

Joining God in the Neighborhood

Congregational Workbook



A *Transformed by the Spirit* Resource
American Baptist Churches USA



AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

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Joining God in the Neighborhood: Congregational Workbook

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Welcome to Joining God in the Neighborhood!

You are joining a growing group of congregations engaged in a journey of discernment and discovery. Over the next eighteen months we will engage together *in a shared journey of discerning what the Spirit is up to in your neighborhoods and communities in order to create experiments in joining with God in these places.*

This co-learning experience is designed to address these questions:

1. How do we learn to discern what God is up to in our neighborhoods and communities?
2. How do we join with God in these places?
3. How might a Region (and other ABCUSA partners) support and resource its clergy and congregations in sustaining such a journey?

Joining God in the Neighborhood is a movement that is already finding new life for congregations in North America, United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. It is shaped by the conviction that the Spirit is at work in your church and your communities. The journey you are about to start is designed around the conviction that God changes the world through ordinary men and women in the local communities where we live and work. Thanks for your willingness to devote your time and energy to this journey. It will strengthen your congregation's engagement in your communities.

Neighborhoods are the places where God calls us to live the mission of Jesus. Some of the most hopeful ways we can be God's people are also the most obvious ways of being human. In the ordinariness of your neighborhood, you will learn to see what the Spirit is up to in transforming the world.

This guidebook is designed for the teams in each congregation who will guide the process in their church. It gives you the tools to understand the process and the steps you will take with the congregation.

Here you are given new practices for engaging your neighborhoods. Learning new practices is a little like developing an effective golf swing or a mastering a difficult choral piece. We learn new skills by doing them over and over again until they become a natural part of what we do. The approach of this Guidebook is:

- We learn by doing and experimenting not by being told.
- We reflect on what we've done and learned; we adjust and try new experiments.
- We act our way into new ways of thinking and seeing the world.

The Journey- What to expect?

The Guidebook gives you a simple **5-Step** process to follow. We've made it as simple and straightforward as possible without a lot of extra information or details. The **Five Steps** are as follows:

Listen: To God and one another through Scripture (Dwelling in the Word)
To your neighborhoods.

Discern: Bring your listening together to discern where God is already at work in your neighborhood and how you might join God in that work.

Experiment: Create several experiments in joining God in the neighborhood.

Reflect: Together as a congregation on what you have discovered in the experimenting.

Decide: To create new experiments inviting more people in the congregation to join with you.

You will be challenged by what the Spirit is up to in your communities; your understanding of the Gospel and the church will be turned upside down. You will be changed!

People often ask: "What do you mean by neighborhood? Is it the area around the church building or some other area?" Our response is this: **Neighborhood refers to the places where people in the church live and play.** Some may live near the church building, and because a church's location isn't incidental to God, we also invite a group to explore and discern God's call concerning that neighborhood.

Guiding Principles

It is important to have a shared understanding of the principles guiding this journey. Principles are guideposts we use to check our course as we navigate along the way. If you want to explore these principles further talk with your coach or invite your pastor to join with you for a time of conversation or Bible study around them.

1. God is already out ahead of us, active in our neighborhoods
2. All the clues for how to join with God in your communities are already among the people of a local congregation.
3. We continually ask: “Where are we being called to join with what God is up to in our neighborhoods?”
4. We are shaped by a desire to know and pay attention to the stories of the people in our neighborhood.
5. We are cultivating new practices of local Christian life that give us fresh insights into God’s work in our local contexts.

The 5 Steps

The **5 Step Process** assists your congregation discerning how it can join God in your neighborhoods. Here is an overview of the steps guiding you along your journey. Each step invites you to learn new practices for joining God in your neighborhoods.

Step 1: Listening

- Attending to God and one another through Dwelling in the Word.
- Focusing in on our neighborhoods through simple exercises in “walking about”

Step 2: Discerning

- Continue listening to God and one another through Dwelling in the Word.
- Discovering where God is present in our own stories and those of our neighbors
- Begin to name:
 - *“Where might the Spirit be inviting us into our neighborhoods?”*
 - *“How might we join the work the Spirit is already engaged in?”*
- Consider and design some experiments

Step 3: Experimenting

- Continue listening to God and one another through Dwelling in the Word.
- Carry out simple experiments, reflect on process, adjust, and repeat.

Step 4: Reflecting

Teams evaluate their experiments:

- What did we do?
- What have we learned?
- What have we sensed God doing?
- What worked?
- What would we change?

Step 5: Deciding

In what new ways will we join God in our neighborhood?

Step 1: Listening

Listening as a key step in discerning how God is inviting your congregation to join with the Spirit in its neighborhoods.

Step 1 introduces three simple practices:

- Listening to God through Dwelling in the Word
- Listening to one another
- Listening in our neighborhoods.

Dwelling in the Word

A big part of this journey is discerning what God is saying to us through Scripture. We do this through the practice of *Dwelling in the Word*, a simple practice rooted in the *lectio divina* traditions of the church.

The text you will use is **Luke 10:1-12**. It is about mission and God being ahead of us in our neighborhoods. You will learn how to dwell in this text with one another and be drawn into the question: *Where might the Spirit be calling us to join with God in our neighborhoods?*

The Text (Luke 10: 1-12)

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near." I tell you, on that day it will be more

tolerable for Sodom than for that town. (NRSV)

In Step 1 invite as many people in the congregation as possible to participate in Dwelling in the Word. Whenever there is a meeting or gathering of groups take 30 minutes and begin with the process outlined below.

Guiding Team Work – Dwelling in the Word

As the Guiding Team in your congregation you are invited to do the following:

1. Practice among yourselves the Dwelling process outlined below so you're familiar and comfortable with what it is about and how to lead others.
2. Meet with your pastor to share the Dwelling exercise and the Luke 10 passage. Share the steps you want to take in inviting others and invite your pastor's partnership in having others join with the Dwelling process.
3. Meet with your church Board (or other governing body) to:
 - a. Share with them the Luke 10 Dwelling process
 - b. Invite them to build this process into their regular meetings over the next 12-15 months.
 - c. Report how you will be meeting with other groups in the congregation to invite their participation.
4. With the partnership of your pastor identify a number of people with whom you can form several groups (5-7 people) to start using the Dwelling process around Luke 10.



How to Lead People in *Dwelling in the Word*

1. Have copies of the Luke 10:1-12 text available for everyone.
2. Begin by explaining that you want to share with people a way of engaging Scripture together. Let them know this is not like regular Bible study but an ancient way by which Christians have sought to listen to God through Scripture.
3. You begin by asking two people (male/female) each read the passage out loud, so that the passage is read aloud twice.
4. Let the text be read a first time. Invite people to be quiet before the text for a minute. Before the second reading ask people to be ready to listen again using the following two questions:
5. As you listen to the text being read where do you stop? You keep hearing the

- reading but there may be a place, a phrase or image that catches your attention.
6. If there were a New Testament scholar in the room (and we always say there never is because we don't want any 'experts' at this point in our listening to the text) what question would you want to ask?
 7. After the second reading invite people into silence for a few minutes.
 8. Break the silence asking people to partner with one other person (we ask them, as much as possible, to find someone they don't well).
 9. In these dyads, each person is given 2 minutes to share their response to one of the other questions (not both) while the other listens. The person listening can ask questions for clarification but they are not to contribute with their own ideas or experiences at this point. The purpose here is to listen attentively to what the other is saying the focus of attention in this exercise is listening attentively to the other. After two minutes invite the dyads to switch so the listener becomes the sharer and the sharer the listener.
 10. After four minutes call time and invite people back together as a whole group.
 11. Invite people to a) introduce their dyad partner to everyone and b) share what they heard their partner saying (where they stopped in the text and why; how they may have heard God; what new insight or question emerged). Remember, the role here is to report what you heard not share what you said or thought. This is a much harder task than we might first imagine.
 12. Finally, ask each other how we might be hearing the Spirit speaking to us through the text.

Listening in our Neighborhoods

“ . . . the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come.” Luke 10:1

The second type of listening you will invite your congregation into is listening in your neighborhoods. We will explore practices to expand our confidence that God is active ahead of us in our communities. One way to ‘see’ God in our neighborhoods with fresh ways is by the practice of “seeing” our neighborhoods with new eyes.



We’re often asked: “Why focus on our neighborhoods?” Here are several reasons:

- Congregations were designed for their neighborhoods.
- There are amazing things happening in our local communities that, if we begin to see them, can transform our understanding of church.
- As society changes, fewer people come to church. Simply trying to make church more attractive doesn’t compel people to come, so we need to go and be where people are – the neighborhood is one of those places.
- The Spirit is already ahead of us, active and at work in our neighborhoods.

This link offers a video for answering questions about why listening in our neighborhoods is important: <http://vimeo.com/77079681>.



Some books to read around this question:

- Sparks, Soerens, & Friesen, *The New Parish* (IVP, 2014)
- Alan J Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Baker, 2012)

The next section offers a series of “walks” people can take through their neighborhoods. After each walk suggest people make some notes about what they saw and experienced, who they talked with, and what they learned. This simple act of note taking helps us learn to ‘wake up’ to our own community.

Guiding Team Work for Neighborhood Listening

Read through the following neighborhood listening materials. We've provided you quite a bit of material, not expecting your people to do all of the activities suggested. Different approaches match the way different people engage their contexts. Invite people to select the elements they want to do.



After you have become familiar with the material:

1. Meet with your pastor. Share what you want to do in terms of inviting people to participate in these 'walking about' experiences and invite the pastor to work with you in planning ways of getting the congregation involved.
2. Share with your Board what you plan to do.
3. Plan a general meeting at which you share this material and then invite people to join.
4. Let people know that as a first step you are inviting them to do this for about 3 months then they will pause for a time to reflect and assess what has happened.
5. During that period they will also be involved in regular *Dwelling in the Word* exercises.
6. Do not be concerned if only a small number sign on. We don't want a lot of people engaged in this first round because we want to learn together. Also, this is asking people to take some small risks so most people will want to 'watch from the sidelines' to see what is involved as a few people try it out. This is very normal. You want to a) inform everyone what is happening and b) let people know they are invited to participate.
7. Continue to share with the church board what is happening.
8. Once you have identified a group of people interested in being a part of this "listening" process plan a training time. At this event you want to lead people through the exercises below and help them to help each other plan how they will go about the exercise.

Neighborhood Listening Questions and Exercises



Exercise 1: Walking about the neighborhood

On these walks have a notebook available. At the end of each walk set a few minutes aside to note what you are seeing and jot down responses to these questions:

1. As I walk about my neighborhood what am I noticing for the first time? Some examples of the 'new' things you may be noticing:
 - a. How people keep their houses. (Some houses have things left on the doorsteps (like newspapers) that do not get picked up.)
 - b. Some lawns are well cared for while others never seem to grow anything green.)
 - c. What times of the day do neighbors come home
 - d. Where are the places where parents gather with their children
 - e. Where do senior adults gather
 - f. How kids get to school (A lot of kids walk to the local school in their jeans and hoodies, while some wear uniforms and are picked up by buses each morning.)
 - g. On and on goes the variety and shifting patterns of your community.

2. What might your church be missing or taking for granted in the neighborhood? Churches often decide on programs to offer the community and spend resources marketing the 'outreach' program to the community (parents, youth or seniors). As you listen to your neighborhood and connect with the rhythms of its everyday life, what are you hearing from the neighborhood itself? What is important? For example, what already exists for parents, youth and seniors?





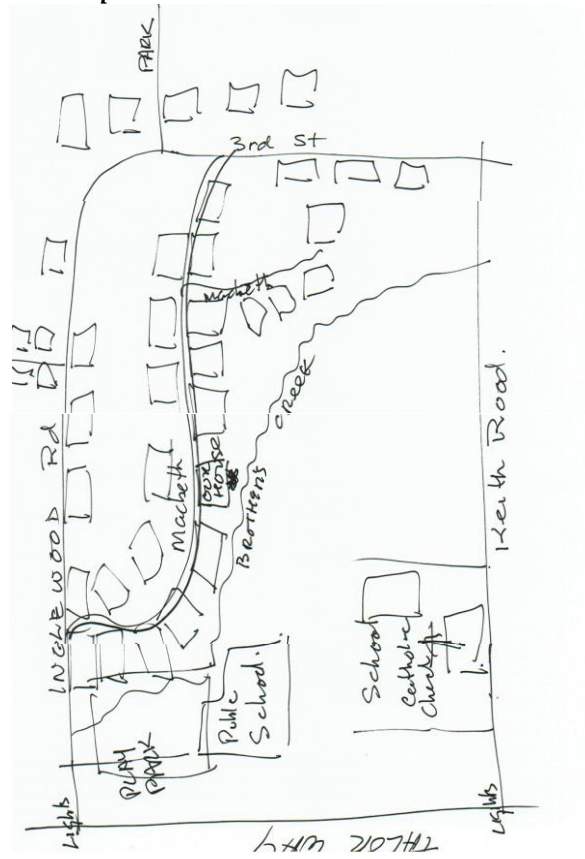
Exercise 2: Mapping Your neighborhood

In this exercise you are going to draw your own 'map' of your neighborhood that you will share with other 'map-makers' in your group and dialogue about what you are discovering.

Here are the steps:

1. Imagine you are in a helicopter looking down on your neighborhood. Draw a sketch of what you see (see the illustration of a 'map' below):
4. What is at the center of your neighborhood? Draw an image of this.
5. Mark the shopping places, parks or schools in the neighborhood.
6. What other landmarks do you want to mark?
7. Are there churches, business buildings, fire or police stations?
8. Mark the gathering places.
9. Mark your favorite places to go. Consider why you chose this.
10. Mark your least favorite place to go. Consider why you chose this.
11. Identify major boundaries in your neighborhood (geographic features, man-made boundaries).
12. Who is in your neighborhood?
13. Name people you know and locate them on your map.
14. Are there some stories you could tell about these people?
15. What do you know about these specific people? What makes them unique?
16. Using Your Senses:
17. What do you see?
18. What do you smell?
19. What do you hear?
20. What do you feel?
21. What effect did any of these things have on you?
22. Did you stop to talk with anyone on your walks? What did you hear?

Example Neighborhood Map





Exercise 3: Walking around your neighborhood 3-4 times a week

This exercise is similar to Exercise 1 but it adds some variations. Take walks at different times of the day (example: early in the morning, early afternoon, late afternoon and early evening). Jot down what you are seeing and hearing. Do this regularly and at different times of the day to see if different people are present and how they shape the neighborhood. Here are some examples of what you might find from this kind of observing:

- Early in the morning you might see a group of runners jogging together.
- If you are up early, you might catch the homeless packing their borrowed grocery carts, readying to make their rounds of stores and missions.
- At Sunrise, and (omit) several nannies get off buses to care for children all day.
- Mid-morning in the suburban neighborhood – all the cars have disappeared. It all looks ghost-like with not a person to be seen.
- Mid-morning – the “Merry Maid” service goes from house to house
- Coffee shops are ebb and flow with people; if you wait and watch long enough you may see a few older men who are regulars, sitting alone, trying to make their coffee last as long as possible.
- Late afternoon – teenagers are at their favorite hangout talking loudly, pushing one another around and laughing.
- Late evening – the streets are quiet but you might notice people walking about. Some have dogs but others are...

Questions to consider as you take your walks

- How is your neighborhood made up (buildings, parks, apartments etc.)?
- What would this same community look like at:
 - 7am?
 - Noon?
 - 6pm?
 - 10pm?
- Who is on the street?
- What are people doing?
- Are there things that surprise you?
- What raises your curiosity?
- What creates concern or questions?

- Is there anything that catches your attention in a way that you want to ask more questions or get more information?

Additional questions for your walks

- What kinds of residences are built?
- Why might my neighborhood have been built the way it was?
- How long ago was it developed?
- Do the original people still live here?
- If not where did they go? Why?
- Who are the people groups here?
- Where did they come from? How long have they been here?
- What do the primary organizations and services tell me about the area?
- Who are the individuals who connect and bridge in this community?
- How does communication take place?
- Where are the differences and stress points in this community?
- How is difference dealt with?
- Who is invisible? Why?
- Where is the church being heard (if at all)?

Journaling Our Reflections

What am I learning about my neighborhood?

What am I learning about my engagement in my neighborhood?

What three things would I do to improve my neighborhood?

Step 2: Discerning

You have been listening and attending to your neighborhoods and the stories shaping the people around you. Statistically, most of the persons in your neighborhood don't attend church, and they will show little interest in attending your church. Even so, out of the shared stories, what are you starting to notice about what God may be up to in the neighborhood? This is a new way of thinking about God, the Gospel and mission. What might it mean to have your eyes opened and your minds converted to this idea that God is out there ahead of you in the neighborhood up to something? How might you ask what God is up to?

What Do We Mean By *Discerning*?

The guiding question of our Luke 10 journey is: *How do we go on a journey together to discern what the Spirit is up to ahead of us in our neighborhoods and communities?* For many of us, this will be a new way of thinking about God, the Gospel, and Mission. Discernment is critical because not everything is "of the Spirit."

Spiritual discernment is the group asking itself: *How can we describe what we agree is the Spirit of God at work in order to develop some actions, testing together how we might join God there?* It is not about individual opinions and interpretations or copying what someone else is doing. It is not about voting. It is about the community of faith listening to God and prayerfully seeking God's direction. This is a lost practice in many churches today. For that reason, it may be the most difficult step of all.

Spiritual discernment may be both individual and communal. For our purposes here, our focus is group discernment. You might find these resources helpful: ***Discerning God's Will Together*** by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, published by Alban Institute, or ***Pursuing God's Will Together*** by Ruth Haley Barton. Also, an abbreviated form of the traditional practice can be found here: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101/2012/07/a-step-by-step-discernment-process/>

Discerning & Naming

To this point you have worked at developing new eyes and ears to connect with the stories of our community, as well as dwelling together in Scripture. Now you want to ask how this work invites you, as a group, to describe or name what God is up to.

The focus of this step is to practice discernment or the naming of what we believe God might be up to in our neighborhoods. This discernment/naming process is grounded in the *Dwelling in the Word* practice you have done together and in the practice of listening to the stories of the

people you have engaged with. In one sense you are taking this dwelling and listening process one step further by asking this:

In the midst of all you have done, how do you dwelt together with God and listen to what the Spirit might be saying about God's presence in all this?

Learning/Testing as a Community

Simon Carey Holt in his book ***God and Engaging the Neighborhood: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighborhood*** writes that this naming is not a solitary business but a communal practice. He wants us to understand something of the journey involved in this way of being a local church. Most of us are schooled in making individual decisions about fairly important things in life. We might talk to others about buying a new house or accepting a job offer, but usually we make private decisions then let others know. While often a good process, an unintended consequence is that we are inclined to think that important actions or decisions are made independently.

The challenge Carey Holt names is about how we develop practices of making decisions with each other. This is a part of what we mean by discernment, seeking to “see” together what God might be doing in our neighborhood. This new habit involves us practicing with each other until it becomes a part of who we are as a church community.

A part of practicing this discernment is beginning to share what we are hearing and discovering in our neighborhood with each other. In doing this we're not always going to get it right. Like a golfer learning to putt a shot on an undulating green, we will initially tap the ball only to see it roll away from the hole. Like new parents trying to figure out how to bring this new baby into our lives we don't always get it right, or, being a sandwich generation person we don't immediately know how to figure out these new relationships between aging parents and ourselves. It's a matter of practice, testing, sharing stories with friends and discovering together how to navigate a new world. Discerning what God is doing isn't exactly like any of these illustrations because, in a very real sense, the 'hole' we're aiming at is often little more than an inkling or hunch, while at other times it's a burning conviction that this is what we have to do. It's more about testing and trying in a new environment and this kind of practice is always best done together rather than alone.

Reflect & Pray

Over the coming weeks spend time in prayer together. Agree as a group to hold each other in this place of listening and discerning in order to resist the temptation of too quickly jumping to easy solutions and actions. This is not a time for deciding on actions, or making

recommendations but for everyone to have a chance to share personal responses to the questions provided. It's a time to assist one another listen more deeply to what has been shared.



Personal Journal Questions for Reflection

Use these questions to stimulate reflection on what has been shared and where your listening experiences might be suggesting some potential experiments.

1. What are you noticing now that you might have missed before?
2. Where do you find yourself 'waking up'?
3. Is there a story of how or where you are seeing your neighborhood with fresh eyes?
4. Are there stories of the neighborhood that keep coming to mind?
5. What names came to you over the past weeks?
6. Why these names?
7. What is it about them that energized you?
8. What parts of your life connects with them?
9. Where is God leading you to pray for people in your community?
10. What have you experienced?
11. What are you learning about yourself?
12. What did you find the most challenging?
13. Is there an experience of God's presence in the past few weeks that you can share?
14. Where might the Spirit be up to something on your street or neighborhood?



Group Review

On the basis of your raised awareness and the discovery of a variety of stories, now you want to ask the question: How might you be called to join with what God is up to in the neighborhood? We begin in group by sharing our responses and reflections on the following:

1. Take the stories you've shared and invite people to share/name what he/she sense God is up to in this story.
2. Invite everyone to respond by affirming and/or commenting.
3. Pray together around the discernment that has taken place.
4. Talk together about how you might find natural ways of attending to the stories of some who live on your street.

As you do this work together be careful to focus on “neighborhood” questions rather than typical “church” questions.

- ‘Neighborhood’ questions (What have we seen happening in the neighborhood over the past weeks? Where might we sense God nudging us to join, participate, and connect?)
- ‘Church’ questions (These are the kinds of questions that keep us in control and are about getting people into the church and what the church has or does, such as: How can I get these folk to come to church? What programs do we have that I can invite them to join? Is there a ‘need’ here I can meet? Is there a place here where I can ‘help’ this person?)

What are we hearing through our neighborhood listening? Consider any themes that are emerging within a particular set of stories or across all of them. What you are noticing? For example:

1. Are you being led to pray for people in your community?
2. Are there people you really enjoy hanging out with or talking to?
3. Are there places where you now find yourself going to more regularly?
4. Are there things happening in the community you are drawn to?
5. Who would you like to invite for a meal?
6. . . .

Step 3: Experimenting



What Do We Mean By *Experimenting*?

Part of our guiding question is: *How do we join with what God is doing in our neighborhood community?* **You have already started!** The first step is the experiment of “getting to know” your neighbors which you began with your practices in the Listening phases. Now you’re stepping into your specific experiment which comes out of your discernment work in Step 2. In this sense an experiment is:

- A simple plan to practice joining with what you see God doing in the neighborhood.
- Becoming a partner with people in your community.
- Participating in something (book club, garden group, sports group etc.).
- Not having elements of *doing something for* people.
- Not primarily about meeting the needs of a group of people.
- About how you come to be a friend and guest with others in the community.
- Placing yourself in a role of learner and listener (*What is God’s Spirit up to here?*)

Acting our way into new habits and behaviors

“Go! . . . When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.” Luke 10:3, 5-7

The heart of experimenting is a readiness to learn from the experience. Success is as much about how much we are transformed by the experience as our impact on others.

Take a moment to review the principles guiding our actions:

- God is already ahead of us in our neighborhoods and communities.
- We are discerning how we might join with what God is up to in the neighborhood
- We want to pay attention to the stories of people in our neighborhood and listen to what this might mean for us as a church.

Group Work: Different Questions for Dwelling in the Word



Dwelling in the Word

Continue practicing Dwelling in the Word using these questions with one another:

1. How is this passage speaking to us about the hospitality of Christ from the other?
2. How might I be the 'stranger' in my context?
3. Where might we be hearing God in our engagements with the neighbor?

Review and Discuss the Characteristics of "Experiments"

The most effective experiments are:

- Simple with no preconceived outcomes
- Small
- Easy wins
- Light on structure
- Requiring no expertise
- Requires no money or funding
- Allowed to fail
- A way of creating further curiosity
- A first step into practicing a new behaviors and ways of "being" church
- Challenges you to step out of the comfortable and "normal"
- Focused on the local
- Comes out of listening and discerning so will be unique to your context
- Partners with people around you
- Includes others in your congregation in partnering with neighbors around you
- Being open and available
- Shifts attention to listening to what the Spirit of God might be saying.

An effective experiment is not:

- Controllable, keeping you in charge
- Only about the "right" choices or doing the "right" thing

- Requiring a budget
- Complex, offering solution to a problem
- Planned with an expected outcome in mind
- Having “high stakes” attached (no room for failure)
- Addressing structural or organizational change
- About recruiting new members to your church
- About meeting needs in the community
- Tweaking a program that you are already doing

Experiments invite confidence to test things about which we are not sure; they invite a willingness to try and fail. In this cycle of trying, failing, reflecting, adjusting and trying again we learn new ways of acting. We try things we haven’t done before in order to test and learn new habits. It is to be expected that you won’t all be perfect at this the first time. Try small steps then report on what you’ve done so that friends can help you reflect and learn how to keep taking next baby steps together. Keep focused on the purpose of your experiment. There are many, many good things we can be doing in a neighborhood. Your work is seeking to join where you sense God is at work in people and join with that. Here are some more simple illustrations of experiments people are doing:

Examples of Experiments:

Raising Awareness. Mapping and walking around your neighborhood 3-4 times a week, reflect on what you notice, what catches your attention or raises questions.

Listening. Using the listening suggestions: Note ways people in your community connect. Reflecting on what you’ve learned, consider where God might be asking you to join.

Joining in where people gather. Go to the local hangouts on a regular basis, for example, local diner where men meet for breakfast, park where parents and kids congregate, the local water hole where folks gather to unwind and enjoy each other’s company. Find out who the regulars are. Strike up conversations. Listen to their stories. Get to know them.

Experiment with what it is like to be the stranger. Explore opportunities to cross boundaries. For example, go to local sport events that people attend and hang out on a regular basis. Notice who you see over and over. Strike up conversations with them. Find out if there is a way for you to personally support the soccer league. Is it possible they need additional help at practices or at games? Are they shorthanded in running the concession

stand at the games? Listen for openings where you might be able to join and work with them.

Testing where you are being invited to join in God's work- inviting someone to lunch.

You've started having regular chats with someone in your neighborhood, and keep thinking about taking the next step and inviting that person to coffee or lunch. Next time you see them, invite them!

Testing where you are being invited to join in God's work- putting people in touch with one another. You've learned that there are a number of older folks in your neighborhood that need help with chores around the house from time to time. In your conversations with them you've also learned that they would welcome help, and, not only that, they encourage you to reach out to anyone that you know who would be willing to do some chores. As it turns out, you also know if some students in the neighborhood looking for ways to make extra money over the summer. You decide to reach out to a couple of the students and invite them to reach out to those who have requested help.

The Book Club. A group of women decided to think of an experiment where they could intentionally keep the guiding principles in mind while they engaged in a very ordinary, typical activity. They joined a book club in the community. As they met month by month they shared questions about the books and in that sharing emerged many personal conversations about people's lives and their own wrestling with meaning. They noticed that the conversations were full of God's presence in the longings and the responses. While these conversations led to other engagements outside the group something took place at the end of one evening that could never have been scripted. After most people had left, one of the women stayed behind at the host's home, a member of the group of women looking for God out ahead of them. She began to share not just her loneliness but that in the economic meltdown, as a single person, she was not making ends meet. Upon reflection, the host realized that this was one of the moments when God was up to something and they were being invited to join with it.

The Garden. A congregation in the suburbs of a large Canadian city watched, initially with dismay, as the community around the church changed dramatically. The community had once been populated by people just like those who made up the congregation.... those with a white, Anglo-Saxon heritage who shared a common language and common customs and traditions. This was no longer the case.

However, the people in this church were curious about how God might be moving in their community. They decided that they would do some intentional listening, not with their own

agenda, but with an expectation that God would show them what they needed to see and hear. What they began to notice was that not only were the people in the community different from them but they were also different from each other. Through conversation with each other, the people in the church realized that they had a part to play in their community. They transformed part of the church's grounds into a community garden and invited anyone in the community who was interested to participate. Before long, people who lived beside each other but had never spoken to each other, were working and talking and learning about each other in the community garden. The people in the congregation participated too and they realized that they were part of a rich tapestry of God's people. God was at work in that place, reconciling and making new.

The Visitor. *In the Midlands, UK members of one church were intentionally engaging their neighbors by simply getting to know them. Their experiment was to develop and extend connections within their community. They did not go with preconceived notions about what they might accomplish. Instead, they went out into their neighborhoods intent on getting to know the people around them, with the underlying premise of continually asking the question of what God was up to in the area and how they could join in.*

After a while, one Sunday morning a man walked into the meeting room where the church was worshipping. He was in his 60s and, and some of the members recognized him from encounters outside the church. He had worked in a blue-collar job on a shop floor all his life. He stood at the door of the room watching the worship service draw to a close. When it was over, Martin, one of the members, went over the man to welcome him and pick up conversation. The man confessed that he had never been in a church in his life. It is just amazing to realize that here, in the middle of England, was a 60 something retired 'Brummy' who had never been in church. Martin asked him what he thought of the worship. The man responded that he didn't understand it but one thing was clear – there was community here.

Examples of What Experiments Are Not:

Provide a location for a group to use your facility as a church on Saturdays. You are aware of a group of new and first-generation immigrants who have moved into your community. You don't think they have anywhere to hold their own church services. You go to your leadership and get permission to invite these people to use your facility. Then, you go and visit the group and offer the use of the facility to them.

Tweak existing program. Step up marketing for this year's Vacation Bible School to reach a broader audience with hopes of increasing not only your VBS attendance, but also get a few new members out of the encounter.

Meet people for the purpose of inviting them to church. As you consider possible experiments use this work sheet to take a look at its characteristics. Upon completion, review, reflect and adjust your action plan as needed.

Your Experiment(s)

Use these tables to state the experiments you want to create around joining God in the neighborhood.

<i>Our Experiment is...</i>
<i>It is based on these elements of our listening & discerning...</i>
<i>It fits the criteria for experiments in the following ways...</i>
<i>What we plan to do over the next 3-6 months is...</i>
<i>Some specific action steps are...</i>

Our Experiment is...

It is based on these elements of our listening & discerning...

It fits the criteria for experiments in the following ways...

What we plan to do over the next 3-6 months is...

Some specific action steps are...

Reflecting on your Experiment as you journey



Ongoing Group Meetings. Continue practicing discernment with one another as you put your experiment into practice. Here are some questions to keep before you as you practice your experiment:

- Where are you 'waking up' to what is happening in your neighborhood?
- Is there a story of where you are seeing your neighborhood with fresh eyes?
- What names came to you over the past weeks? Why these names?
- Where is God leading you to pray for people in your community?
- What have you experienced?
- What are you learning?
- What did you find the most challenging?
- Where might the Spirit of God be up to something on your street (or apartment)?



Keep bi-weekly notes that you will share in your group

Our Experiment is...

What we did this week...

What we are experiencing... (share stories)

What we are learning?

What is really working?

What doesn't seem to be working?

What questions are emerging in terms of your understanding of Biblical themes or values?

Other questions or comments?

Notes:

Evaluating Experiments

Question to address: In the light of seeking to invite the people of our congregation to enter a shared journey of discerning what the Spirit is doing in our neighborhoods and communities and create some learning experiences in joining with God there – engage this worksheet:

EXPERIMENT:			
What We Did	What Worked Well	What Would We Change	Where We Are Now

What we are learning about inviting our people on this journey of discernment and learning experiments:

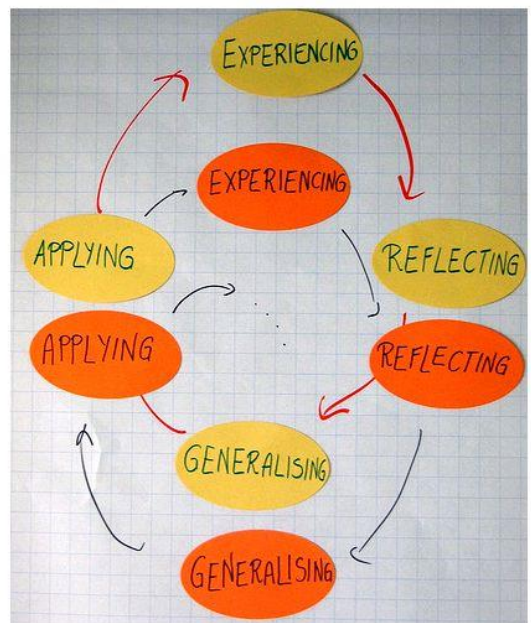
What We Are Learning

Step 4: Reflecting

What did we do? What are we learning? Where are we seeing God?

A key practice that is often left out in processes of congregational change is this simple but powerful step of reflecting on what we have done. There are practices that get into our bones, becoming a part of the rhythms of our life. Attending Sunday worship is one such practice; we would be shocked if clergy decided on a regular basis to skip Sunday. But when it comes to doing some focused reflection on what we've been doing, this is a practice few really do in any intentional way.

The three practices introduced so far are key elements for congregations learning how to go on this journey. Listening, Discerning and Experimenting help congregations to develop new rhythms of life. Each, as a learning moment, stretches us because it calls for new learning and the practicing of new habits. Reflection, like discernment, is difficult and yet the most important in terms of a congregation becoming self-conscious and partnering with God. Without this practice of reflection, getting into the bones and rhythms of a congregation's life, the first three practices will be little more than a moment of trying something before moving on to something else (like a "Forty Days" program, it is exciting for a while but quickly gets dropped for something else. This happens because there was never any real reflection on what took place and what the next actions might be).



There is a pattern to each of these practices. They involve, first, some simple learning of a new practice then, second, the practicing of the new practice and, finally, reflecting on the practice. This is called *action-learning*. Behind it is the conviction that we don't think, read or get educated with workshops into a new way of being church (this journey with Jesus into the neighborhood is a new way of being church for most of us), we *act* our way into seeing, thinking and behaving differently. That's why we introduced each of these practices by taking small steps, testing and trying again.

Reflection is the fourth step into acting our way into new practices. It is a learned behavior, not something we tend to do naturally. It is not a normal part of the way a congregation behaves.

Experience is the most important teacher we have but by itself experience teaches us nothing. Everyone reading these sentences can name situations in which people keep repeating the same patterns and never learn from what they're doing. Each of us could create a long list of illustrations. John Dewey said that the only experiences we learn from are the experiences we reflect on. That's the practice we introduce with this phase.

Reflection has several elements and each is important. The pattern of reflection is as follows:

1. **WHAT?** Sharing together what we have done
 - a. Is there a story that best captures your experience?
 - b. What did you enjoy most about this experience?

2. **WHAT HAPPENED?** On the basis of what we've done:
 - a. In what ways did we experience God at work in all this?
 - b. Are there ways in which your attitudes toward going on this journey with Jesus have changed? Why?
 - c. Are there ways in which your assumptions about being church are being challenged?
 - d. What has worked well? Why?
 - e. What didn't work well? Why?

3. **SO WHAT?** What are we learning about:
 - a. Listening to God in the neighborhood?
 - b. Going lightly?
 - c. Being with rather than doing for?

4. **NEW QUESTIONS:** What are the new questions that are emerging for us from these experiences in terms of:
 - a. Our sense of listening to the Spirit?
 - b. Being church in our neighborhood?
 - c. Are there now new ways you want to imagine being church together?

5. **SHARE:** What are the key things we want to share with the rest of the congregation?

These questions provide a pathway to reflect on our actions to
determine how to take next steps.

Without this reflection taking next steps becomes difficult.

Step 5: Deciding: Joining and participating with God



In what new ways will we now join with God in the neighborhood?

The fifth practice in reframing the imagination of congregations from a church-centered to a God-centered focus (going lightly with Jesus into our neighborhoods) involves deciding to initiate a new set of *experiments* based on the reflection work. By this fifth step a small number of people in a congregation have moved through the first four of the practices. Because this is the first time they will have worked with these practices they will still seem new. When, for example, a trainer introduces you to a new set of exercises (practices) designed to strengthen and stabilize your core, the first time you do them takes a lot of concentration. When you come back to them a week later it is not as if they have now magically become a normal part of how my body operates. Quite often, the trainer has to patiently show you again what the exercise involves (the steps) and then, after a few tries, you start to get a better feel for how to do them. This is where we are on this journey. There are several important elements here that can be summarized:

- The whole journey begins small without a lot of fanfare so that people can “practice new behaviors” without being in the spotlight.
- All the normal programs, events and rhythms of congregation life continue as several things are happening. All who are interested are invited into listening conversations and

Dwelling in the Word and a small number of members enter into the discerning and experimenting practices of going lightly in the way of Jesus into the neighborhood. Most people in the congregation know about the discerning and experimenting practices but they will have been standing on the sidelines watching what is happening. This is what we want to have happen because most people learn new habits by watching others do them first.

- The journey through these first four practices takes eighteen to twenty months. At that point it is essential to invite the congregation to repeat the cycle with this final practice of *deciding*.

This is how a congregation gradually shifts its imagination and energy. These practices are shaped around the process of learning by doing. They gently and gradually invite people into asking God-centered rather than church-centered questions by giving them ways of actually journeying into their neighborhoods and then reflecting on what they have been doing in the context of text dwelling, especially through Luke 10. Little by little, as the cycle is repeated more people get involved in joining the way of Jesus in their neighborhoods. Over and over the action-reflection cycle is repeated. As this happens, people slowly act their way into a way of life rather than working a program that lasts but a short period of time. This is a key insight to understand about this overall process. It is not about creating a program but about introducing new practices so that they start to become the way of life for more and more people in the congregation.

There is a lot to more about giving leadership to this journey that is beyond the purpose of this field guide. The purpose of this section is to provide a simple process whereby a congregation can start to practice its way into being shaped by God-centered rather than church-centered questions. The assumption is that as congregations learn how to go on this journey of joining with God in the neighborhood they will discover how to become very different kinds of congregations. A key leadership skill is in knowing how to continue the cycle. It is at this point that the leadership of a congregation wants to build on the first round by creating a new cycle that involves others in the becoming a part of Discerning, Experimenting and Reflecting. This is what the Deciding practice is about. The following offers an example of how this can be done.

1. Curate

This is where the pastoral leadership needs to step up and decide that he/she will curate (attend to, take care of) the process of deciding. The skill here is in knowing the difference between *making decisions for* the congregation and *ensuring that the congregation makes* the decisions. Curating is about guiding a process in which others are making the decisions for themselves. If the pastor is proposing recommendations people will, generally, agree but the

people won't own them in the long run. Curating involves creating spaces for interacting, sharing and decisions owned by the people themselves.

2. Plan to do this carefully and slowly

Think through the various steps (such as those outlined below) that need to be in place for people to make decisions. Remember there are three kinds of decisions that are important.

- a. First, for the congregation as a whole needs to hear the stories of what has happened and affirm that this is a direction in which the congregation wants to keep moving.
- b. Second, for another small number of people to decide to join with the discerning and experimenting journey. Don't create vague, general bullet point agendas, but work at developing good, specific process agendas for each step.
- c. Third, to have those in the first iteration look at how they will continue this journey into their neighborhoods.

3. Gather and frame the work.

Based on the *Reflection* processes outlined above, frame what you have learned into a communication piece for the board and key leaders of the congregation. A wise leader will see that the structure of that communication piece is already provided in the steps outlined in the *Reflection* section. Design the communication to:

- a. Involve those who participated in this first iteration.
- b. Be as interactive as possible.
- c. Provide a picture of the journey of going lightly in the way of Jesus into the neighborhood (stories of what took place and what people experienced).
- d. Share the five key practices and why they are important.
- e. Emphasize this is about introducing some new practices that can become part of the congregation's life rather than putting another program into place.

4. Gather with the board and key leaders to share with them:

- a. The overall communication piece based on the *Reflection* step.
- b. Listen carefully to their questions and, along with others who have been in the process, take time to interact with them around these questions.
- c. Propose a time for gathering with the whole congregation to share this communication and invite others to join in the journey of discerning and experimenting.

5. Bring the congregation together for an evening to share the communications piece:

- a. Tell the stories

- b. Share a picture of what God is doing – using the stories from your own and other congregations give a picture of what things might look like a few years hence.
 - c. Listen to people’s responses.
 - d. Continue to communicate that no structures, programs or roles are being changed – things in the church continue as they’ve been. This journey is about ‘experimenting’ and we will continue to take the time to stop and reflect on what we’re doing.
6. **Set a calendar date for beginning a ‘next round’ of discerning and experimenting.** Invite all those interested to attend.
 7. **Have people who’ve gone through the first round become ‘coaches’ for the next.**
 8. **Continue communicating** with the congregation the steps being taken and keep inviting people to share the stories of their experiences on the journey.



AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA