

Framing the Essential Questions: A Tool for Discerning and Planning Mission¹

*"I beg you . . . to have patience with everything unresolved
in your heart and try to love the questions themselves
as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very
foreign language. Don't search right now for the answers,
which could not be given you, because you would not be
able to live them. And the point is to live everything.
Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the
Future, you will gradually without ever noticing it, live
your way to the answer."*

-Rainer Maria Rilke

The Big Missional Question:

*How do we specifically embody and live the concerns and passion of
Christ in our relationships with one another and our neighbors?*

Introduction

We have all been through meetings or workshops and left confused about the purpose of the gathering. We have also engaged in conversations where leaders posed questions that seemed disconnected from the real issue or opportunity at hand. These experiences can lead to frustration, withdrawal from the conversation, and a lack of creative energy.

Much of our religious experience in the western world has focused on attaining the right answers. Christian denominations have largely differentiated themselves not on the questions they are pursuing but the rightness of their answers to questions they deem of significance. Community of Christ in times past has also focused more on answers than exploring questions of theological and missional significance.

In recent decades the emphasis has shifted to asking essential questions and then living with those questions as we seek to discern and pursue mission together. Some of the questions that surfaced over this time of exploration include:

- What does it mean to be a global movement of disciples that hold a unity of faith and vision while tangibly expressing the gospel in contextually relevant ways?
- What does it mean to share the peace of Jesus Christ in an increasingly secular society?
- What does it mean to be one in Christ when we hold diverse perspectives on matters of theology and mission?

¹ The content of this resource draws from the work of Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs in their article entitled The Art of Powerful Questions and Mark Lau Branson and his book entitled Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change.

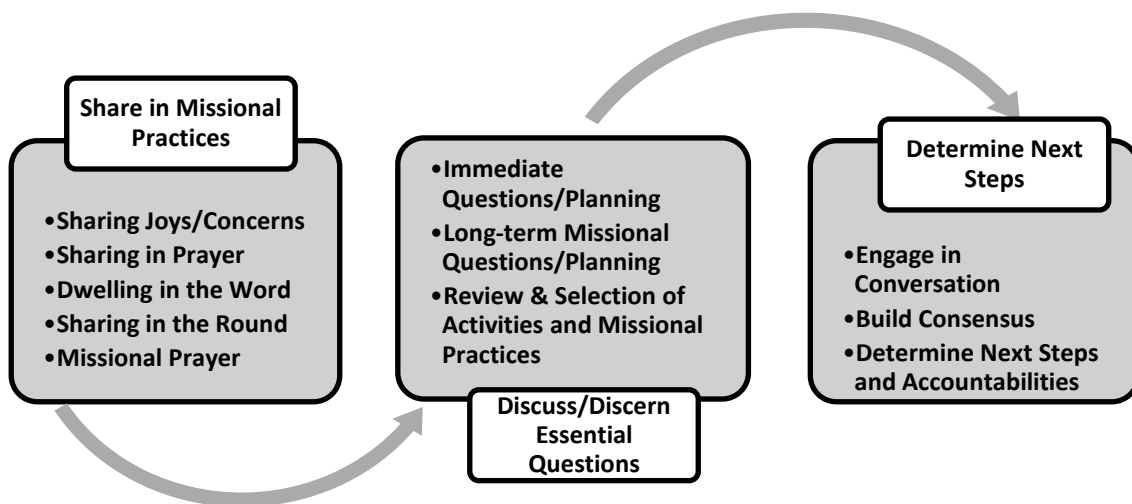
- In the midst of many competing priorities, what matters most?

In congregational settings we often find ourselves tempted to jump into problem solving or idea generation without first identifying the essential question(s) that should guide our discernment, conversation, and creative process. In many cases this bias toward action or problem solving is engrained in us from a very early age.

Framing Essential Questions

Identifying essential questions are critical to the quality of information we gather, insights we discern, actions we take, and outcomes we realize. The word “essential” signifies important, vital, or even urgent. Framing or developing essential questions takes practice but can result in more focused conversation and deeper levels of discernment.

In LCM framing short-term and long-term questions is an important task of the Pastor Leadership Team as outlined below:



Before we discuss the nature of short-term and long-term questions, let's first explore the composition of a good question. In our western culture the tendency is to focus more on having the right answers than framing the right questions. This starts at an early age where we focus on memorization rather than the art of asking essential questions that can guide our exploration as learners.

Slowing down, framing essential questions, and considering a range of possibilities is counter to the culture around us. It requires discipline to “live with” questions for a while and allow our conversations as well as the questions to mature and evolve. In a culture that often values quick and decisive decision-making, LCM challenges us to frame questions that will shape our journey together over the long-term and lead us into new ways of being and acting as disciples.

What does an essential question look like? Here is a list of some key characteristics:

- is thought provoking
- invites creative thinking
- stimulates reflective conversation
- generates positive energy and forward movement
- connects with deep meaning and purpose
- helps surface underlying assumptions
- focuses attention on what matters most

According to Vogt, Brown, and Isaacs, there is an architecture to essential questions that consist of three dimensions. Borrowing from the field of Appreciative Inquiry and our own faith journey we add two dimensions and suggest the following five dimensions to an essential question:

1. **Construction** – This is about how we develop the questions. Using words like “why, how, or what” to begin a question lead to more open-ended exploration. Words like “who, when, and where” lead to more specific answers. Words like “which” and yes/no questions lead to the most specific answers.
2. **Scope** –We want to be careful that our questions are addressing what we have the ability to influence. Questions can be either too narrow or too broad. If questions are too broad in scope people tend to lose interest because they don’t know how to connect or make an impact. If questions are too narrow in scope people can also become impatient with tedious discussions that may not require group decision making in the first place.
3. **Assumptions** –Most questions have assumptions built into them. We want to make sure our questions contain assumptions that would result in a high level of consent and not presuppose too much or too little. If we assume too much in a question people may challenge our question and suggest we need to step back discuss key assumptions before moving to the question at hand. If our questions do not take into account some base level of assumptions our questions can result in unnecessary conversation and cause frustration.
4. **Relevance to Our Mission** – In the context of LCM we continue to point back to our primary purpose on page 3 of the LCM Field Guide Overview:

“If you would truly be Community of Christ, then embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ.”

Our questions whether short-term or longer-term need to always ground us in our mission. We never set aside mission to handle specific tasks but always view and construct questions through the lens of our mission.

Every question and every decision should lead us to embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ in a hurting world.

5. **Shared Assets:** - Borrowing from Appreciative Inquiry, it's helpful to frame questions that build on the positive assets we have and not focus on what we don't have. Questions that focus on "the glass is half full" thinking often lead to negative energy and focus on why we can't move forward together. Questions that focus on "the glass is half full" thinking focus on the gifts, skills, and positive shared experiences of the group and how these assets can help us move forward together.

It's difficult to envision the future out of despair and much easier to envision the future out of a genuine hope about what we carry into the future together.

An example might be helpful in considering how to construct a question:

When should we replace the carpet in the sanctuary?

Let's look at the above question through the five dimensions of construction, scope, assumptions, shared assets, and mission.

- First, a "when question" will result in a specific response and may not be broad enough to address the essential question.
- Second, in this case the scope is appropriate – the sanctuary.
- Third, the assumptions may be problematic here. The question assumes that everyone agrees the carpet needs replacing. It may also assume the carpet does not need to be replaced in other areas of the building. This may or may not be true.
- Fourth, the question is neutral with respect to "Assets".
- Fifth, the question is neutral and does not lead us to consider how replacing the carpet is linked to mission.

Another way of framing the question could be:

What criteria would lead us to the conclusion it is time to replace the carpet in the sanctuary?

This is a much more open-ended question and does not assume any decision has been made. By asking "what criteria" should be considered we have an opportunity to enter into conversation about how replacing the carpet does or does not contribute to our emerging missional focus.

Let's take a look at another example:

What do we need to do to get our neighbors into the church?

In reviewing characteristics of essential questions above we find this question begins with a problem to be solved. In other words reaching out to the neighborhood is viewed as a problem instead of an opportunity. This may result in negative energy by identifying all the reasons the congregation currently does not reach out to the neighborhood. The question also assumes everyone feels it is important to reach out to the neighborhood. And finally, this question assumes we are clear on the missional reason behind reaching out to the neighborhood. How might we frame this question differently?

How is God calling us into a relationship with our neighborhood?

This question calls more for imagination than problem solving. It may lead some to share that they don't feel God is calling them to be in relationship with the neighborhood. This question could be reframed to build on the assets of the congregation:

Think of a time when you felt connected with the neighborhood around the church. What was occurring and how were you a part of that connection?

This question builds on shared experiences and using these experiences to envision the future together. It could lead to meaningful conversation with respect to mission, personal calling, and awareness of how God has blessed congregational efforts in times past and how God may be calling the congregation to engage in the future.

It is imperative that the Pastor Leadership Team invest the time to construct questions that lead to meaningful conversation, discernment, and movement toward meaningful engagement in mission.

Jesus and Questions

Jesus did not feel compelled to provide answers when asked a question. He often responded with questions that probed beneath the surface of what was being asked of him.

“Simple, direct questions that cut to the heart of the matter are part of the spiritual tradition. Jesus had a way of sweeping distractions out of the way with a trenchant question. To the blind beggar Bartimaeus he asked: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ To the disciples of John the Baptist, as they crept along behind him, attracted yet cautious: ‘What do you seek?’ To the disciples, despairing of having enough to feed the multitude: ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see?’” – *Margaret Guenther, Holy Listening, P. 24*

Other examples of essential questions include the following:

- How can I be sure of this? Luke 1:18
- Who do you say that I am Matthew? 16:15
- You of little faith, why are you so afraid? Matt. 8:26
- Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plan in your own eye? Matt. 7:3-4
- Were our hearts not burning within us while he talked with us on the road? Luke 24:32
- Do you love me? John 21:15-17
- Will you really lay down your life for me? John 13:38
- How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorry in my heart? Psalm 13:2a

LCM and Initial Questions

On page 2 we reviewed the importance of asking both short-term and longer-term questions as part of the process of leading congregations in mission. Behind your Overview Tab beginning on page 40 you will find blue sheets that suggest questions for each stepping stone of the journey. These are beginning questions for your consideration as a pastor leadership team. They are designed to begin the conversation in developing your own questions.

As you consider developing the longer-term missional questions that will guide your journey as a congregation consider the four compass points outlined on page 6 and explained on subsequent pages of the LCM Field Guide. The four compass points are:

- Missional (Shared) Leadership
- Missional Practices
- Missional Context
- Missional Process

The compass points and following questions are designed to stimulate your thinking and conversation about questions you feel are important to your journey as a congregation.

The key is to identify a few essential questions that emerge out of your congregation's needs and your leadership team's missional practices, conversations, and perspectives about how to best engage in leading your congregation in mission.

Missional (Shared) Leadership – The PLT must always be asking two key questions:

1. *How are we modeling the relational nature of mission by how we share in the tasks of discernment, conversation, consensus building, and engagement in mission?*
2. *How are we creating a culture in the congregation that fosters connection and shared accountability for discerning and leading mission? In other words, what are we doing to help people join the conversation and see how their contribution is significant to sustaining mission?*

Missional Practices - On page 12 of the LCM Field Guide Overview we introduce missional practices as expressed through three primary relationships. These relationships are the ways we embody and live Christ's mission in the world today. Questions that lead us into deeper exploration of these three relationships will lead us into deeper and more relevant expressions of mission in all our local contexts:

- Loving God – *How is my/our ongoing encounter with God leading me/us to risk deeper and new relationships of invitation, hospitality, and healing?*
- Loving One Another – *What does it look like to truly belong to one another in Christ when we agree and disagree?*
- Loving Our Neighbors – *How do I/we embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ in our relationships with our neighbors?*

Missional Context – On page 5 of the LCM Field Guide Overview we discuss how the Word must become flesh in every new context. We the church are the physical manifestation of the living word in our neighborhoods. The question that must guide every thought, action, and ministry of the congregation is:

How are we called to become “the Word made flesh” in our congregations, neighborhoods, and world?

If we are called to share and live the gospel in ways that open up new pathways of understanding for our neighbors we must become students of our context or environments. ***We must continually ask ourselves how we learn more about our contexts.*** See page 13 in the LCM Field Guide overview for some ideas on how to address this question.

Missional Process – A description of the process begins on page 14 of the LCM Field Guide overview. The Missional process is about creating a sustainable culture into the future that is always discovering, experimenting, and living into new forms of ministry and mission. It is not about replacing one static

model with another. There is also no one way to get there. The Pastor Leadership Team needs to constantly consider the following question:

How do we intentionally cultivate safe space for discovery, experimentation, and commitment to new forms of ministry and mission?

Remember, at the heart of the LCM process are the practices. They help shape our shared experience and lead to new understandings. Prayerful reflection and conversation about when and how to introduce practices and questions for reflection/conversation are primary tasks of leadership.

It is also important to remember that some questions will naturally emerge as we engage in missional practices that lead us into relationship with God, one another, and our neighbors. Our encounters with God in the midst of these relationships help us to see things we did not see before and begin to ask new questions.

Asking Short-Term Questions

Part of the process of meeting as a Pastor Leadership Team outlined on page 2 of this resource is asking the short-term questions that are necessary to lead the congregation on a weekly basis. Careful construction of short-term questions can also lead to clearer and more productive time together in addressing ongoing congregational activities and ministries.

For example, if there is need to plan the upcoming fellowship night next month a few good questions could significantly help the planning process such as:

- What should be the focus of our fellowship time next week?
- How might we integrate an LCM practice like Sharing in the Round or Dwelling in the Word?
- Who do we want to ask to coordinate the event?
- How will we communicate the event to the congregation?
- Who from the PLT will work with the event coordinator to provide support?

Thinking through a few key questions can really help a team process through an agenda much more effectively. As you can see, short-term questions are most often more specific because they need to be in order to plan effectively. It is also helpful to step back from time to time and focus on the Relevance to Mission dimension outlined on page 3 when reviewing congregational activities and ministries.

Next Steps for the Pastor Leadership Team

It is important not to get overwhelmed with questions. Just remember that part of discerning and leading mission is developing questions related to each of the four compass points as they relate to your specific journey:

In Summary:

- Missional (Shared) Leadership – *how are we leading together?*
- Missional Practices – *how are we living into new/deeper ways of being and doing together?*
- Missional Context – *how are we discovering what God is up to around us?*
- Missional Process – *how are we becoming adaptable to the disruptive promptings of the Holy Spirit?*

Every congregation is different and your questions will be different based on your context and how you are approaching the leadership of your congregation in discerning and leading mission. The questions will evolve over time. Be patient and don't feel a need to rush to answers.

Invite the congregation into considering the essential questions with you that will guide the congregation on its journey of discovery, experimentation, and engagement in new forms of ministry and mission. Spend time as a Pastor Leadership Team discussing this resource and beginning to identify the longer-term missional questions that are important to your journey of discernment and mission.

Set aside time each time you meet to begin to discuss and pray about the questions and how you can live with them in congregational life and your daily walk as disciples.