

Listening and Visiting: Suggested Session Guidelines

SESSION I (2 – 2½ hours)

30-35 minutes Introduction

Open with prayer (and a song if you like)

Introduce yourselves with names and your reason for joining or attending this church (allow one minute each, so if you have more than twenty people at your gathering break into smaller groups). Make a record of these stories.

Present:

- The purpose of this Mission Study — why you are doing it
- The process of this Mission Study — what will happen when
- Guidelines for our work together— openness, willingness to listen, etc.
- The process of Session I— what will happen in this meeting

15 minutes Become acquainted on a different level

For each of the following questions, invite participants to stand along the wall according to where they ‘stand’ personally with regard to the question. Participants will make a continuum from one extreme to the other using the criteria in parentheses after each question.

- How long have you belonged to, or participated in, this church?
(*since earlier this year — my entire life*)
- How long have you been a Presbyterian?
(*never — since earlier this year — entire life*)
- How many of your family members have ever belonged to, or participated actively in this church?
(*only myself — many relatives*)
- Do you consider yourself a thinking person or a feeling person?
(*thinker — feeler*)
- Do you consider yourself an introverted person or an extroverted person?
(*introvert — extrovert*)

- When you think about the ministry of the church do your initial thoughts tend to be more about individuals and their needs or about the needs of the larger body?

(individuals — larger body)

As you wrap up the exercise, acknowledge that we approach life differently and that is both a blessing and a challenge.

Discuss how this truth may affect your working together as a congregation.

30 minutes Explore our faith

Prepare Exploring Our Faith handouts from pages 4-6 in this guide.

Distribute handouts and complete as individuals for five minutes.

Divide the larger group into threes and discuss for twenty minutes.

Re-gather as a group and spend 5 minutes discussing learnings.

25-35 minutes Recollections

Divide the larger group into groups of 15 or fewer people.

Have people sitting in a circle so they can see one another as they speak. Tell the group that each person will have about one minute to share their recollections. You may want to use timers to help the stories move along.

Remind the participants that remembering is an important part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. You may want to read Deut. 6:10-12 with its warning to take heed “lest you forget”.

Have a recorder taking notes in each group.

Ask each participant to share:

- Recollections of the most significant event in the life of the congregation since you have been a member. Details?
- List special or traditional things your congregation does every year.

When all have shared their recollections, ask the church historian or a person who searched the session records to report on ten important things that have happened in the life of the congregation.(you will need to ask someone to prepare this ahead of time).

10-15 minutes

Timeline

Post a paper timeline on a wall, beginning with the beginning of the church and continuing to the present day.

Have people go to the timeline and add the following information to it:

- Identify when you or family became members of the congregation.
- What are the earliest memories of the congregation?

Note important events in life of congregation — building changes, new programs, pastoral or staff changes, etc. Include significant events in the community, region, nation, world, and PC(USA) (mergers, factory closings, war, etc.)

Leave the timeline up and encourage the congregation to add to in the coming weeks.

10 minutes

Closing

Reflect on Session I — Share discoveries about ourselves and the church.

Introduce Session II — when, where, major focus

Close with a song and prayer.

EXPLORING OUR FAITH HANDOUT

1. “Faith” has held many different meanings for people. Which statement comes closest to your view of faith? (Circle only one response)

- a. A life of commitment of God, demonstrated by trying to do what is right.
- b. A decision to accept Christ, instead of continuing in one’s own sinful ways.
- c. A trust in God’s grace.
- d. A belief in all that the Bible says.
- e. As long as people are sincere in their beliefs, they show faith.
- f. The idea of faith does not seem meaningful to me.
- g. I am not sure, although I am convinced that faith is important.
- h. None of these applies; my view is _____

2. Which statement comes closest to your view of the way in which God influences what happens in the world? (Circle only one response)

- a. God sets history in motion but does not interfere with it anymore.
- b. God influences individuals who then shape events.
- c. God influences individuals but also shapes events directly through nations and social affairs.
- d. I do not think of God as “influencing” the things that happen.
- e. I am not sure, because I have not thought about it before.
- f. None of these applies; my view is _____

3. People often wonder how a merciful God allows terrible things to happen, such as the killing of six million Jews during World War II or the destruction of 9/11. Which response comes closest to your view of how God lets these things happen? (Circle only one response)

- a. God allows terrible things to happen in order to punish people for their sins.

- b. We do not know why these things happen, but God is able to use them for good.
- c. God does not have anything to do with these things; the devil causes them.
- d. People cause these things to happen, not God.
- e. I do not know how God can allow these things to happen; it does not seem right to me.
- f. I am not sure about this topic.
- g. None of these applies; my view is _____

4. Which statement comes closest to your view of life after death? (Circle only one response)

- a. There is no life after death.
- b. There must be something after death, but I have no idea what it may be like.
- c. There is life after death, but no punishment.
- d. There is life after death, with rewards for some people and punishment for others.
- e. The notion of reincarnation expresses my view of what happens to people after death.
- f. I am not sure whether or not there is life after death.
- g. None of these applies; my view is _____

5. Which statement comes closest to your view of the Bible? (Circle only one response)

- a. The Bible, though written by individuals, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is without error in all it teaches in matters of science and history as well as in matters of theology.
- b. The Bible, though written by individuals and reflecting their personalities, has been so controlled by the Holy Spirit that it is trustworthy in matters of theology and ethics, but not necessarily in matters of science and history.
- c. All of the Bible is both the inspired word of God and at the same time a thoroughly human document.
- d. Portions of the Bible, including some of its theological and ethical positions, may not be the inspired word of God.

- e. The Bible is merely a record of the moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians.
- f. I am not sure that I can say.
- g. None of these applies; my view is _____

6. Which statement comes closest to your view of people in other countries who have never heard about Christ? (Circle only one response)

- a. I desire to share the love of Christ with them.
- b. If we do not preach Christ to them, then they will be damned forever.
- c. We should not worry about them, because so many people in this country have not heard about Christ.
- d. We should respect their religions and stop trying to impose Christianity upon them.
- e. I am not sure, because I have not considered it.
- f. None of these applies; my view is _____

7. Christians sometimes describe God as a “God of Justice” or a God who commands us to bring about justice. Which statement comes closest to your view of what this means. (Circle only one response)

- a. The Church should work for justice and should support groups that are working to end inequality and oppression.
- b. At a personal level, I should try to be just and fair in all of my dealings.
- c. This is a spiritual term that refers to God’s punishing evil, rather than to activities of the church or to individuals.
- d. The concept of god’s justice does not hold meaning for me.
- e. I am not sure to what it refers.
- f. None of these applies; my view is _____

SESSION II (2 – 2½ HOURS)

20-25 minutes Introduction

Open with prayer (and a song if you like)

Reintroduce yourselves with name and a hope for this Mission Study (be sure to record these)

Reflect upon Session I — things that stood out, learnings, discoveries, etc.

Discuss the process of Session II —what will happen today

10 minutes Focus on the timeline, noting changes from last time

Be prepared to comment on the changes over the years, past trends, etc., noting:

- What significant events happened in the immediate past decade, and
- What significant events happened in the decade prior to that one.

Continue to leave the timeline up during the mission study process.

5-10 minutes Distribute and discuss a handout listing

12 Assumptions that Guide Thoughts on the Church of Tomorrow by Bill Easum.

1. North America is the new mission field.
2. Society will become increasingly hostile toward Christianity in the twenty-first century.
3. The distinction between clergy and laity will disappear in the twenty-first century.
4. If churches only improve what they have been doing, they will die.
5. The best way to fail today is to improve yesterday's successes.
6. Bureaucracies and traditional practices are the major causes of the decline of most denominations in North America.
7. Traditional churches that thrive in the twenty-first century will initiate radical changes before the year 2001.
8. God exists and creates everything.

9. Jesus Christ is the center of all human life.
10. The Bible is our primary source of faith and practice.
11. The purpose of the Body of Christ is to bring the world to faith in Jesus Christ.
12. A way will be found to avoid world ecological and economic disaster.

15-20 minutes Bible/Theological Study

Prepare handouts or newsprint with the following questions:

- What does being the salt of the earth look like for you as a church?
- What are some of the ways your church has been the light of the world?
- How does the outside world see your good works?

Read Matthew 5: 13-16

Divide into groups of 3-4 and consider the questions.

Re-convene as a larger group and invite people to share a few comments in the whole group about what they discovered. Ask them NOT to report for their small group, but to respond to the question, "What was an insight you had about the Bible Study as you talked with each other?"

60-75 minutes Present the Demographic Study

Someone will need to have studied the demographic information and be prepared to present the data and an analysis of it.

Use of overhead projector and maps is great. Some of the information may need to be duplicated and handed out.

Take questions as they come up to make sure that this material is understood.

10 minutes Closing

Reflect upon Session II — major learnings

Introduce Session III — when, where, major focus

Close with a song and prayer.

SESSION III (2 – 2½ HOURS)

20 minutes Welcome

Open with prayer (and a song if you like)

Reintroduce yourselves with name & concern for the church you feel (be sure to record these)

Reflect upon Sessions I & II — major learnings

Discuss Session III — what will happen today

15-20 minutes Reports on Community Study

Each person who contacted a community leader needs to state who was interviewed and why, and then share briefly what their response was to the questions.

There should be a written report of these interviews already filed with the MST.

Only take questions for clarification.

5 minutes Financial Health of the Church

The Session should make a brief report on the current financial health of the Church.

30-40 minutes Congregational Survey

Present results of tabulation using overhead projector and analysis of major learnings from the Survey.

5-8 minutes Strengths of the Church

Brainstorm: compile a list of strengths of this church

Now combine the ideas lifted up into groupings of similar issues.

Save compiled list for use in Session V.

20 minutes Study Scripture

Prepare a handout with these questions on it:

1. What does Paul's description say to you about the Church?
2. What three factors from Paul's description ought to apply to all churches?
3. How does Paul's description fit this particular church?

Distribute pencils, Bibles, and the handout for the Bible Study.

Divide into groups of four or five and in each group:

Have a volunteer read aloud I Corinthians 12:4-13

Write individual responses to the questions for five minutes

Discuss the questions in the small groups for 10 minutes

5-8 minutes Reconvene and share significant insights from the Scripture study

15-20 minutes Identify Needs of Church and Community

Distribute newsprint and markers to the groups.

Explain that brainstorming means that all ideas that are lifted up are accepted without debate and listed on sheets of newsprint.

Brainstorm 1: compile a list of needs of church

- Combine the ideas lifted up into groupings of similar issues

Brainstorm 2: compile a list of needs of community

- Combine the ideas lifted up into groupings of similar issues

Save the combined brainstorming lists for Session V

10 minutes Closing

Reflect upon Session III — major learnings

Introduce Session IV — when, where, major focus

Close with a song and a prayer.

SESSION IV (2 – 2½ HOURS)

20 minutes Welcome

Open with prayer (and a song if you like)

Reintroduce yourselves with name & a thought or feeling that has arisen about the church since this study began.(record these)

Invite the group to reflect upon Sessions I & II & III — share major learnings

Discuss Session IV — what will happen today

5-10 minutes Timeline and Community Study

Comment briefly on any significant changes in the timeline

Invite any reports on interviews which have not been made yet

15-20 minutes Study Scripture

Prepare a handout with the following questions:

1. What do Paul's words say to you about setting goals for the future?
2. What does Scripture say to you about planning?
3. What does the life of Jesus say to you about planning?
4. What does the early Church say to you about planning?

Distribute pencils, Bibles and handouts.

Divide the larger group into groups of four or five and in each group.

In each group:

- Have a volunteer read aloud Philippians 3:12-14.
- Write individual responses to the questions.
- Discuss the questions and answers as a small group

5 minutes Reconvene and share significant insights from the Scripture study

10 minutes What is a Vision Statement?

Spend some time explaining what a vision statement is using these characteristics of a good vision statement:

- The vision is faithful to the congregation's best understanding of its religious heritage.
- The vision statement is oriented to the future.
- The vision is appropriate to this congregation.
- The vision statement is realistic in terms of the congregation's context.
- The vision statement contains both judgment and promise, good news and bad news.
- The vision is, in so far as is possible, a shared image of the desired future.
- The vision statement is specific enough to provide direction for the congregation's life, but broad enough to encompass multiple but complementary visions important to groups within the congregation.

Consider sharing some vision statements from the book *Congregational Mission Studies* as examples.

Make clear that a vision statement is not goals nor objectives; rather, goals and objectives will be built upon the vision statement.

20 minutes Visioning

Re-divide the larger group into small groups, ensuring individuals are with all new group members and no family members in the same group.

Distribute newsprint and markers to the groups.

Each small group should write two sentences describing a vision for the future of this church.

These sentences should seek to address the questions:

1. What kind of community of faith are we called to be?
2. What kinds of activities are we called to do as a people of God?

(questions taken from *Congregational Mission Studies*, page 18.05)

15-30 minutes Share Vision Statements

Post each group's work and have each group read its sentences aloud.

Discuss similarities and differences in the sentences.

Work toward consensus on some major points, perhaps by choosing important words and phrases to recommend to the MST for their on-going work.

10 minutes Closing

Reflect upon Session IV — share major learnings

Introduce Session V — when, where, major focus

Close with a song and prayer.

SESSION V (2 – 2½ HOURS)

20-25 minutes Welcome

Open with prayer (and a song if you like)

Reintroduce yourselves with name & joy about this church for which you are thankful. (record these)

Have the group reflect upon Sessions I & II & III & IV — share major learnings

Discuss Session V — what will happen today

15-20 minutes Study Scripture

Prepare a handout with the following questions:

1. What do the words of Hebrews say to you about persevering?
2. What does Scripture say to you about the community of faith?
3. What does Hebrews say to you about the joy of life in faith?
4. What example does Christ set for us in living lives focused on God's goals?

Distribute pencils, Bibles and handouts.

Divide into groups of four or five.

In each group:

- Have a volunteer read aloud Hebrews 12:1-2
- Write individual responses to the questions

- Discuss the questions and responses.

5 minutes Reconvene and share significant insights from the Scripture study

5 minutes Vision Statement

Recap of the vision statements developed at the last gathering

Report of the Mission Study Team on its rewrite of the Vision statement based on those statements.

Post the new vision statement for all to see.

5 minutes Introduction to Goal Setting

Have the newsprint from the brainstorming exercises in Session III

Quickly review the clusters of items on the list

Introduce the importance of goal setting by stating that the purpose of planning is to organize our ministry. Remind the folk that we plan because the reason behind our planning is important – namely the mission of the body of Christ. The best way to plan is to give ourselves some goals to achieve. The task for the next hour is to identify some possible goals for the church.

But for goals to be workable they must have three characteristics:

S – Specific: Peace on earth is too broad, safety in our neighborhood is specific

A – Attainable: Can it be done in the time allotted and with the resources available

M – Measurable: Will you know when you have attained your goal? How?

Goals begin with some kind of verb: for example, “to develop . . .”. When you write your goals, consider the following verbs: CHOOSE, DECIDE, RESOLVE, BUILD, EXPAND, SERVE, STUDY, INCREASE, DESIGN . . .

As you think about the church, imagine several kinds of goals; goals that MAINTAIN a solid, existing program; goals that DEVELOP a weaker, existing program; goals that ADD brand new programs, and goals the REMOVE ineffective programs. Sometimes adding a new program requires deleting an old one.

20-30 minutes Developing Goals

Divide into at least three small groups no larger than 10 each, with family groups divided among them

Have each group develop 3 goals, write them on newsprint, and bring them back to the larger group

15-20 minutes Sharing Goals

Have each group present their goals and post their newsprint

After all the groups have shared, invite a conversation by asking two questions:

- Where do you see some similarity among these goals?
- Where do you see some differences that will need to be reconciled?

Try to reach some consensus on three to six goals that seem most important

15-20 minutes Developing Objectives

Take the three to six goals and assign them to groups of 20 or less (there may need to be duplication in larger churches or smaller groups in smaller churches. If necessary two goals to be assigned to each group in order to have groups of 8 or more.)

Ask each group to develop two or more objectives for each goal. An objective is a way to begin to reach the goal. For instance, if your goal is to grow in membership by 10% each year for the next five years, your objectives would be things you could do to help you attain that goal. Again, you need to apply the SAM characteristics: S – Specific, A – Attainable, M – Measurable.

Again. have the groups list their objectives on newsprint and bring them back to the whole group.

10 minutes Report Objectives

Have each group report on the objectives it developed. Remind the gathering that these may well not be the only objectives needed to reach these goals but it is a way to begin thinking about what will be needed.

10 minutes Closing

Thank everyone for participating in the Congregational Gatherings

Share what the next steps in the mission study will be

Close with a song and prayer.