

# Sharing and Discovering our Congregational Story

The Doctrine and Covenants urges us to:

*Listen carefully to your own journey as a people, for it is a sacred journey and it has taught you many things you must know for the journey yet to come. (D&C 162:2)*

It's important to "catch" that last phrase. It does not indicate that we should listen to our story to anchor us in the past, nor to simply appreciate where we came from (as important as that is). Instead, this verse of scripture asks us to listen to our story because of its lessons **for the journey yet to come.**

Story can be powerful. Stories can remind us of who we are and where we come from. They can help us bring the very best of our past into our present and future. What is more, hidden in our stories can be clues to our gifts and inner resources. The telling of story can help build community as we remember the fibers that weave us together and deepen our understanding of both one another and our shared journey.

It's no wonder that the verse of scripture quoted above goes on to gift us with this wise counsel about our story:

*Listen to its teachings and discover anew its principles. Do not yearn for times that are past, but recognize that you have been given a foundation of faithful service, even as you build a foundation for what is yet to be.*

Our story—the broad sweep of the Christian tradition, the treasures of Community of Christ, the unique story of our congregation—can free us to discover insights for the journey ahead. This resource is designed to help us draw out these insights, to assess where we are today, and **to identify some key questions that may frame where God calls us into the future.**

## Approaches

To help us tell our story, the following approach is offered in two different forms. The first is an experience of story-sharing and discussion that is facilitated over the course of 8 weeks, in which the congregation engages in the discussion for about an hour each week (During the Christian Education hour, or some other time that works well for the congregation). The second is an experience of story-sharing and discussion that happens over the course of a weekend or all-day experience. The Pastor Leadership Team will have to determine which approach makes the most sense for your congregation.

## Before You Announce...

(Important Points for the Pastor Leadership Team)

Before announcing this opportunity to “Share / Discover Our Congregational Story”, it is important for the Pastor’s Leadership Team (PLT) to plan the announcement in such a way that includes the following points.

- God wants to guide us—our congregation—into the future.
- Inspired counsel to the church asks us to listen to our own journey as a people because it can teach us things that we *“must know **for the journey yet to come.**”* (D&C 162)
- Our congregation’s unique story is part of the journey that we need to listen to.
  - To really understand our congregational story, we all need to participate in discovering and sharing it.
- All members and friends of the \_\_\_\_\_ Congregation are invited to participate in “Sharing / Discovering Our Congregational Story”, which will be: *(date.... time.... place)*
- This will be fun.... and important as we try to understand where we are as a congregation and what questions we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future.

The above can be announced easily in less than one minute. It also fits neatly onto a bulletin insert. As you plan this announcement, please consider the following:

- Begin announcing this (at least) several weeks in advance
- Consider having different people share the announcement, rather than having the same person do it every time.
- Select people for the announcement who can be genuinely enthused about what they are announcing.

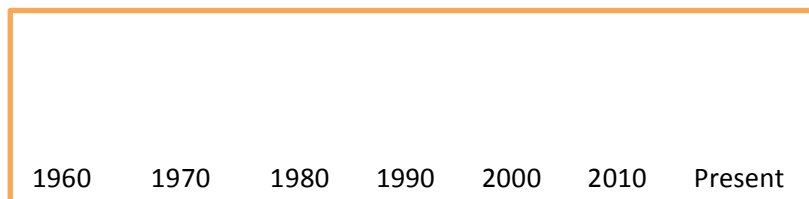
## Our Congregational Story

(“Weekly Approach” Model)

The “Weekly Approach” Model can be implemented in a variety of settings, including the Christian Education hour (which the following outline is based on). It may however, be used in other settings, depending on the needs of the congregation. A pivotal question for the Pastor Leadership Team (PLT) is, “What setting and times will allow the most people to be involved without placing undue burdens on already-busy schedules?”

### Before you Begin

1. The PLT will need to select someone to facilitate the process. This person needs to have a good grasp of facilitation skills, including the capacity to encourage sharing from the group, without the need to control the outcome.
2. Please make sure that all Christian Ed. teachers are aware in advance that we’ll be doing something special over this 8-week period. It is important for as many age groups as possible to be involved (young and older adults, teens, and children old enough to write)
3. Select a wall that will become the congregation’s “storyboard” (*you’ll probably need to dedicate the entire length of the wall for this*). If possible, select a wall where the developing storyboard can remain for several weeks. On the wall, place pieces of poster board end to end. Along the bottom of the poster board, mark the years in decades, beginning with the decade of the congregation’s birth. So, if your congregation began in the 1960’s, the wall would look like this:



4. Make sure you have pens for everyone (narrow-tipped markers are best, but not essential), LOTS of 4"x6" "sticky notes" (25 per person should be enough for the 8 weeks) or 4"x6" cards (with masking tape).
5. Set up chairs so that everyone (if possible) can see the wall/storyboard.
6. Select someone to collect the information that will be posted on this wall over the next 8 weeks. The information should be left on the wall during this time, but you will want to capture it electronically **EACH WEEK** to make sure that nothing is lost. The person recording the information must capture the information as it appears, including repetitive stories/comments.
7. Begin inviting people to this experience of discovering and sharing our congregational story several weeks in advance. If helpful, you may want to copy and distribute the first page of this resource as part your publicity effort in the congregation.
8. This is NOT an experience to invite people from other congregations to participate in.

## The Process

### Week #1

1. Welcome everyone.
2. The facilitator BRIEFLY (5 minutes) shares the following principles:
  - a. The importance of story. Use the introductory paragraphs of this resource. (You may even want to print and hand out the first page of this resource)
  - b. Given the importance of story, we're here today to begin telling our congregation's story in a special way.
  - c. The need for everyone to have input. Our true story...our whole story...is like weaving a tapestry. It's incomplete unless the thread of everyone's story is included.
3. It is also important to share and stress the following:
  - a. *In addition to what's already been said, there's one more reason that we are doing this. As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God's work. Part of that, is discerning the **essential questions** that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. **The body of information that we create over the next few weeks will be used to help us discover those important questions.***
4. Ask someone to offer a prayer, thanking God for our congregational story and asking God's blessing on our time together.
5. If there are 12 or more people present, form groups of approximately 6.
  - a. Give everyone a pen and 4-5 "sticky-notes" (or cards)
6. Story Remembering / Story Sharing
  - a. Inform everyone that we're about to enter a period of silence. Ask people to use this quiet time to consider 2 questions (share that you'll be repeating the questions soon)
    - i. The first question is: *In your experience, when have you experienced the greatest sense of community/belonging in this congregation?* This could have involved a particular event, or it may have been a specific period in the congregation's life. (Giving brief examples from your own life may help. For instance: *I experienced a strong sense of belonging/community last summer when we helped with adult literacy effort in the neighborhood...when we take the time to do "Dwelling in the Word"...a few years ago when we did all those social things in each other's homes...when I was sick and so many people called...etc.*)
    - ii. The second question is: *Has your personal story taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation? If "yes"...how?*
  - b. Ask everyone to take out 2 sticky notes. (demonstrate the following on a flip chart, board, slide, etc.)
    - i. On one sticky note, write a one-word/phrase "name" of the experience or time in the congregation's life that you are remembering when you felt a strong

- sense of community/belonging. (i.e.: *adult literacy effort...dwelling in the word...socializing in homes...when I was sick...etc.*) . Below this “name”, give a brief (1-2 sentence) description of what made this so meaningful to you. Put and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.
- ii. On the other sticky note, write one or two sentences about how your personal life/story has taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation. Write and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.
  - c. Encourage people to write down as many stories as they wish—**one story per sticky note**. Ask them to “print” and to write as big as possible.
  - d. Begin the quiet time and allow 5-10 minutes for people to write.
  - e. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share just one of their stories with their group. (approximately 10 minutes for group sharing)
  - f. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes. The ones which share a specific memory should be posted on or near the appropriate point in time where the stories occurred. The ones that describe how personal lives have taken on added meaning can be posted away from the “timeline” at a place of the facilitator’s choice. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats.
7. Have everyone form one group again. In the time remaining, ask if there is anyone who would like to share one of their stories.
    - a. Hear as many stories as time will allow.
    - b. Tell everyone that if someone’s story triggers a memory in you, please write it on a sticky-note and post it on the board when you leave.
  9. In the closing 5 minutes:
    - a. Thank everyone for sharing and tell them that we’ll be considering a new question for story-sharing next week.
    - b. Explain that we will be engaging in this experience of story sharing for the next 3 weeks. After that, we’ll spend 4 weeks digesting and discussing what we’re learning through our congregational stories. We’ll explore where we are right now in our congregational journey, and what key questions need to be asked in order to discern how God is calling us into the future.
    - c. Share that we will also keep a set of sticky-notes and pens here by the wall. You can come in at any time to write and post a memory/story that “comes to you” in regard to the aspect of congregational life that we’ve talked about today or will talk about in the weeks ahead.
    - d. Close with prayer

## Week #2

1. Welcome everyone and begin with prayer.
2. Share a brief reminder about why we're paying attention to our congregational story, based on page one of this resource.
3. Make sure that everyone has a pen and 4-5 sticky notes, and if there are 12 or more people present, form groups of 6.
4. Share that this week our story focus question is: *When, in your experience, were you especially grateful for the way members of the congregation shared their gifts?* As the facilitator, consider the following:
  - a. It may be helpful to share a few brief examples from your own life. For instance: *I really appreciate the gift of hospitality that I experience when I arrive at the church. OR I remember the time a few years ago when several people volunteered their time to help tutor neighborhood kids. OR, I remember when we used to "commission" shut-ins to pray for any major ministry effort that we were launching.*
  - b. Point out how none of the foregoing examples name specific people by name...but only name the experience and the gifts offered. (hospitality, tutoring, prayer)
  - c. You may need to explain that the term "gifts" refers to any attribute or ability that can be used in Christ's service.
  - d. Ask everyone to write two things on their sticky-note:
    - i. 1 phrase or sentence that "names"/states the experience they want to share.
    - ii. 1-2 sentences that tells why the experience was so striking or so meaningful to them
  - e. Ask everyone to put and circle a number "2" in the top right corner of the sticky-note
  - f. Encourage people to share as many stories as they wish—**one story per sticky note**. Ask them to "print" and to write as big as possible.
5. Begin the quiet time and allow 5-10 minutes for people to write.
6. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share just one of their stories with their group. (approximately 10 minutes for group sharing)
7. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and "post" all of their sticky notes on or near the appropriate point in time where the story occurred. Give people a few minutes to "hang around the wall" and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats.
8. Have everyone form one group again. In the time remaining, ask if there is anyone who would like to share one of their stories.
  - a. Hear as many stories as time will allow.
  - b. Tell everyone that if someone's story triggers a memory in you, please write it on a sticky-note and post it on the board when you leave.
9. Thank everyone and close with prayer

### **Week #3**

1. Follow the steps outlined for Week #2. This time, in step #4 (from the Week #2 outline), the story focus question is: *When have you experienced the congregation dealing with difficult challenges or distress in a manner that resulted in blessings.* As the facilitator:
  - a. Brief examples may again be helpful.
  - b. Ask everyone to write 2 things on their sticky-notes:
    - i. 1 phrase or sentence that “names”/states the experience they want to share
    - ii. 1-2 sentences that describe why this experience was so meaningful
  - c. Ask everyone to put and circle a number “3” in the top right corner of the sticky-note

### **Week #4**

1. Follow the steps outlines for Week #2. This time, in step #4 (from the Week #2 outline), the story focus question is: *What do you think is the current "story" of your congregation as most members would tell it? What are some things you wish they'd include or exclude?* As the facilitator, ask everyone to write the following 4 or 5 things on their sticky-notes:
  - a. Write “Current Story” at the top
  - b. Write a sentence or two summarizing the current story as you understand it
  - c. Write “Include:” and then briefly list what you think are most important things to include in the congregation’s current story
  - d. Write “Exclude:” and then briefly list anything that you hope would be excluded
    - i. On the back of the sticky-note, write a sentence or two about why you hope this/these things would be excluded
  - e. Ask everyone to put and circle a number “4” in the top right corner of the sticky-note
2. Close with prayer, after sharing that next week we will begin our exploration of what we have posted over the past 4 weeks.

### **Week #5**

1. After welcoming everyone, explain that today we begin the process of talking about what we’re learning from our congregational stories.
2. Have someone pray for our time together today.
3. Distribute or post the collected story information that was captured by the recorder over the past 4 weeks.
  - a. Invite everyone into a time silence (about 10 minutes), during which time they should review the information. Ask them to pay attention to:
    - i. Anything that strikes them as significant.
    - ii. Do they see any recurring themes?
    - iii. Do they see any surprises? (including anything that might be missing)
    - iv. Are there any patterns to the gifts that were expressed (or gifts that must have been behind the scenes) in the stories?
4. Invite observations, questions, feelings, comments, etc. This discussion will take the rest of the session. Have someone take notes. (the recorded notes can allow comments to be anonymous)

5. Thank everyone and point out the significance of their observations, insights, and questions. Share that next week we'll venture further into the conversation.
6. Close with prayer.

## **Week #6**

1. Welcome and prayer for our time together.
2. Distribute or post the collected story information from the recorder. This now includes the notes from last week's session.
3. Invite everyone into a time of silence (about 5 minutes) in which we will simply look at the stories and information from last week. Let it soak in. Ask them to be aware of any impressions that might strike them. It might be a word, a phrase, an image, a feeling, etc. ***[Facilitator's Note: this is like a "Dwelling in the Word" experience, except we're contemplating our stories, rather than a specific section of scripture. In last week's discussion, people were asked to apply traditional thinking / observation processes to the matter before us. This week, they will be accessing "intuitive" functions as they allow images, phrases, etc. to strike them. Both the traditional thinking process and the intuitive process are important pathways of insight.]***
4. Form groups of 6 and invite people to share any brief impressions, thoughts, images, or feelings that they experienced during the time of silence. (Give about 10 minutes for this)
5. Ask everyone to turn their chairs and become one group again. Again, invite everyone into 2-3 minutes of quiet stillness. Preface the quiet time by asking them to consider this question:  
*What might God be saying to us through our congregational story?*
  - a. Emphasize that no one should "stress" over this question—or somehow "strain" to hear God's whisper. Neither should anyone just assume that their thoughts are God's thoughts just because they feel strongly about something. It's just a simple question that we are now asked to ponder. If thoughts or insights arise—fine. If nothing occurs to us—that's fine too.
6. The rest of today's session will be taken up with the group discussing this question. (Comments should be recorded, but can be left anonymous)
  - a. In some congregations, it might help to emphasize the importance of prefacing comments with the phrase "God might be saying"; or "I wonder if God might be saying". ***[Facilitator's Note: Relating to the Holy Spirit is a subjective experience that we're all needing to mature into. The language suggested here gives people permission to "wonder" about God's whisper, while not suggesting that "we know what God is saying". It also hints at the importance of community discernment, rather than giving any one person the authority to definitively say "here's what God is saying".]***
7. When closing, remind everyone that our congregational story is an unfolding one. Share that next week we'll be discussing how our congregational stories can help us understand where we are right now on our congregational journey.
8. Thank everyone and close with prayer.



## Week #7

***[Facilitator's note: Up until now, your role has been primarily one of facilitation. In the opening minutes of this session though, it's important for you to present the information in steps 3-4 as clearly and succinctly as possible.]***

1. Welcome and Prayer for our time together.
2. Make sure that all story information, including notes from last week, has been distributed or posted.
3. Share the following:
  - a. Over the past several weeks, we've learned a lot about our congregational story.
  - b. Last week, we discussed what God might be saying to us through our story.
  - c. So, today we want to ask what all this might imply about ***where we are right now*** in our congregational journey.
4. Continue Sharing....
  - a. However, before we jump into this conversation, let's be aware of 4 dangerous traps that congregations can fall into at this point.
    - i. First, some congregations are prone to feeling badly if they are not where they want to be in their journey of faith.
    - ii. Second, some congregations are prone to "justify" or "defend" where they are, if they have not made the progress that one might otherwise hope for.
    - iii. Third, some congregations are happy to let current "successes" or good times lull them into an attitude of complacency.
    - iv. Fourth, some congregations tend to respond to any discussion of this kind by feeling an urgency to put together some type of program or effort to move us along.
  - b. None of these temptations are helpful. In fact, they can be harmful. So let's be clear. There is no need to be harsh with ourselves; no need to defend where we are; no need to pat ourselves on the back; and no need to rush prematurely into action. We just want to pause and have a conversation about a simple question: *Where are we right now in our congregational journey?*
  - c. So, where are we? Let's keep in mind all of the story information that we've gathered, but let's take a special look at the stories we shared in Week 4: *What do you think is the current "story" of your congregation as most members would tell it? What are some things you wish they'd include or exclude?*
5. Give people 4-5 minutes to review the information that was created in response to this question (during week 4).
6. Facilitate a discussion with the congregation in response to this question: *Based on what we've said about our current story, plus keeping in mind all of the other information that we've gathered, where are we right now in our congregational journey?"*
  - a. Where are we in relationship to each other?
  - b. Where are we in relationship to our surrounding community?

- c. Where are we in relationship to God and the mission of Jesus Christ?
  - d. (Have someone take notes, again allowing comments to be anonymous)
  - e. “a” through “c” do not have to be answered in order, but they are good questions to pose in order to help the congregation consider the primary question.
7. Thank everyone and close with prayer

## **Week #8**

1. Welcome and prayer for our time together
2. Distribute or post all of the collected story information we’ve created so far, including notes from last week’s session.
3. Explain that today, we want to hear some very recent stories.
  - a. If 12 or more people are present, form groups of 6
  - b. Invite everyone into a time of silence (about 2 minutes). Ask them to spend this time contemplating this question:
    - i. *How has this experience over the past 7 weeks of exploring our congregational story affected you?*
  - c. *Sharing in groups for 10 minutes*
4. Bring everyone back together into one group. Distribute or post the 5 Mission initiatives. State that in Community of Christ, when we talk about Christ’s mission, we’re talking about the *Mission Initiatives*. Share that we’re not going to discuss these today, but that we all should hold them in our hearts and minds as we consider the future to which the church is called.
5. Share the following:
  - a. *Here we are today, poised between the stories that we have shared and the future that God invites us into. To enter that future as faithful to Christ’s mission as possible, what are the most important questions that we should be asking ourselves as a congregation?*
8. Invite everyone to respond to this question and facilitate the discussion. (Someone should be taking notes, allowing comments to be anonymous.)
9. At the end of the discussion:
  - a. Remind everyone of what you said at the beginning of Week #1: *As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God’s work. Part of that, is discerning the **essential questions** that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. **The body of information that we create over the next few weeks will be used to help us discover those important questions.***
  - b. Thank everyone for participating in the discovery of these questions, and for the other insights that have arisen as we’ve shared our stories.

- c. Share that the Pastor Leadership Team will prayerfully consider all of the information that has been shared, and will consider ways of helping the congregation explore these important questions.
- e. Close with prayer.

### **LATER**

The Pastor Leadership Team will now want to take all of the information gathered and continue the conversation about what we are learning. *Patterns of giftedness, recurring themes, notable “stirrings”, should all be noted and discussed, as well as the key questions that were identified. These things now become some of the raw material that the PLT (and the congregation) can consider in times of prayer, meditation, and conversation as we continue to discern God’s call to us.*

### **Process Tips**

- As people “remember” things in their stories, some may suggest, “We need to start doing \_\_\_\_\_ again.” The PLT will want to exercise caution here. The point of this experience is not to replicate programs/activities from the past. The point is to peer into our stories to discern:
  - “Types of things” that may more naturally invoke congregational energy
  - Patterns of giftedness that can be called upon in current circumstances
  - Insights about the nature of congregation life, dynamics, personality
  - What God may want to say to us through our stories
  - Where are we now and what questions do we need to be asking?
- This experience may invoke stirrings or senses of call in someone, which may need to be honored. There is a difference though, between doing something because we are responding to what we sense is God’s movement in our lives, and doing something because “it worked once so let’s try it again”. The former can increase energy, while the latter—if not accompanied with a sense of “calling” or “rightness”—can diminish energy.
- It is VERY IMPORTANT to keep all the notes from this experience. You will need them later on.

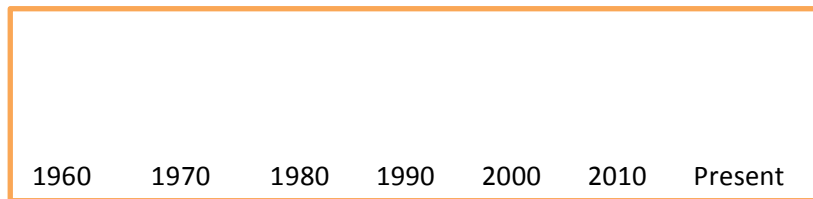
## Our Congregational Story

(Weekend Model)

The “Weekend Model” can be held in a variety of places, including conference centers, campgrounds, or in the church building itself. It can be structured as a weekend retreat, or as a single, whole-day experience. Exact times listed in the outline are only for guidance and may be adjusted according to need.

### Before you Begin

1. The PLT will need to select someone to facilitate the process. This person needs to have a good grasp of facilitation skills, including the capacity to encourage sharing from the group, without the need to control the outcome.
2. Select someone to handle logistics, especially set-up, snacks, beverages, etc.
3. Select a wall that will become the congregation’s “storyboard” (*you may need to dedicate the entire length of the wall for this*). On the wall, place pieces of poster board end to end. Along the bottom of the poster board, mark the years in decades, beginning with the decade of the congregation’s birth. So, if your congregation began in the 1960’s, the wall would look like this:



4. Make sure you have pens for everyone (narrow-tipped markers are best, but not essential), and LOTS of 4"x 6" "sticky notes" (25 per person) or 4"x6" cards (with masking tape).
5. Set up chairs in circles of 6. Have pens and sticky-notes in each circle.
6. Select someone to collect the information (electronically) that will be posted on this wall over the course of the day. The person recording the information must capture the information as it appears, including repetitive stories/comments.

## Process

8:30 Welcome and Dwelling in the Word ***[Facilitator's Note: Review the missional practice "Dwelling in the Word"—found in the LCM Manual—and select an appropriate scriptural passage for the beginning of this important day. Facilitate the experience according to the outline presented in the LCM Manual. People will already be sitting in circles of 6, in which they can share the Dwelling in The Word experience.]***

9:00 Facilitator shares the following:

- a. The importance of story. You can use the introductory paragraphs of this resource, and may find it helpful to copy and distribute page one of this resource.
- b. Given the importance of story, we're here today to begin telling our congregation's story in a special way.
- c. The need for everyone to have input. Our true story...our whole story...is like weaving a tapestry. It's incomplete unless the thread of everyone's story is included.
- d. It's also important to share the following:
  - i. In addition to what's already been said, there's one more reason that we are doing this. *As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God's work. Part of that, is discerning the **essential questions** that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. **The body of information that we create this weekend will be used to help us discover those important questions.***

Prayer: thanking God for our congregational story and asking God's blessing on our time together.

9:15 Story Remembering (round 1)

- a. Explain that we're about to enter a period of silence. Ask people to use this quiet time to consider these questions:
  - i. *In your experience, when have you experienced the greatest sense of community/belonging in this congregation?* This could have involved a particular event, or it may have been a specific period in the congregation's life. Giving brief examples from your own experience may help. For instance: *I experienced a strong sense of belonging/community last summer when we helped with adult literacy effort in the neighborhood.....when we take the time to do "Dwelling in the Word"....a few years ago when we did all those social things in each other's homes...when I was sick and so many people called....etc.)*
  - ii. *Has your personal story taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation? If "yes"...how?*

- b. Ask everyone to take out 2 sticky notes. (Demonstrate the following on a flip chart, board, slide, etc.)

- i. On one sticky note, write a one-word/phrase “name” of the experience or time in the congregation’s life that you are remembering when you felt a strong sense of community/belonging. (i.e.: *adult literacy effort...dwelling in the word...socializing in homes...when I was sick...etc.*). Below this “name”, give a brief (1-2 sentence) description of what made this so meaningful to you. Put and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.

- ii. On the other sticky note, write one or two sentences about how your personal life/story has taken on added meaning because of your involvement in this congregation. Write and circle the number “1” in the top right corner. Do not put your name on it.

- c. Encourage people to share as many stories as they wish—**one story per sticky note**. Ask them to “Print” legibly and to write as large as possible.

9:30 Story Sharing (round 1)

- a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to *briefly* share just one of their stories with their group. (about 10 minutes for group sharing)
- b. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes on the wall. The ones which share a specific memory should be posted on or near the appropriate point in time where the stories occurred. The ones that describe how personal lives have taken on added meaning can be posted away from the “timeline” at a place of the facilitator’s choice. Give people a few moments to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then share that we’ll now take a break.

9:45 Break

10:00 Story Remembering (round 2)

Come together in groups again, but mix the groups up so that everyone is sitting with different people. Explain that we’re going to now be thinking about a different set of stories. Our story focus question this time is: *When, in your experience, were you especially grateful for the way members of the congregation utilized their gifts?*

Again, it will be helpful to share a brief example or two from your own life. For instance: *I really appreciate the gift of hospitality that I experience when I arrive at the church...or... I remember the time a few years ago when several people volunteered their time to help tutor neighborhood kids...or... I remember when we used to “commission” shut-ins to pray each day for major outreach efforts that we were launching.*

- a. You may need to explain that the term “gifts” refers to any attribute or ability that can be used in Christ’s service.
- b. Point out how none of the foregoing examples name specific people by name...but only name the experience and the gifts offered. (hospitality, tutoring, prayer)
- c. Remind people to write down as many stories as they would like—one story per sticky-note. Each sticky-note should include:
  - A one-phrase “name” of the experience or time in the congregation’s life that you are remembering
  - A brief description (one or two sentences) about what made this experience so meaningful for you.
  - Put and circle the number “2” in the top right-hand corner
  - Print as clearly as possible
  - Do not put your name on it

10:15 Story Sharing (round 2)

- a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share just one of their stories with their group. (about 10 minutes for group sharing)
- b. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes on the wall on or near the appropriate point in time where the story occurred. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats, and to sit with new people if possible.

10:30 Story Remembering (round 3)

Our story focus this time is: *When have you experienced the congregation dealing with difficult challenges or distress in a manner that resulted in blessings.* As the facilitator:

- a. Remember that brief examples may again be helpful.
- b. Ask everyone to write the following on their sticky-notes:
  - i. 1 phrase or sentence that “names”/states the experience they want to share
  - ii. 1-2 sentences that describe why this experience was so meaningful
  - iii. Put and circle a number “3” in the top right-hand corner
  - iv. Print as clearly as possible
  - v. Do not put your name on it

10:45 Story Sharing (round 3)

- a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, ask them to share one story with their group about when they experienced the congregation dealing with difficult challenges or distress in a manner that resulted in blessings. (about 10 minutes for whole group to share)
- b. After people have shared with their group, invite everyone to come to the wall and “post” all of their sticky notes on the wall. Give people a few minutes to “hang around the wall” and look at what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats—sitting with new people if possible.

11:00 Story Remembering (round 4)

Our story focus this time is: *What do you think is the current "story" of your congregation as most members would tell it? What are some things you wish they'd include? Exclude? Ask everyone to: (demonstrate on flip chart, board, slide, etc.)*

- a. Write "Current Story" on the sticky note.
- b. Write a sentence or two summarizing the current story.
- c. Write "Include:" and then briefly list what you think are most important things to include in the congregation's current story
- d. Write "Exclude:" and then briefly list anything that you hope would be excluded
  - i. On the back of the sticky-note, write a sentence or two about why you hope this/these things would be excluded
- e. Put and circle the number "4" in the top right-hand corner
- f. Print as clearly as possible
- g. Do not put your name on it

11:15 Story Sharing (round 4)

- a. When you sense that most people have finished writing, invite them to come to the wall and "post" their sticky notes near the "present" end of the timeline. Give people a few minutes to "hang around the wall" and look what others posted, then ask everyone to return to their seats.

11:25 Whole Group Sharing

Ask if anyone would like to share one aspect of how they would hope the story would be told.

Thank everyone for sharing their stories this morning. This afternoon we will take a look at them and see what we're learning.

12:00 LUNCH (The Pastor Leadership Team will need to determine in advance if it's best to "go out" and eat; or, is it better to have lunch together "in".)

During lunch, chairs can be arranged to form one group

1:30 Let's Review

Welcome everyone back ...Invite everyone to come up and look at the stories posted on the wall. Ask that they pay special attention to:

- Anything that strikes them as significant.
- Are there any surprises? (including anything that might be missing)
- Any recurring themes?
- Are there any patterns to the gifts that were expressed (or gifts that must have been behind the scenes) in the stories?



Let people know that we'll have almost 30 minutes for this, so they can take their time. ***[Facilitator's Note: the group may not need 30 minutes, but the informal story sharing prompted by their review of the story board--it's may deepen conversation yet to come.]***

## 2:00 What are we Learning?

Ask everyone to return to their seats and invite observations, questions, feelings, comments, etc. Facilitate a congregational discussion. (Have someone take notes, focusing on major points. No need to capture details. The notes can allow comments to be anonymous. Notes will need to be projected or written where all can see in the very next session.)

## 2:30 Dwelling in Our Story

Invite everyone into a time of silence in which we will simply look at our stories again and the notes (posted or projected) from our last session. Just let it all soak in. Ask everyone to use this 5 minutes of silence to simply be aware of any impressions that might strike them. It might be a word, a phrase, an image, a feeling, etc. ***[Facilitator's Note: this is like a "Dwelling in the Word" experience, except we're contemplating our stories, rather than a specific section of scripture. In our previous discussion, people were asked to apply traditional thinking processes and observations to the matter before us. This time, they will be accessing more "intuitive" functions as they allow images, phrases, etc. to strike them. Both the traditional thinking process and the intuitive process are important pathways of insight.]***

Close the time of silence and ask people to share any brief impressions, thoughts, images, or feelings that they experienced.

## 3:00 What Might God be Saying?

1. As you transition into this new segment, ask: *Is it possible that God may want to speak to us through the stories of our congregation? If so, what might God be saying to us?*
2. Tell everyone that they'll have about 30 minutes to ponder this question. Encourage people to get up and review the storyboard again, or to go for a walk as the question "percolates", or to just sit and reflect on the matter.
  - a. Emphasize that no one should "stress" over this question—or somehow "strain" to hear God's whisper. Neither should anyone just assume that their thoughts are God's thoughts just because they feel strongly about something. It's a just a simple question that we are now asked to ponder. If thoughts or insights arise—fine. If nothing occurs to us—that's fine too.
3. Tell everyone that they are on their own for the next 30 minutes, and then snacks/drinks will be available.

3:30 Break

4:00 What Might God be Saying through our Congregational Stories?

1. Welcome everyone back and facilitate a discussion on this question. Repeat the principles of item 2a (above). In some congregations, it might help to emphasize the importance of prefacing comments with the phrase “God might be saying”; or “I wonder if God might be saying”. ***[Facilitator’s Note: Relating to the Holy Spirit is a subjective experience that we’re all needing to mature into. The language suggested here gives people permission to “wonder” about God’s whisper, while not suggesting that “we know what God is saying”. It also hints at the importance of community discernment, rather than giving any one person the authority to definitively say “here’s what God is saying”.]***
2. During the discussion, have someone take notes and, as always, comments in the notes can be left anonymous.

4:45 ***[Facilitator’s note: Up until now, your role has been primarily one of facilitation. In the opening minutes of this session though, it’s important for you to present the information in steps 1-2 as clearly and succinctly as possible.]***

1. Share the following:
  - a. During the day, we’ve learned a lot about our congregational story.
  - b. We discussed what God might be saying to us through our stories.
  - c. So, what does all this imply about where we are right now in our congregational journey?
  - d. However, before we jump into that conversation, we need to be aware of 4 traps that congregations can fall into at this point.
    - i. First, some congregations are prone to feeling badly if they are not where they want to be in their journey of faith.
    - ii. Second, some congregations are prone to “justify” or “defend” where they are, if they have not made the progress that one might otherwise hope for.
    - iii. Third, some congregations are happy to let current “successes” or good times lull them into an attitude of complacency.
    - iv. Fourth, some congregations tend to respond to any discussion about mission by feeling an urgency to put together some type of program or effort to move us along.
  - e. None of these temptations are helpful. In fact, they can be harmful. So let’s be clear. There is no need to be harsh with ourselves; no need to defend where we are; no need to pat ourselves on the back; and no need to rush prematurely into action. We just want to pause and have a conversation about a simple question: *Where are we right now in our congregational journey?*

- f. So, where are we? Let's keep in mind all of the story information that we've gathered, but let's take a special look at the stories we shared earlier when we were asked: *What do you think is the current "story" of your congregation as most members would tell it? (In other words, what's been happening recently?) What are some things you wish they'd include or exclude?*
2. Give people several minutes to review the information that was created in response to this question.
3. Facilitate a discussion with the congregation in response to this question: *Based on what we've said about our current story, plus keeping in mind all of the other information that we've gathered, where are we right now in our congregational journey?"*
  - a. Where are we in relationship to each other?
  - b. Where are we in relationship to our surrounding community?
  - c. Where are we in relationship to God and the mission of Jesus Christ?
  - d. (Have someone take notes, again allowing comments to be anonymous)
  - e. "a" through "c" do not have to be answered in order, but they are good questions to pose in order to help the congregation consider the primary question.

5:30 DINNER

\*\*\*\*Optional Endings\*\*\*\*

The Pastor Leadership Team will need to decide in advance when the closing session should be held. One option is to reconvene after dinner, another is to dismiss everyone for the day, and hold the closing session the next morning, possibly during the Christian Education hour. If the congregation is on an overnight retreat, then holding the final session the next morning before a closing service will work. The question is, which schedule will allow for the greatest participation and least amount of schedule inconvenience for our congregation? Whatever way is chosen, the closing session outline is as follows:

(15 min) Distribute, project, or post all of the collected story information we've created so far, including notes from the last session.

Share that in this session, we want to hear some very recent stories. (Form groups of 6)

Ask everyone to ponder and discuss this question in their groups:

*i. How has this experience of exploring our congregational story affected you?*

(5 min) Bring everyone back together into one group. Distribute, project or post the 5 Mission initiatives. State that in Community of Christ, when we talk about Christ's mission, we're *talking about the Mission Initiatives*. Share that we're not going to discuss these today, but that we all should hold them in our hearts and minds as we consider the future to which the church is called.

Share the following:

*Here we are today, poised between the stories that we have shared and the future that God invites us into. To enter that future as faithful to Christ's mission as possible, **what are the most important questions that we should be asking ourselves as a congregation?***

(30min) Invite everyone to respond to this question and facilitate the discussion. (Someone should be taking notes, allowing comments to be anonymous.)

(5min) Remind everyone of what you said at the beginning of the first session:

*As a congregation, we have embarked on a process of making ourselves available to God and God's work. Part of that, is discerning the **essential questions** that we need to be asking ourselves about the journey ahead. Exploring our congregational story will not only help us learn about ourselves, our gifts, and where we are in our congregational journey; but it will also help us discover the central questions that we need to ask in order to move faithfully into the future. **The body of information that we create over the next few weeks will be used to help us discover those important questions.***

Thank everyone for participating in the discovery of these questions, and for the other insights that have arisen as we've shared our stories.

Share that the Pastor Leadership Team will prayerfully consider all of the information that has been shared, and will consider ways of helping the congregation explore these important questions.

Close with prayer.

## **LATER**

The Pastor Leadership Team will now want to take all of the information gathered and continue the conversation about what we are learning. *Patterns of giftedness, recurring themes, notable "stirrings", should all be noted and discussed, as well as the essential questions that were identified. These things now become some of the raw material that the PLT (and the congregation) can consider in times of prayer, meditation, and conversation as we continue to discern God's call to us.*

## **Process Tips**

- In processes such as the foregoing, there is a natural tension between allowing good, important conversation to "flow" and keeping things on track so that we can get to issues that need to be addressed. In this regard, the timeframes in the foregoing are only guides to inform the ebb and flow of the process. The facilitator will have to determine when some discussions are allowed to "go long" and when some discussions may need to be curtailed. One advantage of this experience being held in a weekend retreat setting is the flexibility that it gives the facilitator.

However, the Pastor Leadership Team will need to determine which format makes the most sense for their congregation.

- As people “remember” stories, some may suggest, “We need to start doing \_\_\_\_\_ again.” The Pastor Leadership Team will want to exercise caution here. The point of this experience is not to replicate programs/activities from the past. The point is to peer into our stories to discern:
  - “Types of things” that may more naturally invoke congregational energy
  - Patterns of giftedness that can be called upon in current circumstances
  - Insights about the nature of congregation life, dynamics, personality
  - What God may want to say to us through our stories
- This experience may invoke stirrings or senses of call in someone, which may need to be honored. There is a difference though, between doing something because we have “discerned our way into it”, and doing something because “it worked once so let’s try it again”. The former can increase energy; while the latter—if not accompanied with a sense of “calling” or “rightness” can diminish energy.
- It is VERY IMPORTANT to keep all the notes from this experience, including a record of all stories posted on the wall. You will need them later on.