

Discerning a Path  
for Your Congregation

Syracuse United Methodist Churches (February 2015)

Guidelines

1. **Pray**

Pray for God's guidance and grace, as you go through this time of discernment.

Pray for yourself ... for your congregation, its leaders and members ... for the leaders and members of the other Syracuse city congregations.

Pray that you and they might be attentive, open and responsive to the leading of God's Spirit. Pray for the well-being of the city itself ... and that this prayer might be at the heart of all our planning and action.

Pray that God's will be done, no matter what ... and that you have the grace and faith to recognize it, accept it and be part of it.

Pray that this be a time of renewal and revitalization not just for your congregation and the other city congregations, but for yourself and for each each person involved.

Pray over the questions, answers and implications of the following exercise.

Make all this part of your congregational prayers each time you gather for worship, as well as in all other church meetings and gatherings.

2. **Consider the following steps**

1. Distribute copies of the Summary and full Action Plan as widely as possible.  
Use both print and electronic media to get the word out, along with Sunday morning announcements.
2. Have your Church Council or a small leadership team meet to define the process and timeline for how your congregation will go about discussing, discerning and making its decision.  
Have your leadership team designate one or two persons to coordinate and lead the process.  
Notify the congregation of the process, timeline and coordinator(s) in place for your church.
3. Hold 1 or 2 open "work sessions" where everyone is invited to talk through the options, questions and issues in an informal but organized and comprehensive way.
4. From the work sessions, develop a recommended option to take to an all-church meeting. Look for and work toward broad-based consensus.
5. Plan a church-wide meeting to vote on and approve one of the four Paths (or Tracks). Make sure people know about the all-church meeting and what's to be voted on.  
*See special voting guidelines on last page.*
6. Communicate your congregation's decision to both Mike and Craig by February 27.

3. **Organize and Involve**

Do not leave this decision-making process to chance or to the last minute.

Do not leave it up to just a few individuals. It's too important a decision.

You need the wisdom and participation of as many active members as possible, if you want your decision to be supported and to succeed.

You also need the wisdom and participation of persons on the fringes or margins of your

congregation. They may offer a perspective that no one else can see. They may also be the ones who get excited, inspired and energized by the possibility of change ... and the ones most ready and most able to make needed change happen.

#### 4. **Reflect and Discuss**

Carefully ponder the questions below on your own.

invite others to ponder them, too, both on their own and in conversation with one another.

Listen to the voices of others, especially when they disagree with you.

Allow them to hear your voice, even if it's in the minority or unpopular.

Trust and expect that God speaks through all of us ... including yourself ... and the person you (and others?) don't like listening to ... and the person who always acts as if he or she has all the answers ... and the person who's too young or old or new or different or ...

#### 5. **Find Your Path**

Take your time in answering the questions that follow. Don't race through them quickly.

Each question is self-contained. That is, you are to deal with each question on its own.

In the course of doing so, you may find yourself coming back to one or two primary options.

Explore what those options might have to offer you and your congregation ,, especially if they are not your original preference.

Path 1 = Ready to move quickly and decisively toward revitalization

Path 2 = Interested in a more deliberate, slower paced approach to revitalization

Path 3 = Moving toward closure, but wanting to stay together as long as possible

Path 4 = Looking to start something brand new, free from the legacy of the past and from the burden of maintaining a building

##### A. *Leadership*

Are there at least 10% of your active leaders and members who are willing, committed and able to lead your congregation through a structured, intentional revitalization process?

Will they have the active interest and support of a strong majority of the congregation?

YES Consider Path 1 or 2

NO Consider Path 3 (or 4?)

##### B. *Adaptability*

Do you and your congregation have the heart to participate fully, freely and joyfully in an intentional process of change and revitalization?

Can the congregation tolerate (survive?) significant change to its current style of worship, ministry, fellowship and/or organizational structure?

Is the sense of community within the congregation strong enough that it would pull people who are on the fence through the change?

YES Consider Path 1 or 4 (or 2?)

NO Consider Path 3 (or 2?)

##### C. *Sense of Urgency*

Are you and your congregation eager to see change?

Do you sense that change is overdue and time is of the essence?  
Is your congregation's current trajectory--including leadership, membership, giving and savings--leading it toward a need to have change happen sooner, not later?

YES Consider Path 1 or 3 (or 4?)  
NO Consider Path 2

D. *Preferred Scope and Pace of Change*

Are you and your congregation risk-takers?  
Are you able to live with uncertainty and fluidity?  
Do you have an interest in starting new ventures and ministries?  
Are you and your congregation more likely to jump into action without all the exact details than you are to take time to thoroughly weigh your options and do the needed planning?  
Are you and your church more likely to focus on freedom, creativity and innovation than you are on security, familiarity and dependability?

YES Consider Path 1 or 4  
NO Consider Path 2 or 3

E. *Impact*

Will any decisions and changes you make potentially have a significant impact on current ministries and ministry partners, including other building tenants?  
Are these ministries and partners important enough to you that you want to take time to factor in their needs and concerns and perhaps include them in the planning process?  
Are there external factors that need to be taken into account?

YES Consider Path 2 (or 3? or 4?)  
NO Consider Path 1 or 3 (or 4?)

F. *Building*

Are there major building concerns that need to be addressed fairly quickly?  
Do you lack the financial resources needed to support and maintain the building properly for the long-term?

YES Consider Path 1, 3 or 4  
NO Consider Path 2

(You may want to refer to the 2008 Paragraph 213 study report with its review and assessment of your church building.)

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Comment [1]:

G. *Human and Financial Resources*

How long can your congregation realistically survive, if your current trends and trajectory continue unchanged?  
(Current trends and trajectory include: using up of accumulated savings; loss of giving units--especially major donors; shrinking membership and leadership base.)

< 3 years Consider Path 3 or 4

3 yrs. or more Consider Path 1 or 2

(The assumption is that it will take at least 3 years to see meaningful and substantive results and for long-term turn-around to be sustainable.)

## 6. **Analyze**

Assess each option carefully and thoroughly, with particular attention to the one or two primary options identified in the "Find Your Path" exercise.

What are the potential benefits of each option?

What are the potential negatives and obstacles of each option?

In which option(s) do the potential benefits outweigh the negatives?

## 7. **Things to Keep in Mind**

A. Bathe the entire process and conversation in prayer, including time for silent prayer.

Listen for where God is calling and leading you and your church.

Pray that God's will be done, not ours.

B. Trust and affirm that God is present and at work in any of the options.

C. Reiterate that this vote is about how to participate in the overall citywide planning process.

It will not change the legally incorporated status of any of the churches.

That would require a clear and specific vote at another time.

D. Create a healthy and safe environment for persons to (a) ask questions, (b) express their opinion and preference(s), and (c) dialogue with others about the options.

E. Keep a record of all questions that come up ... and report those questions to both Mike Nevin and Craig French (so that there can be consistent answers to all questions).

F. In answering questions, stick to the basics. Answer straightforwardly, simply, directly.

If you don't know the answer, say so ... and promise to get the answer.

Then follow up by contacting Mike and/or Craig to see what they can say.

Take that answer back to the individual who asked it ... and if needed, to others.

G. If it would be helpful, invite Mike Nevin and/or Craig French to one of your meetings where the Plan is discussed, so they can help make sure that information and answers given to your church match those given to other churches.

## 8. **Voting Guidelines**

1. Churches are likely to vote in one of two ways.

Some churches may have members vote "yes" or "no" on a single recommended path.

Other churches may have members vote on all 4 options, with voting continuing until one of those options receives a simple majority of the votes.

2. For churches that place all 4 options on the ballot:

If no option receives a majority of votes on the first ballot, a second ballot shall be taken.

The two options receiving the most votes on the first ballot shall be the only eligible options on the second ballot.

3. For churches that choose to vote on a specific recommendation:

If the recommendation is not approved, the deliberation and voting need to continue until

- one of the 4 paths is chosen by a majority of those present and voting.
4. Absentee voting is not permitted, in keeping with United Methodist practice. A quorum consists of those present and voting.
  5. If a church chooses to use a paper ballot, a sample one will be provided.

9. **Individual Sign-up Option for Path 4**

1. Regardless of how his or her church votes, anyone is welcome--as an individual--to sign up for Path 4 ("New Track"), in order to be part of creating a brand new ministry or faith community.
2. Individuals may signal their interest by notifying their pastor or by notifying either Mike Nevin (mnevin1@twcny.rr.com) or Craig French (craigfrench@twcny.rr.com).
3. Churches are asked to make sure parishioners are informed of this option.