

Guidelines for Congregations Walking through Difficult Times

The **mission of God** in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church.

Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its **mission in the world** for its service to God.

Christ gives to the Church its faith and life, its **unity and mission** in order and discipline.

In the power of the Spirit, Jesus Christ draws worshipping communities and individual believers into the sovereign activity of the triune God at all times and places. As the Church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. United with Christ in the power of the Spirit, the Church seeks not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

--excerpts from *The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity* in the Book of Order

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When congregations are in times of transition, uncertain about what their future holds, it is normal to feel overwhelmed and unsure – even alone. **This document is designed to remind Flint River congregations that no worshipping body ever need walk through a difficult or uncertain season alone.** Our presbytery’s primary purpose is to “support the local witness of congregations” as we encourage, engage, empower, and equip them to be Light and Salt for the world. The reality is this: God has given us everything we need to do the mission to which we are called – here and now. Sometimes, we simply need a reminder – especially when the congregation’s journey seems particularly difficult.

PROCESS

When a congregation is uncertain about what the future may hold for them due to reasons of sustainability and/or mission or both, it is both wise – *and essential* -- to contact presbytery staff and our presbytery’s Committee on Ministry (COM) as soon as possible. **This process is designed to be congregation-driven always.** The presbytery will partner with the congregation when requested and will also step back when its presence is no longer needed. In order for this process to be fruitful, a deep commitment to honest connection with God, the presbytery, and one another is crucial.

The aim of this process is two-fold:

- to develop – and deepen – trust between a congregation and the presbytery
- to provide the congregation with meaningful resources and helpful relationships so that it may function out of a place of God-given strength and missional focus

RESOURCES

- **Denominational Resources**
 - www.presbyterianfoundation.org contains many helpful resources online
 - <https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/project-regeneration/> is a particularly helpful tool for congregations wondering about how to reboot post-COVID or how to re-invent themselves in a new season of ministry
 - Robert Hay is our liaison and he can be reached at 770.289.3884 or 855.514.3152 or robert.hay@presbyterianfoundation.org
 - <https://chchurches.org> (*The Center for Healthy Churches*) contains many online resources, particularly online webinars and weekly newsletters

- **Presbytery Resources**

- www.flintriverpresbytery.org holds countless resources online
 - Reach out to staff to discover what will be most helpful to your congregation. Your Small Church Coordinators, Executive Presbyter, and Ministry Associate are here to help in particular ways.
 - Remember that you also have a COM liaison that has been connected to your congregation as well for support and prayer!
 - Remember that we can also form a network of gifted folks in your area which can help with a variety of issues.
 - Legal issues and property issues are two areas with which the presbytery can help.
 - We can also connect you with congregations who have experienced the same sort of challenges so that you can learn from – *and with* – them.
 - Deep listeners, skilled question-askers, and imaginative dreamers who can see possibilities are the other kinds of folks which will be helpful to you along the way.
 - Use the following resources which have been used within our presbytery and borne fruit.

[A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation](#) by Rouse and Van Gelder

A much-needed resource for leaders who want to be agents of hope to congregations struggling to find their way in a changing world. In the place of quick fixes and easy answers, this book offers specific direction that is theologically grounded, biblically based, and deeply practical. 9 chapters with discussion questions at the end.

[Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink its Mission and Practice](#) by Joan Gray

This resource encourages churches to remember that “rowboat churches” depend largely on human effort. When church budgets shrink and membership declines, rowboat churches frantically row harder against a current, often frustrated and disappointed at their efforts. Sailboat churches, on the other hand, take up the oars, hoist sails, and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide them. This book will help leaders reframe their church’s mission and practice with the Holy Spirit as their guide. 10 chapters with discussion and 40 days of prayer to follow.

[The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts](#) by Snow

This resource offers a clear way for people to work together with hope and enthusiasm. Both a how-to manual and a journey of faith, this book includes step-by-step directions and a variety of personal insights, based on the example of Jesus. This book will help congregations discover their assets in order to mobilize them for ministry. Lots of charts and pictures with practical exercises for leaders to use or tweak as their situation merits.

[Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World](#) by Gil Rendle

A dense and incredibly insightful read which offers a shift in perspective on resources, discusses models of change, and offers suggestions for avoiding common pitfalls and working creatively.

How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season by Susan Beaumont

This book lays out leadership tasks appropriate for liminal seasons, blending sound organizational practices with a contemplative leadership stance. An attitude of wonder and openness to discovery further enhances this ready. Focus points in this resource focus on clarifying institutional purpose, shaping institutional memory, deepening communal discernment and nurturing emergence.

QUESTIONS to CONSIDER as you Face Your Future

- For what purpose was your congregation formed? What has been its primary focus over the years? Be as specific as possible.
- What are spiritual practices that are particularly meaningful to your congregation? Can you imagine how they might provide comfort to you in times of uncertainty or necessary risk?
- What does it look like to trust God – as a congregation? What are some Biblical stories and metaphors you can draw from as you walk this process which is often nebulous and undefined?
- What is the financial health of the congregation? Is current giving on par with the past 10 years? Increasing? Decreasing? How does its giving compare with denominational averages?
- How well has your building been maintained? Is it being used regularly or much of it unused during the week? Is it cost-prohibitive to maintain? Is your congregation's identity closely tied to the church building? Is yes, in what way? Can you imagine being a congregation in a new space? Imagine what that might look like.
- Who are the staff that currently lead the congregation? How do they specifically equip the congregation for its purpose? Does the size of staff seem appropriate to the size of the congregation? Explain.
- What are the programs that give shape and definition to the congregation? Are they lay-led? Staff-driven. List them and think carefully about their inception and the current administration required for them to continue.
- What are the skills most needed to support your congregation during this time?
- What are the resource you most need?
- Are there other PCUSA/ELCA/RCA/UCC congregations in the area? Are there ways in which you can meaningfully partner with sister PCUSA churches? Are there ways to share space? Remember that the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America), the Reformed Church of America (RCA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC) are all part of our denomination's Formula of Agreement which means that we can share pastoral leadership between these denominations much more easily.

saved as "Guidelines for Congregations – Difficult Times" in COM 2023 folder