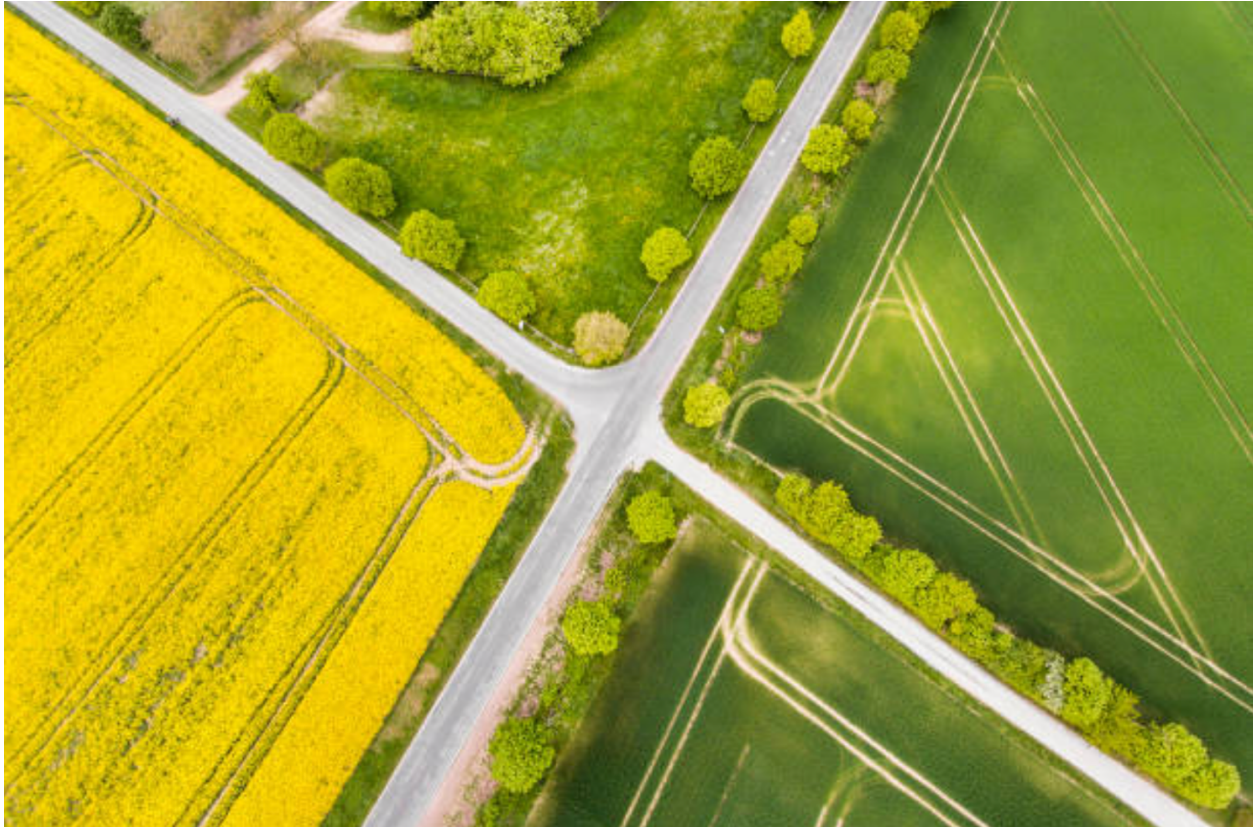


# At a Crossroads

Guiding Your Congregation Toward Vitality

*"God in Christ is always doing a new thing."*



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## How to Use This Booklet

- This is a **guide**, not a mandate.
  - You'll move in and out of sections — start with the **Key Questions, Decision Map, and Sample Process**.
  - Use the **Reflection Pauses** and **Next Step** suggestions to engage leadership and congregation.
  - The synod staff is your partner every step of the way.
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## 1. Introduction & Orientation

Many congregations now face shifting cultural, financial, and demographic landscapes. What once was assumed — stable membership, cultural centrality, growth — is no longer guaranteed. Yet there is hope: the risen Christ continues to do a new thing in and among us.

This booklet helps congregations prayerfully discern faithful, sustainable futures. **It offers multiple paths, each with sub-options, required strengths, risks, and next steps. Use the Key Questions and Decision Map to identify which paths may best fit your context.**

Lutheran theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the well-known “Serenity Prayer”:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Friends, there *are* things we *can* change. We can choose **empowerment** by acting on what is within reach. This booklet offers ideas for congregations to move from being at risk toward daring new mission. You have choices—and you’re not alone. The synod walks with you in discernment and decision.

All change carries risk. Letting go of something may be necessary for something greater. If you feel the options are exhausted, this booklet is for you. You have hope. You have company. We *are* church together.

### **Rocky Mountain Synod**

Directors for Evangelical Mission

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## **2. Sample Discernment Process**

Below is a **roadmap** — a sample sequence showing how a congregation might walk through discernment. Adjust timing and steps as needed.

<b>Step</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Responsible / Participants</b>	<b>Approx Time</b>
0	Council initiates discernment & invites synod staff	Council + Pastors	1 meeting
1	Form Leadership / Discernment Team; begin using this guide	Council + Pastor + Key Leaders	2–4 weeks
2	Complete <b>Key Questions &amp; Worksheet</b>	Leadership Team + Council	1–2 meetings
3	Synod staff / facilitator meets with leadership	Synod Staff + Team	1 meeting
4	Choose 1–2 possible paths to explore deeper	Team + Council	1 meeting

Step	Action	Responsible / Participants	Approx Time
5	Explore sub-options, read, pilot, discuss	Team & Congregation	1–3 months
6	Decide on path; draft plan & covenant	Leadership + Synod	1–2 months
7	Launch path with periodic check-ins & evaluation	Congregation & Synod	Ongoing

*Pause for Prayer & Reflection* — At each step, stop for Scripture, silence, or group conversation. Don't rush.

### 3. Key Discernment Questions & Worksheet

Use this as a working tool. Mark **Yes / No** and add notes as you go.

Theme	Question	Yes / No	Notes / Observations
Viability / Finance	Do we have a pattern of growth in attendance?		
Viability / Finance	Will our trend (growth, plateau, decline) allow sustainable ministry long term?		
Viability / Finance	Can we sustain ourselves without relying on large gifts or bequests?		
Leadership / Volunteers	Do we have enough people to staff ministries internally and externally?		
Growth / Outreach	Are new evangelism / education efforts feasible?		
Growth / Outreach	Are first-time visitors coming regularly?		
Growth / Outreach	Do visitors return for a second or third visit?		
Growth / Outreach	Do 20-25% of first-time visitors eventually join?		
Focus / Mission	Is our primary focus more on outreach / mission than survival?		

Theme	Question	Yes / No	Notes / Observations
Focus / Mission	Are we trying to do more than just keep the doors open?		
History / Trend	Has the congregation grown in past 5 years?		
Capacity	Do we have enough engaged members for ministry?		
Giving	Does giving support mission work beyond maintenance?		
Generational Life	Are young families or newer generations active?		
Generational Life	Are several families tithing regularly?		
Flexibility	Are we willing and able to adapt ministry and lifestyle?		
Facility	Is our facility physically adaptable for new uses?		
Facility	Can we afford necessary repairs to keep it usable?		

### Interpretation Guidelines (optional):

- 5 or more “No” responses → early conversation with synod staff is wise
- 8 or more “No” responses → congregation may be entering a serious decline phase
- Use your notes to see where you are strongest, weakest, and which paths align best

## 4. Decision Map / Navigational Guide

Review Key Questions →

- └ If viability, leadership, and volunteer capacity remain → **explore Transformation**
- └ if full transformation seems too big but some capacity remains → **explore Partnership**
- └ If sustainability is already dangerously low → **explore Resurrection**
- └ If the congregation values stability or wishes minimal change → **consider Maintenance**

**At each branch, pause and ask:** “Do we have enough energy, resources, and vision to pursue this path?” If constraints tighten, you may pivot.

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## 5. Path A: Transformation

### Vision

Renew what is — identity, structure, mission — so your congregation becomes more vital, outward, and spiritually animated.

### When to Choose This Path

Consider transformation when:

- You still have core leadership capacity (lay + pastoral)
- Some financial or organizational resilience remains
- You sense God is calling you to reimagine, not just maintain
- You're open to multi-year change

### Sub-Options & Considerations

Sub-Option	Description	Timeline / Resource Needs	Key Questions / Risks
Intentional Vitality Process	Bible study, asset discovery, reformation, action planning	18–24 months	Do we have coachable leadership? Are we willing to reposition ministries?
Redevelopment	Re-root in community, structural redesign, outreach shift	3–5 years	Are we ready to refocus outward? Can we sustain the effort?
TEEM / SAM & Alternate Leadership	Use part-time or nontraditional leaders; expand lay leadership	Ongoing adaptation	Are there gifted lay leaders? Are you flexible?
Relocating / Selling Building	Reduce property burden or move to a better site	Varies	Is the building constraining mission? Is relocation feasible?

### Reflection Pause

- Which ministries feel most lifeless or overburdened?
- What would need to change in our structure or identity to allow new growth?
- Are we holding too tightly to past models?

## Benefits

- New momentum, clarity of mission
- Alignment with local context
- More sustainable staffing or leadership models
- Spiritual renewal

## Risks / Caveats

- Change fatigue or resistance
- Underestimating costs or time
- Internal conflict or backlash
- Leadership transitions at critical junctures

## Suggested Next Steps

1. Form a “Transformation Readiness Team” to match your current reality to the “When to Choose” criteria.
2. Meet with synod staff or an external facilitator to assess readiness.
3. Select one sub-option to pilot (e.g. begin an 18-month vitality process) before all others.
4. Create a covenant of accountability, schedule check-ins (quarterly), review progress, and adjust as needed.

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## 6. Path B: Partnership

### Vision

Collaborate with other congregations — sharing staff, resources, vision — for the sake of mission while retaining some independence.

### When to Choose This Path

Partnership is attractive when:

- Transformation alone feels beyond capacity

- You have relational or geographic partner potential
- You want to maintain identity, but need shared support
- You wish to leverage synergy

## Sub-Options & Tradeoffs

Sub-Option	Description	Benefits	Key Risks / Questions
Yoking	Two+ congregations share pastoral staff, remain separate legal entities	Maintains separate identities, shares costs	Adjusting worship times, member expectations, travel demands
Merger	Congregations combine into one building & structure	Pool resources, simplify operations	Turf issues, identity loss, governance conflicts
Consolidation	Sell buildings; form a new entity in new location	Fresh mission posture, unified resources	Overcoming history, identity shift, alignment demands
Anchor Models (Accompanying / Adoption)	A more vital congregation “adopts” or mentors a weaker one	Capacity infusion, coaching, stability support	Distance constraints, aligning vision, permanence of partnership
Area Mission Strategy	Cluster congregations to share ministries, facilities, outreach	Efficiency, collaboration, shared mission	Complex coordination, identity tension, governance

## Reflection Pause

- Which neighboring congregations might align with us?
- What shared ministries can we try first (e.g. worship, outreach)?
- What fears or resistances might surface in partnership?

## Benefits

- Shared risk, shared resources
- Increased mission reach
- Encouragement and mutual accountability

## Risks / Challenges



- Differences in culture or pace
- Conflict over governance, identity, expectations
- Communication and coordination burden
- Power imbalances or misaligned vision

## Suggested Next Steps

1. Identify potential partner congregations.
2. Convene joint vision conversations.
3. Draft a memorandum of understanding / covenant.
4. Pilot shared ministries before fully merging.
5. Regular review and open communication.

## 7. Path C: Resurrection

### Vision

When sustaining the current path is no longer faithful, embrace endings so God can birth something new — grounded in Easter hope.

*"The worst thing is not the last thing."* — Frederick Buechner

### When to Choose This Path

This path may be fitting when:

- Current trends are deeply unsustainable
- Financial, volunteer, or facility decline is irreversible
- You sense God inviting you into new forms beyond the old structure
- Vital ministry is utterly constrained

### Sub-Options & Tradeoffs

Sub-Option	Description	Benefits	Key Questions
Close & Re-Organize as New Congregation	Temporarily close, then restart with new vision / structure	Fresh mission identity, flexibility	Will current members support re-launch? Are resources sufficient?

Sub-Option	Description	Benefits	Key Questions
Word & Service Mission Post	Close as sacrament community, continue social ministry	Community impact may continue	Members need new worship homes; nonprofit structuring
Holy Closure	Intentional and dignified ending with legacy	Prevents protracted decline; legacy clarity	Deep grief; legal and governance complexity

## Reflection Pause

- What would we grieve most in this process?
- What legacy do we hope to leave?
- How might God be inviting something entirely new?

## Benefits

- Frees energy for new mission forms
- Honors the life cycle rather than forcing decline
- Enables strategic use of remaining assets

## Risks / Challenges

- Deep grief, conflict, emotional resistance
- Legal, financial, and procedural complexity
- Care for members during transitions
- Determining disposition of property, funds, archives

## Suggested Next Steps

1. Form a **Legacy & Closure Taskforce** to lead discernment.
2. Engage synod staff on dissolution, legal, asset, archival matters.
3. Plan pastoral care, memorial worship, and communication.
4. Clarify how to distribute assets (buildings, funds, records).
5. Celebrate history, commission members into new ministry, and release the congregation prayerfully.

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## 8. Path D: Maintenance

## Vision

To continue ministry as is, with minimal change — often by default.

### This Path Occurs

- When leadership resists deeper change
- When constraints feel too heavy for bold paths
- When congregation prioritizes stability over transformation

### Risks & Realities

- Maintenance may only delay necessary change
- Momentum tends to slow over time
- Eventually, without adaptation, decline may become inevitable

### Possible Adaptive Moves Even in Maintenance

- Trim facility costs or relocate
- Introduce small experiments in outreach
- Share services or staff informally
- Revisit key questions periodically

### Suggested Next Steps

1. Recognize maintenance as a conscious choice, with its own risks.
2. Conduct regular “health checks” (e.g. revisit Key Questions at intervals).
3. Stay open to shifting toward Transformation, Partnership, or Resurrection if needed.
4. Use synod staff as accountability and sounding board.

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## 9. Grants

Grants are available for congregations committing to outreach initiatives as part of their intentional vitality process. Many of these grants are offered through ELCA Churchwide, and others are available through other agencies. Grants are awarded on a case-by-case basis and include:

- Evangelism Microgrants – up to \$1,000 with a focus on fresh expressions and experimentation

- Evangelism Initiatives – up to \$5,000 with a focus on evangelism training for laity.
- Congregational Outreach Ministries – up to \$10,000 with a focus on congregation-based efforts sharing the Good News through intentional invitational discipleship and outreach.
- Congregational Vitality – up to \$10,000 with a focus on congregations exploring intentional vitality as well as anchor church and collaborative models.
- CaSTLE Project grants - The CaSTLE Project stands for *Country and Small Town Lived Ecclesiology*. The emphasis is on a new way of being church, particularly in rural contexts, and a more focused, specialized way of forming leaders for these congregations.

***Please contact one of the synod's Directors for Evangelical Mission for more information.***

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## 10. Frequently Asked Questions

- **How long should discernment take?**  
There's no fixed timeline. Earlier is often better, but don't rush the Spirit.
  - **Can synod staff or bishop make decisions or force closure?**  
No — under our polity, the congregation, through its constitution, makes these decisions. Synod staff advise and support, not impose.
  - **Can we keep our current pastor?**  
Maybe. Some paths may require leadership transitions. Discern what leadership gifts are needed for the next season.
  - **How do we find a partner?**  
Begin locally — neighboring congregations, denominations in full communion, synod networks. Invite exploratory conversations.
  - **Are there financial aids or grants?**  
Yes — some paths may qualify for synod or churchwide grants, coaching, or seed support.
  - **What if we change our mind midway?**  
Flexibility is essential. Use regular reflection and evaluation to pivot as needed.
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## 11. Glossary / Definitions

- **Transformation:** Renewing internal structures and identity to align more fully with God's mission

- **Partnership:** Collaborations where congregations share staff, resources, mission while retaining some identity
  - **Resurrection:** Faithful endings and new beginnings (closing, re-organizing, pivoting)
  - **Maintenance:** Continuation of existing ministry with minimal change
  - **TEEM:** Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (lay candidate pastoral path)
  - **SAM:** Synodically Authorized Minister (trained lay leader authorized to serve a congregation)
  - **Yoking / Merger / Consolidation:** Different forms of combining congregations in staff, governance, assets
  - **Anchor Models (Accompanying / Adoption):** Stronger congregation partners with a weaker one for support and direction
  - **MOU / Covenant:** Written agreement defining roles, expectations, duration in partnerships
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## 12. Contacts / Next Steps / Prayer

### Next Steps

1. Share with your council or leadership team; ask them to read and mark the Key Questions.
2. Contact your Synod Staff in the Rocky Mountain Synod to begin partnering.
  1. [Pr. Sara Wirth](#), Synod Minister for Transitions and Healthy Ministries
  2. [Pr. Diana Linden](#), Synod Minister for Rostered Leaders
  3. [Pr. Chris Davis](#), Director for Evangelical Mission–North and Synod Minister for Generosity
  4. [Pr. Quirino Cornejo](#), Director for Evangelical Mission–South & Synod Minister for Multicultural Witness
3. Plan a congregational conversation using the reflection pauses as anchors.

### Prayer & Sending

O God, you have called us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.