



Mission Study Guidelines

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Introduction to the Mission Study: FAQs

What is a Mission Study?

A Mission Study is a 6- to 9-month study that a congregation undertakes to discern where the Spirit is leading them for their next season of ministry.

Why should we do a Mission Study?

One of the eternal and undeniable truths about God’s people is that we stray. We regularly get distracted or complacent.¹ Our Reformed heritage is rooted in the ministries of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others who realized that, in certain areas of faith and practice, the Church had strayed significantly from what (it said) it believed. The Reformation gave birth to a slogan: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, or “The Church reformed, always being reformed.” The second half of this slogan reminds the Church that we are in constant need of reformation. Being faithful means acknowledging this truth, regularly examining our lives and practices, and asking the Holy Spirit to correct, re-direct, and shepherd us afresh on the mission to which God has called us. A Mission Study is a process and a tool that a healthy church uses to regularly clarify God’s call and measure the congregation’s fidelity to that call (G-2.0301).

When should we do a Mission Study?

While there is never a bad time to conduct a Mission Study, there are at least four occasions when presbytery recommends a congregation perform a Mission Study:

- Before beginning a search for a new pastor/associate pastor²
- In order to assess the health of the congregation
- When more than 7 years have passed since your last Mission Study
- Following trauma, conflict, or significant change in the congregation

¹ [Examples from Scripture]; the Church Life Cycle (appendix A) illustrates this dynamic from several different perspectives.

² Aside from its benefits to the congregation, the Mission Study Report assists the Transitional Relations Committee when responding to a congregation’s request to form a PNC (or APNC).

What if we recently completed a Mission Study?

If you just did one, it may not be necessary to perform another one. However, the presbytery may ask you to complete a new one, especially if the congregation has experienced trauma, conflict, or significant change.

Who conducts the Mission Study?

The Session appoints a Mission Study Team (MST) to conduct the Mission Study. Usually this is a team of five to seven people drawn from the Session and the congregation. There is also usually an advisor who has experience and/or training in performing a Mission Study. For most congregations this will be the Interim Pastor.³ If you are conducting a study without an Interim Pastor, please contact the COM through the Presbytery office as we may have resources to assist you.

Do we have to pause other church activities during the Mission Study?

Not at all. Although the MST will schedule a few events involving the entire congregation, team members will perform much of the research and study. Of course, it's a good idea for the MST to designate a specific member to be in frequent communication with the church administrator (or whoever maintains the church calendar) so as to avoid scheduling conflicts.

How long will the Mission Study take?

A congregation should plan to devote six to nine months to its Mission Study. Depending on recent events and/or present circumstances in the congregation, it may take even longer. While this may strike some people as overly long, a glance at what's involved will help one understand that this is a reasonable amount of time. In addition, the church must keep in mind that:

- 1) members of the MST are volunteers, with other responsibilities.
- 2) few (if any) of the MST members have conducted a Mission Study before. While the learning curve may not be terribly steep, neither is it simple "common sense."
- 3) Congregational involvement is an essential ingredient of an accurate and reliable Mission Study. Anyone who has led a church event knows that coordinating the involvement and schedules of dozens (if not hundreds) of church members - not to

³ In the Presbytery of the James, the Interim Pastor's contract stipulates that they are a MST member *ex officio*, serving as an advisor.

mention the church's own calendar - is far more easily said than done. It will take time.

- 4) The product of the Mission Study – the Report – will require not only people to write it, but also for the MST to edit it together and make sure that members agree with what is eventually set down on paper. (This may, um, require more than one meeting).

These are just a few considerations among many. The truth is, six to nine months only seems like a long time to someone who *expects* a shorter time (the next section addresses managing people's expectations). Alternatively, if people expected a Mission Study to take two years, and were told it would only be six to nine months, they would be relieved and grateful.

“Well Begun is Half Done” – Preparing for the Mission Study

Professional house painters will tell you that 30% or more of a quality paint job is the preparation. No amount of painting skill or technique can compensate for poor surface preparation. It's the same with a Mission Study: preparation is key. While this guide and your Interim Pastor (or Mission Study consultant) can direct you to resources and help you with analysis and writing the report, they are not in a position to prepare the congregation. They don't have years' worth of relationships with the congregation, and they don't enjoy the same level of trust as the church elders. Preparing the congregation for Mission Study is the responsibility of the Session and other members of influence. If the congregation is to be meaningfully engaged, it will be because the leaders they know and trust have helped them to understand why it's important, and have led by example in their own engagement.

Managing Expectations

A common impediment to conducting a quality Mission Study is lack of congregational engagement. Too often members approach the Mission Study expecting that 1) it will require yet more of their precious time, 2) it will interfere with the church ministries *they're* involved with, 3) it's not actually going to produce anything of value, 4) as soon as it's written it will be filed away on a top shelf in the church office closet and never again see the light of day, and 5) the only reason the church is “jumping through this hoop” anyway is so it can get on with electing a PNC and finding their permanent pastor.

In other words, congregants frequently bring these expectations to a Mission Study:

1. It will take way too long
2. It will compete with my ministry/committee
3. It's not worth my time
4. It's a waste of paper
5. It's just another bureaucratic hoop to jump through

These expectations may not be shared out loud, or at all. Folks may not even realize they have these expectations. Unless these expectations are managed early on by the MST or by the church and staff as a whole, the quality of input from the congregation - regardless of the MST's diligence and effort - will be suboptimal. Those expectations – like gutter bumpers in a bowling alley – will guide the process and ensure that they *are* fulfilled: the Mission Study will take up too much time, will compete with other church activities, be a waste of our time and resources and, in the end, useless.

So how does one go about conducting a Mission Study that people think is worthy of their time and effort, is helpful to leadership and the congregation moving forward, and will provide fresh insights and recommendations that will strengthen and refresh the church and its ministry?

It begins with church leadership and good quality communication.

Start With Why

After members of the MST are appointed, the Session should schedule a morning or afternoon with them to establish the goals and the expectations of the Mission Study, as well as the responsibilities of each party. These goals and expectations need to be rooted in the purpose of the Mission Study – i.e., Why are we doing one? Authors and researchers like Simon Sinek⁴, John Kotter⁵ and Rick Warren⁶ have recognized the fundamental importance of articulating purpose. Without a clearly- established purpose and a shared understanding, people will form their own reasons and motivations for doing a project. Those motivations will, in turn, shape people's engagement and performance, even when the task is clearly

⁴ Simon Sinek, Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action (New York: Portfolio/Penguin Random House, 2011)

⁵ John Kotter, Leading Change (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012)

⁶ Rick Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/HarperCollins, 2010)

stated. For example, a parent may tell a child to clean their room. The task is clear. Yet the parent may tell one child they must do so because their room is messy, and tell another child they must clean their room before cellphone privileges will be restored. While the task is the same in both instances, the reasons for doing so will have a distinct effect upon the child's motivation – and performance. Their motivation will determine the energy, focus and commitment the child brings to the task.

The Session and the MST need to be of one voice about the purposes of the Mission Study, both so that they can maintain focus, and so that they can communicate those purposes to the congregation. Once people are clear about the purposes of the Mission Study, it's much easier to shape and manage expectations.⁷ To some extent, the purposes will vary from church to church, depending on what has gone before (trauma, retirement, etc.). At minimum, however, it's important to keep the Mission Study's three primary purposes in front of everyone:

- To review the church's current position honestly and comprehensively (e.g., demographics, financials, etc.)
- To reflect thoughtfully and prayerfully on the nature of the church's context (neighborhood / city /country)⁸, especially how it has changed in recent years
- To hear what the Spirit is saying to us today

In other words, **1) Who Are We? 2) Who is Our Neighbor? and 3) Why Are We Here?** Or, more precisely, Why has God chosen to position us in this place, at this time?

Underlying these three main purposes are several truths to keep in mind, and to share with the congregation:

- A healthy church regularly reflects upon its ministries and its mission. The stories of God's people in scripture remind us not only that we regularly wander off course, but God is constantly seeking to return us to the path prepared for us.
- Every year brings change. To continue fulfilling our mission, we need to address that change thoughtfully, prayerfully, and intentionally.
- This process "primes" us – prepares and equips us – to identify new and emerging ministry possibilities where God may be calling us.

⁷ This doesn't mean that everyone in the congregation needs to agree with those purposes. There will always be outliers, naysayers and Doubting Thomases. But so long as leadership clearly and consistently articulates the purposes of the Mission Study, they are much better equipped to respond to questions about it.

⁸ Acts 1:8

The recommendations you make will be informed by data and guided by the Spirit, and not simply be reflections of members' personal opinions. You will be better equipped to answer questions about your decisions, and better able to respond to concerns raised by "squeaky wheels" in the congregation.

Session and the Mission Study

Even though Session is not the body conducting the Mission Study, it has an important role to play. As the Ruling Elders for the congregation, they will set the tone by 1) regularly reminding the congregation of the Study's purpose and importance; 2) frequently communicating its support for the Mission Study; and 3) encouraging the congregation's full participation. In addition to setting the tone, the Session also keeps the congregation informed and focused by regularly reminding the congregation:

- Of the "3 Questions" (p. 7) to the congregation
- How the MST's activities are designed to help the church answer these questions
- That, when engaged sincerely and prayerfully, this process will help the congregation discern God's path for the near future, and begin walking that path.

Positive Expectations

With this information in mind, how might you reframe the "default" expectations (p.4) that a congregant brings to the Mission Study?

1. **~~It will take way too long.~~** It can be helpful to ask oneself, "How long is too long?" The necessity of seeking the Spirit's direction for our lives is not in question. The question we face is how much time should the church devote to this endeavor? Experience over the years has shown that 6-9 months is a reasonable length of time to devote to this process, so it's important to budget sufficient time to do it well. Particularly since people aren't "on site" 40 hours a week (as with an organization), this process could easily take a year. However, leadership has discussed this matter and agreed to this target.
2. **~~It will compete with my ministry/committee.~~** One of our aims is to determine how best to align our ministries with our *current* realities and mission. Each of us has a responsibility to the congregation to pursue our ministries in the most effective and faithful way possible. The Mission Study is a way to ensure that we're doing this. After all, while your committee's responsibility may be to keep current the church's

website and social media presence, no one is served by using a dial-up modem when broadband is available. We're asking you to help us determine how to move our ministries forward given our current situation.

3. ~~**It's Not Worth My Time.**~~ This sentiment often arises from a person's experience with a previous (poorly executed) Mission Study. A wise person once said, "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Devoting much time and effort to a process, only to see the results of that effort ignored, is a surefire recipe for disappointment and cynicism. For this reason it's incumbent upon leadership not only to support the congregation throughout the Mission Study, but also to begin thinking early in the process about how it will be able to make good, faithful, and positive use of the findings and recommendations in the report. Regularly remind the congregation that their input and engagement is vital to a meaningful Mission Study.
4. ~~**It's a waste of paper.**~~ Any Mission Study that is incomplete, half-baked, or poorly undertaken, deserves to sit on a shelf (or put in the recycling bin). But your church's Mission Study will have sufficient thought, prayer, engagement, congregational input, community analysis, and scriptural grounding to be of considerable help to the church, to its Session and to its next pastor. In addition, it will include recommendations to help the congregation measure its progress in the years to come. It will be a living document – not just something that fills a three-ring binder.
5. ~~**It's just another bureaucratic hoop to jump through.**~~ This couldn't be further from the truth. Most church MIFs, using a variety of words and phrases, end up communicating to a candidate, "We want someone to lead us to the next place" – without any idea of what that "next place" might be. Ambiguity and aimlessness do not benefit a pastoral search. From time to time, however, a church publishes a MIF that says, "WE are the church, and God is calling us to THIS ministry. We're looking for someone to shepherd and guide us along THIS path." These words communicate that the church is not expecting the pastor to define the church. Rather, they know who they are and where God has called them, and seek a pastor who will help guide them along that path. This is the basis for a strong and fruitful ministry together – and it begins with the congregation doing the necessary work of the Mission Study.

“I Am Doing a New Thing”

Lastly, honestly *expect* to be surprised by the Spirit, to have your eyes opened to something new. Joseph’s eyes were opened to the true purposes of providence in his life (Gen 50:20); Esther realized that hers was a larger purpose than she had imagined (Esther 4:16); Job’s eyes were opened to a cosmic reality far greater than his own (Job 42:1-6); Elizabeth was given to see the truth surrounding her cousin’s unborn child (Luke 1:41ff.); Peter was crushed to realize the truth of Jesus’ prophecy (Matt 26:75), and later dumbfounded by the unorthodox breadth of God’s grace (Acts 10:28).

God is always seeking to make God’s self and God’s will known to us, because God loves us far more than we can ever know, and wants us to enjoy the life offered to us through Christ. Our natural tendency as flawed human beings is to settle on what works and then cling to the familiar, even when we begin to see that it no longer serves its original purpose. It is we who must be intentional about seeking God’s will to move forward. God is faithful, and God’s mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:23).

Conducting the Mission Study

Now that we are “well begun,” let’s take a closer look at the steps involved. The Mission Study consists of five main phases:

I. Preparation

Session

MST

Congregation

II. Gathering Information

	Congregation	Community	Calling
Who ⁹	Demographic Analysis	Demographic Analysis	Scripture Study & Reading
What	Ministries Analysis	Cultural Analysis	Prayer
Where	Congregational Survey	Visitation & Engagement	Discussion

III. Analyzing & Interpreting the Data

IV. Making Recommendations

V. Writing the Report

1) Orientation: Seeking God

We will rely on our saying again, “Well begun is half done!” A faithful and effective Mission Study is grounded in seeking God’s will for the next season in the life of your congregation. Session appoints a team (committee) to conduct the Mission Study. The Mission Study Team (MST) is responsible for designing each step of the Mission Study and then implementing it.

⁹ See p. 13, “II. Gathering Information”

2) Appoint Mission Study Team (MST)

The Session appoints a team (committee) to conduct the Mission Study. The Mission Study Team (which shall be referred to as MST for the rest of this document) is responsible for designing each step of the Mission Study and then implementing it.

3) Demographic Study Of Community

Part of the process of understanding what work God has to do for us in a certain time and place is getting to know the needs of the community to which we minister. As part of the assessment of the community a demographic study is to be conducted, in order to understand who our neighbors are now and who they probably will be in the coming years.

The goal is to learn about the community to which we minister is to interview community leaders about what they perceive as the needs of the community. This is often an eye-opening experience for the congregation.

4) Congregational Survey and Gatherings

A survey of the congregation, about who they are and what they desire in the church, is an effective tool for getting a decent amount of information from many members and presenting it in a single report. Again, we often think we know what everyone in the church thinks but we rarely ask them and are often surprised by the results when we do. This includes financial review, member demographics, property review, ministry review, etc. As a means to gather information the MST will design a way for members of the congregation to gather for 8-12 hours in total.

5) Written Report Done by Committee, Approved by Session and Reviewed by COM (*if writing a MIF*)

After the Congregational Gatherings, the MST will continue to develop the ideas gathered from the congregation and write the Mission Study Report.

6) Report Presented to Congregation

Once both the Session and COM have reviewed the Mission Study Report, it should be presented to the congregation. Copies of the report should be available to the congregation.

7) Session Implements Recommendations of Report

At the next meeting of the Session after its review by COM, the Session should begin to decide how to use the Mission Study and how to implement the new Vision with its Goals and Objectives.

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I. Preparation

The reasons for thorough preparation were covered earlier (pp. 5-10). The steps are:

- A. **Session Training** – The Interim Pastor / presbytery advisor is primarily responsible for this task.

- B. **MST Selection and Training** – At the same time, Session (in cooperation with the Interim Pastor or POJ Advisor) will determine who it will ask to serve as members of the Mission Study Team (the MST is a committee of the Session). We suggest five people, though it may be as few as three for small churches, but no more than seven for larger churches.
 1. The MST should include at least one member of Session, though the majority of the Team should not currently be serving on Session.
 2. Session should consider the entire congregation when choosing potential members. It will be helpful if at least one MST member has skills in the following areas: writing; public speaking; expertise or familiarity with handling and processing data; Biblical literacy; and ease in leading group prayer. In addition, all MST members should be “team players” who will prayerfully consider what others have to say, and who will honestly share their own thoughts; people who appreciate the church’s traditions and history, while also being open to change – even significant change; and people who fully understand and accept the commitment of time and effort this Study will require, and can resist the urge to rush things.
 3. The Interim Pastor or POJ Advisor shall be an *ex officio* member of the MST.
 4. Members of the MST shall elect a moderator or chair, as well as a secretary to record notes.

Once Session has appointed the Team, they should read this Guide and come to their first meeting prepared to draft an outline of the process. This outline should include timelines, in conversation with the calendar of church activities scheduled for the

coming year. During this stage the Interim Pastor / POJ Advisor will help get the MST “up and running.”

NOTE: If the church has a copy of a previous Mission Study, the POJ recommends the MST refrain from reviewing it until the MST has concluded the “Gathering Information” phase. The primary aim of the Mission Study is to discern the church’s identity and mission today, not what people thought it was in the past. If, after concluding its own research, the MST reviews earlier Reports and discovers important and relevant information, it can discuss how that information affects their analysis, and whether to incorporate it into their own Report.

C. **Congregational Orientation** - Drawing on the FAQs and the Well-Begun sections above, Session should develop a plan for educating the congregation about the Mission Study.

1. Clearly communicate the Session’s positive expectations. This is particularly important at the beginning.
2. Make a schedule to communicate (and repeat!) information frequently through print media, electronically, online, and in person.
3. Remind people that the roots of our Presbyterian faith lay in Luther’s and Calvin’s realization that the Church needed reform; it was engaging in ministries that, over the years, had evolved to serve itself rather than God.
4. Make use of scripture to show how this is in keeping with the pattern of God’s people regularly returning to God.

II. Gathering Information

The most time-intensive stage of the Mission Study is Gathering Information. The Study focuses on three areas: **Congregation** (Who Are We?), **Community** (Who Is Our Neighbor?), and **Calling** (Why Are We Here?). In researching each area, one could say that the Study focuses broadly on three categories: people’s *identity*, *activity*, and *direction* – or **Who**, **What** and **Where**. Again, this is a broad characterization; they are not meant to exclude data, and you will find that the categories overlap. Still, they may help you maintain a general focus for your research

There is no fixed timeline or sequence for this stage of the study. Some MSTs “divide and conquer,” assigning each of the areas to specific team members; others choose to use the timeline as their guide, shifting assignments as the situation changes; still others assign certain tasks to people across the areas (e.g., one person handles all the demographic research). The only “correct” way is whichever way works best for your team.

A. Congregation (3 parts)

1. **Demographic Analysis** (Who) - The Demographic Analysis focuses on historical information and congregational demographics to illustrate the congregation's identity today, and over time.
 - a. **History** – for this section, tell a story. Focus on events that have shaped the congregation. Reports that contain only a timeline of pastors and construction projects are of little utility here.
 - i. Don't gloss over challenges and trials; they often have a greater effect upon the church than the celebrations. At the same time, there's no need to go granular. Be both honest and prudent.
 - ii. Should you want to include pastoral and/or construction timelines, it may be useful to include them in an appendix and simply reference them here.
 - b. **Congregational Demographics** – This section contains such information as membership levels, attendance levels, members' ages, marital status, racial/ethnic make-up, etc. The good news is that most of this data can easily be found in the Annual Reports that your clerk files with the denomination each year.
2. **Ministries Analysis** (What) This is a “granular look” at the components of your congregation. When gathering this data, resist the temptation to confirm existing assumptions and biases. Rather, enter this with an open mind – or maybe with a bias to challenging those assumptions. It can be helpful to involve in this process at least one person who is relatively new to the congregation; a new set of eyes often sees things that the rest of us have learned to ignore, or take for granted.
3. **Congregational Survey** (Where) – These are essential to the work of a Mission Study, not only because of the data they can yield, but also (and sometimes more importantly) because they are tangible signs to the congregation that they and their thoughts about TPC will be a vital part of the Mission Study. The Transitional Pastor has several resources to assist with this process; more can be found by googling “Congregational Survey.” The MST can use surveys and questions:
 - To “take the temperature” of the congregation at present (hopes, fears, joys, disappointments, etc.)
 - To help surface issues from the congregation's past that remain unaddressed

- To ascertain what values are important to the congregation
- To ascertain what “things” (i.e., physical objects) are important to the congregation
- To learn how the congregation understands its identity and its purpose
- To learn what the congregation believes about the community
- To assess how the congregation might react to change

This list is not exhaustive; the MST may find it helpful to ask the congregation certain questions earlier in the process and then, based on their data analysis and interpretation, conduct a second survey to go deeper in areas they deem important, and to address previously-unexamined issues that have come to light.

Coming up with good, useful questions is both art and science. Many online survey services today will administer their surveys for free; the trade-off is that they get your anonymized data, for their own research purposes. The MST may want to come up with its own questions. If so, you want to maximize congregational participation while also getting quality data. Keep the following factors in mind:

- Think carefully about how the answers to survey questions will (or won't) help the Study. Too many questions will frighten off some people, and there are some things we might like to know that aren't actually useful. Start by clarifying what you want to know and why you want to know it. For example, A question such as “Are you willing to assist with childcare during the worship service?”
- Realize and accept the fact that, for the most part, people's thoughts and opinions will be heavily influenced, if not actually restricted, by their experience. For most of your respondents, their only experience with the Church is in context that is denominational and 20th-century.
- Consider how you will administer the survey.

Multiple choice questions are easier to tabulate, but force a respondent to choose among pre-determined answers. Conversely, short-answer questions allow the respondent to express themselves more fully, but are harder to quantify for purposes of analysis. Aim for a mix.

B. Community (3 parts)

1. **Demographic Analysis** (Who) - The MST will research the community where God has placed the congregation. Much of this research is usually accomplished using a demographic study/analysis prepared by a commercial vendor who specializes in this service.¹⁰ These analyses collate publicly-available data from a wide variety of sources to present information on a population within a specific geographic area with respect to ages, genders, marital status, education levels, population density, employment types and levels, political leanings, faith preferences, church engagement, religious beliefs, leisure activities, and many other characteristics.
2. **Cultural Analysis** (What/Where) – This is one of the most important, and perhaps also most unnerving, part of the Mission Study. It is important because North American culture in the 21st century has undergone significant and fundamental change, and particular with respect to the church’s place in society. And it’s unnerving because, for the first time since European explorers and settlers arrived on this continent, The Church – as far as much of society is concerned – has become irrelevant. One cannot overstate the importance of this fact to the conduct, findings, and recommendations of the Mission Study. We are greatly hindered in this endeavor by the fact that ALL our experience of “church” has been in a modern and post-modern 20th-century context. NONE of us has significant experience (if any) of thriving as a mainline congregation in the 21st century. All of our ideas, suggestions, proposals, visions, etc. are firmly grounded in a culture that no longer exists. This is not a moral judgment – it’s just a fact. In order to *move forward*, we must relinquish the quixotic quest to preserve the past, and instead boldly explore this new world where God’s Spirit is, indeed, quite active. Honest exploration requires us to set aside our assumptions (based on our past experience) about what will work and what others like, and instead be intentional about opening our eyes to a new culture where Church is never more than just an option (and often less desirable than spending the weekend camping, or at the beach, or even half-listening to a Zoomed service at the kitchen table while drinking your second cup of coffee and trying to keep the kids from fighting).

This phenomenon has been studied and written about since at least the 1990’s, and there are countless books, magazine articles, blog posts, etc. addressing it. The seminary library has shelves full of books on the topic. A Google search

¹⁰ See Appendix 3, “Research Resources”

(in 2023) turns up 67 million hits. Yet most of our congregations are only vaguely aware of this development, and few (if any) have taken the time to explore the implications of this development for their own congregation. Rather, most are simply hoping that the Church they have always known will just – *continue*. This, despite the stream of reports documenting an inexorable loss of members in the denomination, along with a just-as-inexorable rise in the number of church closings. We do not know, and have not been taught, how to flourish and minister as a church in 21st-century North America – *because no one has ever done this before*. (Remember people saying, “Well, we’ve never had to do this during a pandemic before”?)

In this respect, the MST is an invaluable instrument in the hands of the Spirit to help the Church see the world as it is today, and discern the path God has prepared in this new world. To you has been given the task of scouting out this new land and reporting back to leadership (see Numbers 13-14 for an excellent – and cautionary – parallel to our own situation). The Mission Study was initially conceived of as an aid to preparing a congregation to call a new pastor, an “updating” designed to help members conduct ministries, perhaps to stimulate changes in staff configuration, and to inform the writing of the MIF. These all remain valid purposes. But by far the greatest and most important responsibility of the MST is to help re-orient the congregation to this new reality, and help them to discern God’s path in this new land. Indeed, nothing the MST can do will prepare the congregation more fully and effectively to call a new pastor than this “exegesis of culture.” Absent this analysis, your congregation will continue to assume that your church and your neighbors are the same people we were 30 years ago, with the same priorities as 30 years ago, inhabiting the same world as 30 years ago – *simply because that’s the only reference point they have*. Your work can help lay the groundwork for a new chapter in your congregation’s life.

3. **Visitation & Engagement** (What/Where) – As important as it is to read and learn about this new culture, it is even more important to spend time in it. Now, this is not to suggest that you have been living in your bedroom for the last 20 years. Of course you have been living and functioning in the world this whole time. Nevertheless, it has been primarily, if not exclusively, a world of your own making.¹¹ We largely choose where we will work, with whom we will eat, how we will spend our time and our money, etc. These choices naturally form and inform our perspectives and opinions. It’s also

¹¹ See David Foster Wallace’s Kenyon College 1985 Commencement Address, “This Is Water,” for a profound (and humorous) meditation on this truth: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ms2BvRbjOYo>

true, generally speaking, that we tend to associate with people who are like us. While there's nothing necessarily wrong with that, it leaves us with limited understanding of, and insight into, the lives of people who are NOT like us. For example, people who consider church and/or faith to be unimportant. Or people whose life situation makes attending Sunday morning worship a practical impossibility. Or people who would like to attend church but can't afford the extra gas, or bus fare. Or people whose early love for the church was twisted and poisoned by abuse from a church leader. These are the people who are not coming to your church. These are the folks to whom God is sending God's people. These are the residents of this new, un-churched age, for whom the traditional way of engaging with God are not options – but who nevertheless are loved by God, and yearn for the true fellowship of God's Spirit.

“But if traditional practices don't work with such people, what will?” Exactly. This is what you've been asked to learn, and to share with the congregation. And while it's necessary to learn about this new culture, the answer to this question must be grounded in actual lived experience with others. With neighbors. “What will I say? What questions should I or shouldn't I ask?” Don't paralyze yourself by overthinking it. You're simply meeting some new people. Making new friends. Learning about them – what's important to them, what they like and don't like, etc. NOTE: this is *not* about persuading people to visit or join your church. That should be the furthest thing from your mind. Rather, remember Philippians 2:3ff. and, like our Lord, approach your neighbors humbly, as a servant, with their interests in mind. The Bible is a story about Going. Numerous times God tells God's people to go – somewhere (Gen 12:1-3; Ex 3:10; Jonah; Matt 28:16-20; etc.). Jesus is our example: He left heaven to go to earth; he left Nazareth to go minister to the Jews; he left the Mount of Transfiguration to go to his passion and death in Jerusalem. Even our liturgy ends by acknowledging that, as God's people, we are sent by God to go forth into the world.¹² Visiting with neighbors may seem unnatural, simply because that's not the traditional way, the way we've done it in the past. But it is a cornerstone of the church, and one we must practice if we are to discern how the Spirit is moving today among people who are not in the church – or at least, not in our church.

To be clear, these visits need not be limited to members of the MST. If they wish, the MST could design a framework for other members (Session? Deacons? Elders and deacons not currently serving?) to conduct some of

¹² PCUSA Book of Common Worship (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 33.

these visits. So long as people steer clear of “recruiting new church members,” there are a number of ways to approach this. But the bottom line is that you are seeking to know and love your neighbors. And the Mission Study is not complete if it does not include this component.

C. Calling (3 parts)

1. **Scripture Study & Reading** - The fundamental question grounding the study is, “What is God’s will for us today?” Yet this is often the one that suffers from lack of attention. We tend to default to the “corporate” practice: do the research, perform the analysis, publish the results, and present our recommendations. Unfortunately, this practice excludes the single most important part of a Mission Study: asking God this question, and listening for God’s answer.
 - Prayer: listening and speaking
 - Scripture reading – esp. Numbers 13 & 14
 - Discussion and discernment
2. **Prayer**
3. **Discussion**

III. Analyzing & Interpreting the Data

The analysis and interpretation stage is where the MST is asked to answer the question, “So what?”

IV. Making Recommendations

Having gathered the data, analyzed the information contained in the data and prayerfully interpreted the implications of that analysis, the MST is now equipped to make its recommendations for moving forward. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Be concise.** The previous sections in the Report will have space for details, background, analysis, etc. The Recommendations section, ideally, is just one page long, and certainly no more than two. This will be the “ready reference” for Session and the pastor moving forward.

- **Be specific: What and How.** The Session has entrusted you with the mission of thoughtfully reviewing your congregation’s current situation and prayerfully discerning God’s will for the congregation moving forward, in order that you might share *what* you learned and provide specific guidance on *how* to do proceed.
 - ***Begin each recommendation with the responsible party and a verb.***
Starting each recommendation with the responsible party will prevent you from slipping into the “passive voice.” This is a frustratingly common practice that hobbles many organizations, because it jettisons all responsibility for action. You can usually recognize the passive voice by the use of the verb “be” – for example, “We recommend...”
 - ... that a Thursday night worship service *be started*...
 - ... that children *be given* children’s Bibles...
 - ... that neighbors *be invited* to church events...

While the sentiments here may be good, no one has been assigned the task of making them happen.

- Who will start the new worship service – the pastor? The worship leader? The Worship committee?
- Who will purchase the children’s Bibles? With what money? And who will give them out?
- Who will invite the neighbors? Will invitations be mailed or delivered in person?

The lack of specificity and responsible parties creates ambiguity and invites confusion. Clearer and more helpful recommendations would read,

- ... that the pastor work with the Worship Committee to develop a schedule and a liturgy for a 7pm Thursday worship service...
- ... that the Christian Education committee purchase children’s Bibles at the beginning of each year for all elementary school children who have not received one in the past, and that the DCE present these Bibles to the children at the Mother’s Day worship service.
- ... that deacons, whether currently serving or not, gather in groups of two to four and walk the local neighborhood (bounded by Main Street, Maple Avenue, Oak Grove Rd. and Walnut Court) two weeks before each church event and distribute invitations created by the Church Administrator to each household...

Now, these are just recommendations. Session may choose to adopt them completely, or only in part, or not at all. What's important for the report is that you provide the Session with a solid starting point, which includes these essential elements.

- **Recommend a timeline.** It's not uncommon for initiatives and new projects – even those approached with excitement and energy – to fall apart because of the lack of a schedule. A timeline helps keep us accountable and provides others with a helpful reference. The second and third recommendations above already include some scheduling (Mother's Day; two weeks before a church event). You might add to the first recommendation, "The church should hold the first of these new worship services no later than August 15, 2023."
- **Ground your Recommendations in your Analysis and Interpretation.** This is an important aspect of the recommendations that MSTs sometimes neglect. A Report may be filled with data and analysis, and yet contain recommendations that have no relation whatsoever to that data. How can this happen? Simple – someone with influence, either on the MST or close to it, thinks it's "a good idea." Start a men's ministry. Open a clothes closet. Create a new staff position for IT. There are people in your congregation who, with only the best intentions, are convinced that their suggestion will help the church. But if your research does not support that recommendation, you have a responsibility to ensure it does not appear in the Report. Including it only compromises the integrity of the Report and undermines its usefulness in people's eyes. Instead, you might say to that person something like, "That's an interesting suggestion, John. The Report is limited to documenting the results of our research, but I would urge you to share that recommendation with the Fellowship Committee. They're always open to new ideas."
- **Highlight two or three as priorities.** Depending on your research and prayer, you may have numerous recommendations. This is fine. As mentioned above, this will be a key reference document for the Session and the pastor for years to come. However, to avoid spreading church resources too thinly at the beginning, highlight **no more than three** recommendations to be pursued immediately. The Session and congregation can focus on these, and then move on to other recommendations once the high-priority items are well-begun.

V. Writing the Report

The Mission Study Report is a synthesis of the MST's work. For purposes of readability, it can be helpful to have one person write and "wordsmith" the final copy. This helps maintain a consistent tone and voice, which will make it easier for readers to focus on the content. The Report should include:

- A title page and a Table of Contents
- An Executive Summary (one to two pages) at the beginning of the report
- Summary conclusions at the end of each section. These conclusions are good places to put your Analysis of the Data
- Clear and concise presentation of information
- Enough color and graphics to provide helpful illustrations, but not so much as to overwhelm the report

Next Steps

Once the final draft of the Mission Study Report is complete, the MST meets with the Session to present the Report and answer questions. This discussion may prompt the MST to make a few minor changes to the Report, but at this point, the work of the MST is largely finished. Congratulations!

Session Review / edits

Since the MST is a committee of the Session, it falls to the Session to review and take action on the MST's Report. The MST will have spent significant time working on the Report, and the Session's new set of eyes can provide a helpful second look. In particular, the Session's review should include:

- What beliefs and assumptions does the Report confirm? Which ones does it challenge?
- What new data does the Report reveal?
- Does the Report address the three main questions of Identity, Neighbor and Purpose?
- Does the Report address existing topics of concern?

- Does the Report clearly link its recommendations to its data?

At the same time, Session should not receive this as a “rough draft” for them to revise. Grammatical and typographical corrections are welcome, but so long as the MST members have their names on the report, it is their work, not the Session’s.

Session members should read the Report individually on their own, contacting an MST representative with questions, before gathering to discuss the Report. Depending on the size of the Report, you may want to budget up to two hours for discussion. During this review Session should clarify the meanings of any unclear item in the Report, and answer the bulleted questions (above). Secondly, the Session should consider how it will respond to the Report.

Of course, the congregational will want to see the Report, and the MST will want to share the fruit of their labors with them. One way to accomplish this is to schedule a Town Hall meeting with the congregation, where the MST can review the report in detail and answer questions about the Report. There will also be questions about the recommendations. Ideally, the data cited in the recommendations will answer (even forestall) the question, “Why did you recommend this?” If not, the MST can answer. But the next question – “So (when) are we going to do this?” – is one the Session should be prepared to respond to, if not answer outright. Session may be at the point where it has chosen to accept all the recommendations, and to pursue the high-priority ones immediately. However, it may not have made a decision yet on some of the recommendations, or perhaps it may want to amend some – change the timeline or the responsible party, e.g. Whatever the case, everyone on Session should be clear by the time of the Town Hall meeting as to how Session will respond to each of the recommendations, even when a response might be “we’re planning to discuss it further.”

Publication

NOTE: if presbytery requested the Mission Study pursuant to allowing the congregation to elect a PNC, see “COM Review” (below) before proceeding with this section.

Once submitted by the MST, the Report is the property of the Session, and Session may use or disseminate it as it chooses. You may not want to post the entire report online, or if you do, you might consider waiting a month or two.

That said, experience has shown that something as significant as this has the potential to cause at least a little disruption, particularly among church members who have not been terribly engaged in recent months, and/or who did not attend the Town Hall meeting. The Report is a broad-ranging document, and its data provides context that could be key in understanding the reasons behind some of the recommendations. Lacking this context,

some members might be alarmed at something they read. Accordingly, Session might want to:

- Wait a month or two before posting the entire report online, if it .
- Provide members with paper copies of the Executive Summary and the Recommendations at the Town Hall Meeting. If Session has already made some decisions concerning their response, include a page with this information.
- Explain to people that printing costs money and uses paper

COM Review (conditional)

If your congregation has conducted the Mission Study as a step of the process to call a new pastor, the COM may ask to review the Report before giving the congregation permission to elect a PNC. If the Session has published a response, then it should provide COM with a copy of that response, as well. As for timing, check with the presbytery or COM at the beginning of the Mission Study to learn COM's meeting schedule. It's never pleasant to submit something to a committee for approval, only to learn afterwards that they met the previous, and won't meet again for another month (or two - !) Plan to submit your report a week to ten days before COM meets (find out their deadline for agenda items).

Used by PNC to write MIF

Lastly, if you will be electing a PNC, that committee will rely heavily on this document in assembling the church's Ministry Information Form (MIF).