that usually brings forth both “Aha” and “I don’t think this is accurate” statements. Someone who knows the community data and who could speak about it without recommending actions to be taken would also illuminate “who is out there.” Some congregations reshape their ministries on this information. Many do not.
- Provide your summary report along with your congregation’s tabulated results from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey to the entire congregation. A congregational gathering in which your results are in print for everyone to see is a way to increase interest in and ownership of exactly who is coming to your congregation and why they come. A large crowd can be broken into small groups in which the question would be: “What does this mean for our life together and our mission in the community?”
- *Connecting* leads to strategy questions. It may lead you to modify your current Mission Statement and Goals, or it may motivate you to write a new Mission Statement and develop related Goals. Do this remembering it is a very dangerous course to have a long-range planning group determine your future ministry if that group does not use all of this information. Do not give your future to a small group of “people who know” unless your people’s perceptions are in the process. They count.

**Notes:**

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message – The Prophets* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2000)
2. Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1991)
3. James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987)
4. Celia A. Hahn, *Growing in Authority, Relinquishing Control* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1994)
5. Hopewell
6. Hahn
7. Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995)
8. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1994)

## Appendix A

### Sources of Demographic Information

There are many sources of demographic information. This list shows several that might be helpful to you.

**Your denomination’s Web site:** For example, the **Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services office** provides a free demographic report for the community around your congregation on the web at: <http://www.pcusa.org/research/demographics.htm>. Call 1-888-728-7228 ext.2040 for more information.

**U.S. Census Bureau:** Provides information for counties and cities/towns with more than 25,000 people (<http://quickfacts.census.gov>); the American FactFinder online provides popular tables and maps for the U.S., states, counties, cities/towns, or zipcodes—use the “show more” links to see additional information (<http://factfinder.census.gov>).

**The Association of Religion Data Archives:** This site provides free community data, maps, and other tools (demographic maps at <http://www.thearda.com/DemographicMap> and Community Builder at <http://www.thearda.com/profile>).

**MissionInsites:** Provides demographic packages and other tools for congregations and judicatories. Learn more at: <http://www.missioninsite.com/>.

**Percept:** Provides a variety of demographic packages and other products for congregations and judicatories. Learn more online at: <http://www.perceptgroup.com/>.

## Appendix B

### Personal Vision Statement For My Congregation or Parish

Create a statement that accurately and vividly portrays **your congregation's** vision of faithful mission as you think God wants it to be. Use the Church of the Brethren statement below as a format. Let your imagination run wild on God's "paths in the wild."

**Reference Point:** The Church of the Brethren Vision Statement:

*Continuing the work of Jesus  
Peacefully  
Simply  
Together*

**Format:**

1. Begin with an "...ing" word, for example Seeking, Completing, Desiring, . . .
2. Give the "...ing" word a **content phrase**, for example, the will of God, the way of the cross
3. Develop the statement with **descriptive modifiers**, for example, Fervently, Openly

**Workspace:**

My Statement for \_\_\_\_\_ our church, congregation, or parish:

- My "...ing" word:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- My content phrase:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- My descriptive modifiers: