

WHY CHURCH?

Neighborhood Edition



WHY CHURCH: Neighborhood Edition

Purpose

This guide helps congregations discern how to minister more effectively to the people in their neighborhood through a structured, Spirit-led process of community engagement and ministry development.

Process Overview

Over three months, a church team will:

- ▶ Study scriptures related to outreach
- ▶ Read through selected portions of the “Why Church” material built on the *Church Becoming* material created by the Rocky Mountain Synod Congregational Ministry committee
- ▶ Research neighborhood demographics and needs
- ▶ Interview congregation members and community stakeholders
- ▶ Discern the Holy Spirit’s guidance through prayer and reflection
- ▶ Develop and implement a new ministry initiative

Time Commitment

- ▶ Six 90-minute meetings (twice monthly)
- ▶ 2 - 3 hours of homework between meetings (interviews, research, prayer)
- ▶ Total commitment: Approximately 25 - 30 hours over three months

Expected Outcomes

- ▶ Deeper understanding of your congregation’s strengths and identity

- ▶ Greater awareness of community needs and opportunities
- ▶ Stronger relationships with neighborhood stakeholders
- ▶ One concrete, sustainable ministry initiative aligned with both congregational gifts and community needs
- ▶ A Spirit-led process that can be repeated for future ministry discernment

Who Should Participate

This process works for congregations of all sizes. Your team can include as few as three people to as many as you'd like. The key is finding people who represent diverse perspectives and are committed to attending all sessions and are open to new revelations from the Spirit of God.

Getting Started

Review the full guide, secure leadership approval, assemble your team, and schedule your first meeting.

Preparation

Team Selection

When selecting team members, consider:

- ▶ Diversity of ages and backgrounds
- ▶ Mix of long-time members and newer participants
- ▶ Includes both those who live near the church and those who commute
- ▶ People with different perspectives on ministry and outreach
- ▶ Those with connections to the neighborhood (work locally, children in local schools, etc.)
- ▶ At least one church leader with decision-making authority

Leadership Buy-In

Get appropriate approval and participation from the authority in your system. Consider how findings will be shared with leadership throughout the process. Will a council member participate? Will there be regular updates in the church newsletter or announcements?

Logistical Planning

- ▶ Determine a meeting schedule for all six sessions (recommended: twice monthly for three months)
- ▶ Secure commitments from team members to attend all sessions
- ▶ Identify suitable meeting spaces that allow for both discussion and breakout activities
- ▶ Assign a facilitator who will guide discussions and keep the process on track
- ▶ Assign a note-taker to document key insights and decisions
- ▶ Gather supplies: sticky notes, markers, large paper/whiteboard, printing of interview forms

Setting Expectations

Before the first meeting, communicate with your team:

- ▶ This is a discernment process, not just a planning exercise
- ▶ The goal is to listen first—to God, the congregation, and the community
- ▶ The outcome might be different than what is initially expected
- ▶ A commitment to both learning and action

MEETING 1

Introductions

Make sure everyone knows each other, and invite people to share why they are participating in this group.

Devotional Moment

Read Acts 15:22 – 35

Discuss: What is the Holy Spirit doing in the church in this passage?

How might the Holy Spirit do something similar in your church?

Pray

Study the *Why Church /Church Becoming* Material

Holy Spirit - Where is God in this?

We've sometimes become so accustomed to our familiar habits and ways of working that we've failed to ask how the Holy Spirit may be inviting us to think and act in new ways. *Church Becoming* asks a congregation to intentionally engage with God by listening for where the Holy Spirit is calling, and thinking about the differences between our view and what the Holy Spirit sees. When we talk about discernment in the church, we mean moving from our perspective to God's perspective.

It's important to remember that the Holy Spirit invites us to take ourselves out of our comfort zone. And it's okay to feel like we've failed or fallen short in our efforts! Sometimes, what seems like failure is actually the Holy Spirit's way of planting seeds that will later come to fruition, inviting us to reconsider what is meant by success in ministry.

Discussion Questions

Depending on the size of your team these can be discussed as a large group or in smaller breakout groups.

- ▶ When has your congregation listened (discerned) for the Holy Spirit calling in the past? Or what would it look like for your congregation to listen (discern) now for where the Holy Spirit is calling?
- ▶ Name a time when something didn't work as expected in your congregation? What did you learn? How did the Spirit guide you into seeing something new?
- ▶ Where does the Holy Spirit seem particularly active in your congregation? What are the bright spots? How might you embrace that work?
- ▶ How does your congregation pray together for God's guidance?
- ▶ If someone felt inspired by the Spirit to suggest a direction for the congregation, how would that be shared with leadership?
- ▶ How does study of scripture shape congregational mission? Is there a Bible story or verse that serves as a touchstone for the congregation?
- ▶ What allows you to trust or take risks?

Activity

As a group, take a walk around the church neighborhood and talk about what you notice. Make appropriate accommodation for those who have trouble walking. If your congregation is not in a neighborhood, determine a place in town or a nearby neighborhood to be your starting place. Depending on the size of the group you may split up and walk a mile loop in each direction from the church. Take note of what you see. Who are the neighbors? How old are they? What can you tell about them? What organizations do you see? What is their purpose?

Who do you know already in the neighborhood? Who don't you know yet? As you turn around and walk back to the church ask yourself what the congregation is communicating to the neighborhood? Would our neighbors know they are welcome here? Is there anything that entices them in or pushes them away?

Debrief

As you come back together, take a few minutes to share some things that surprised you. What are some questions the activity raised in you? What might the Holy Spirit be saying?

Closing Prayer

Share with God some of the learnings from the evening and ask God some of the questions that were raised.

Homework

Have each member of the group commit to interview 2-3 people in your congregation using these questions. Be consistent in the questions so that everyone gets asked the same things. Feel free to add additional questions you think will be helpful. Be prepared to share the results at your next meeting.

Interviewing the People of Our Congregation

1. How long have you been part of this Christian community?

_____ years.

2. Where do you live? How long does it take you to get to this Christian community?

3. What first brought you to this Christian community?
4. How deeply involved would you say you are in the life of this Christian community?
5. Tell a story of a time when this Christian community meant the most to you.
6. What has been most frustrating or discouraging in your experience of this Christian community?
7. How does this Christian community contribute to the life of the surrounding neighborhood or world?
8. When you think about this Christian community's future, what do you find most hopeful?

MEETING 2

Interview Presentations

Share some of the things that you learned when interviewing members of the congregation. What common themes did you notice? How diverse was the pool of interviewees? What were the demographics of those we interviewed?

A Note on Sharing Homework in the Group

In this curriculum, homework assignments are suggested for each meeting with reports presented at the next meeting. These reports could easily use up all the meeting time so here are some suggestions:

- ▶ Limit homework discussion to 30 minutes.
- ▶ Each person should be prepared for a report by summarizing comments and information gathered into several key statements
- ▶ Two methods for sharing reports:
 - ✳ Sticky Note Clustering: Everyone writes individual comments/observations/readings on sticky notes. Then each person places them individually on large paper/white boards or tables looking for other notes with similar comments. A designated moderator can combine and then present the common themes.
 - ✳ Echo-Free method: A designated moderator asks one person for one comment/theme. If other participants have a similar comment, they mark that off their list. Continue around the room until everyone has exhausted their lists without repeating something that has already been brought up
- ▶ Consider having a place/poster/whatever designated as a “parking lot” for people to add sticky notes with further comments and ideas as they think of them, even

if those thoughts aren't timely to the current discussion. The leader should review and address these at the end of the meeting.

Devotional Moment

Read *Luke 9:49 – 50*

Discuss What's the message for your congregation from this passage?

Pray

Study

Collaboration or Competition

Congregations can easily operate and act individualistically. Some congregations may think that they have to generate all the ministry programming themselves for all the people. Those that retain that mindset miss the opportunity for collaboration or partnership. Lots of time and energy is put into competition, convinced that a congregation needs to be all things to all people if it wants to outdo that *other* congregation down the street, even if that other congregation is part of the ELCA.

Church Becoming, on the other hand, puts time and energy into collaboration, convinced that every congregation has distinctive gifts, and only by bringing those gifts together can we experience the fullness of the Body of Christ. As such, *Church Becoming* values cooperation and communal ministry. Congregations that exemplify *Church Becoming* know we have more to offer our communities when we partner together. Church Becoming thrives on being **Church Better Together**: knowing that no one congregation can be everything to everyone, and that working together, none of us have to be.

Although it's often easier to do things ourselves, the mission statement of the Rocky Mountain Synod says, "*Together we proclaim and embody God's unconditional love for the sake of the world.*"

Questions

- ▶ What does “Church Better Together” mean to you?
- ▶ With whom is your congregation already partnering?
- ▶ With whom is your congregation intentionally (or unintentionally) challenging or in competition?
- ▶ Who are the natural partners around you? Other congregations? Non-profits? Community groups?
- ▶ What gifts does your congregation have that may benefit your community?
- ▶ What gifts do others have that may benefit your congregation?
- ▶ How might you be more collaborative?
- ▶ How does your congregation live out being Church Better Together?

Homework

Spend some time online researching your community and engaging with your online worship attendees.

Break up into two groups: one group to research your church as if you were new to the area, and one group to research your area as if you were new to the community. Be prepared to share your findings with everyone at your next meeting.

Research Your Church

Read reviews of your church on Google, NextDoor, Facebook, and other social media platforms. It can be helpful to use the “search” button on community groups to research your church’s name. Explore your church’s website and social media presence. Are comments made to your pages, video links, etc. responded to? Overall, how is your community perceived by others? Is there one activity that your church is known for? Has there been one story that’s been made prominent in the community? Compare your online presence findings to what your congregation members discussed in Meeting 2.

Research Your Area: Research your geographic area. Try researching your town name, zip code, and county to find historic and demographic data. Try AI chatbots like copilot and ChatGPT and have a conversation about your area. The Association of Religious Data Archives is a good source for statistical information (<https://www.thearda.com>), pulling information from the US Census. Some demographic data to gather include the following: racial and ethnic makeup, education level, income levels (median and spread), average age, number of family members in home, percentage of home ownership versus rental...



MEETING 3

Present findings from online research

Devotional Moment

Read *Matthew 25:31 – 36* and *28:16– 20*

Discuss How do these passages speak to the directionality of congregational ministry?

Pray

Study

Directionality

Every congregation seeks to be an inviting and welcoming community of Christian faith. Often, however, the direction is turned inward, relying on people to come “to us”. This involves putting a sign outside that says, “All are welcome” and assuming that will do the trick.

A congregation studying *Church Becoming* understands the importance of being an inviting and welcoming community of faith while intentionally turning the focal direction outward. So instead of waiting for people to show up, the congregation asks what it means for us, as a church, to show up in the spaces where people actually spend their time. This outward focus draws us back to the New Testament understanding of church as **ecclesia**, “the ones called out.” Directing ourselves outward is about being contextual.

Being a congregation called out to where people actually can be found takes many forms, from engaging the neighbors or schools or businesses right around us, to showing up at the park or ski slope down the road where people gather. Our faith in Christ leads us to understand Christ’s message of unconditional love and compels us to share that reality with others. A congregation embracing *Church Becoming* is participating as the church outside of the congregation’s

walls. Being church called out also involves intentionally reaching out to the most vulnerable, to those most impacted by crisis.

Questions

- ▶ Where are people gathering in your community?
- ▶ Where are people finding purpose and meaning in your community?
- ▶ What groups already exist in your community that might partner with your congregation?
- ▶ What problems are people trying to solve in your community; how can your congregation partner with those already engaged in problem solving?
- ▶ How is your congregation uniquely equipped to answer one or two of the problems identified? We can all only do so much, but where is God leading your community?
- ▶ As the church, how could/can you accompany your community outside of the congregation's walls?
- ▶ Are the time, energy and resources of your congregation being mobilized for the sake of what's happening within your congregation, or for engaging your community, neighbors and world?

Homework

Interview Neighborhood Stakeholders:

Some examples would be the chief of police, Habitat for Humanity, nearby small business owners, neighbors who live nearby, school principal, faith leaders of other communities nearby, anybody who shares space or meets at your church.

Use these questions to interview people who live and/or work in the neighborhood of your congregation but are not part of your Christian community.

1. How long have you lived and/or worked in this city/ community? ____ years.
2. What are 2 or 3 things that you really like about this city/ neighborhood?
3. What are two or three things would you like to see changed in this city/neighborhood?
4. Would you name two or three community organizations that you feel are really contributing to the well-being of this neighborhood? In what ways are they helping?
5. Would you name up to three Christian ministries that you feel are making an important contribution to the quality of life in this city/neighborhood? What contribution(s) do you feel each is making?
6. If not named, then: Are you familiar with (name of your Christian community)? If not, go on. If yes, then ask: How well is this Christian community serving this neighborhood from what you know about it?
7. If a Christian community wanted to better serve this neighborhood, what are two or three ways that you feel they might do so?

MEETING 4

Present findings from neighborhood stakeholder interviews.

Devotional Moment

Read *Philippians 3:12 – 16*

Discuss How does this inspire you in this work of reaching your neighborhood?

What have you attained that you want to “hold fast to”?

Pray

S.O.A.R. Activity

(This may take more than one session to complete.)

S.O.A.R. Neighborhood Edition

(Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results)

Objective

To recognize the church’s strengths, uncover opportunities, define aspirations, and set measurable goals for strengthening connections with the neighborhood.

Materials Needed:

- ▶ Large sheets of paper or whiteboards
- ▶ Sticky notes (4 different colors)
- ▶ Markers (markers are better than pens because you can see the writing on the sticky note from a distance better)

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

Step 1

Welcome and Prayer

Begin with a short prayer asking for wisdom and clarity in discussions. Ask the Holy Spirit to use this activity to guide your congregation in following the way of Jesus to benefit your community.

Purpose Overview

Explain the SOAR framework and emphasize that this is about identifying strengths and opportunities, not problems (Appreciative Inquiry).

Step 2: Strengths (S) – Recognizing Our Gifts

Guiding Question

What are our church's greatest strengths in regard to our neighborhood/community?

Activity

1. Provide the same color sticky notes to participants. Ask them to write down 2-3 strengths per note and stick them on a board under the title "Strengths". Each Sticky note should only have one strength written on it.
2. Once all notes are up, group similar strengths together into themes (e.g., hospitality, building use, outreach efforts). Organize them by number of responses.
3. Ask the group: What strengths seem to be our greatest? Does anything surprise you about this list?

Step 3: Opportunities (O)

Identifying Community Needs

Guiding Question

What are the main needs we've discovered in our neighborhood and surrounding community?

Activity

1. Provide the same color sticky notes to participants different from the one used for strengths. Ask them to write down 2-3 needs per note and stick them on a board under the title "Opportunities". Each Sticky note should only have one need/opportunity written on it.
2. Once all notes are up, group similar strengths together into themes (e.g., hunger, community, education, childcare, grief support etc.). Organize them by number of responses.
3. Ask the group: What needs seem rise to the top? Does anything surprise you about this list?

Step 4: Aspirations (A)

Our Hopes and God's Hopes

For this step we will spend time in individual prayer. Take 20 minutes or so and go on a prayer walk or find a comfortable place to spend time talking about all this work with God. Ask God what God wants for your neighborhood and community. Come back ready to share with the group.

Sharing

1. Invite the group to share how the prayer experience was for them.

2. Write down on a new (third) color sticky note the one aspiration that came from your time of prayer. Put these on the board under “Aspirations”

3. As a group, identify common aspirations and the underlying values and beliefs of the group’s hopes.

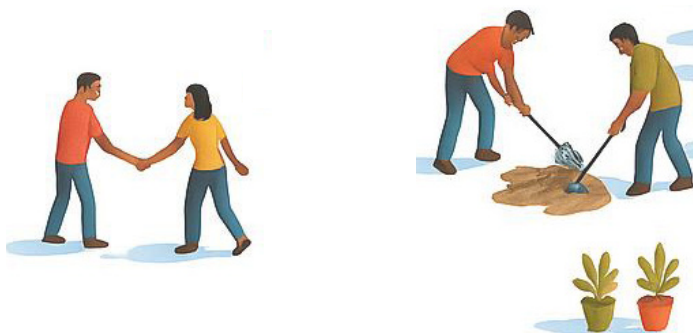
Step 5: Results (R) – Setting Actionable Goals

Group Discernment: When you look at your congregation’s strengths, the needs of the community and God’s deep hope for the neighborhood, what concrete actions can the congregation take to move towards God’s vision for the community your congregation is called to serve?

If your group is larger than 10 people, do this in small groups of 4-6 people. Have each group discern a concrete action to share with the group. Write down the concrete action you might take on a fourth color sticky note and place them on the board under the title “Results”

Then come together as a larger group and discuss the results and choose one or two to try. It might be helpful to determine one thing you can do immediately and one thing you can work on over the next year.

Next session will take these Results and turn them into a SMART goal with a concrete plan of communication and action.



You've finished all the interviews, reviewed all the data, and have walked around in the physical spaces that is your neighborhood. You have been scanning and taking in what all you see. Now it's time to pull together all your insights from this experience.

You may find these last meetings would be best used to cover material that you needed more time for earlier on. Take the time to go back and process those thoughts.

Start by finishing or reviewing the SOAR activity from the previous session. What if anything new stands out to you or where do you still have curiosities? What other themes have you discovered throughout this process? What would you like to learn more about?

Once you've completed the SOAR activity and processed your learning, you're ready to finalize your work. Use your final meeting(s) to turn the results into a SMART Goal.

MEETING 5

Devotional Moment

Read *Luke 10:25 – 37*

Discuss What does it mean to be a good neighbor to those you've learned about through this Why Church: Neighborhood Edition process?

Pray



MEETING 6

Devotional Moment

Read *Ephesians 1:15 – 23*

Discuss What has God done among you over these months? What do you hope God will do through your work together?

Pray

Developing SMART Goals from Your Results

Step 1: Review Your Results

Remind the group of the top results from the SOAR exercise. Do they align with the church's strengths and the needs identified in the community? Do they align with your understanding of what God wants for the community and for your congregation? Let these questions guide you in rewriting the results in a way that flows from the work you've been doing over the past sessions.

Step 2: Define SMART Goal

Each goal must be:

- ▶ Specific – Clearly define what will be accomplished.
- ▶ Measurable – Identify ways to track progress.
- ▶ Achievable – Ensure the goal is realistic given resources and time.
- ▶ Relevant – Confirm alignment with the church's mission, God's desires and the community's needs.
- ▶ Time-bound – Set a deadline for completing the goal.

Step 3: Turn Your Results Into SMART Goals

For each action from the Results step, use this framework:

“We will [*specific action*] by [*measurable method*] within [*timeframe*], leveraging [*resources*] to [*intended impact*].”

Example:

If your congregation chose to “develop a community garden” as a result, a SMART goal might be:

“We will develop a community garden by spring of 2026 on our property and invite 15 neighbors to participate with our garden group in planting and harvesting with the goal of providing fresh vegetables for the neighborhood by fall of 2026 and fostering a sense of community and connection with God’s creation.”

Step 4: Assign Roles and Responsibilities

- ▶ Who will oversee the initiative?
- ▶ Who will help execute it?
- ▶ What support is needed from leadership, clergy or volunteers?

Step 5: Establish Communication Plan and Progress Assessment

- ▶ When and how will we check progress?
- ▶ Give yourself permission to make adjustments as you move forward toward the goal. Things change and it’s important to be adaptable when pursuing the goal.
- ▶ How will we communicate this to the congregation? How will we communicate to the neighborhood? Who will head this effort?

Step 6: Commit with Prayer and Action

And finally, share the story.

How might you report the findings to the rest of your congregation? Remember, the work your committee has put into this process is creative and inspired. Start with a summary of what the project was intended to be. Share what the groups wonderings were as they began the process. Move through the basic plan you used to work your way through each section. Tell the story about what you experienced when you walked around the neighborhood, what assumptions for you changed as you explored. Report what was most surprising and inspiring as you went deeper into this project. Be sure to describe the demographics of your neighborhood as well as any other interesting facts that you learned about the neighborhood and your neighbors. Finally, share what you discovered God might be doing through the work of the Holy Spirit in this place and time that will lead you into the future.

We encourage you to present your findings to the rest of your congregation, stakeholders, and anyone else you may have interacted with during the process. When you do present your findings, visuals are helpful to share the experience. Is there an overall image that resonated with the committee that might help tell the story? Consider projecting maps from the ARDA website or other online resources to help visualize the area of focus. Most importantly, share the recommendations and SMART goal(s) created by the committee.

Close the session with prayer. Name to God the things God has revealed through the Holy Spirit. Thank God for the time together and ask God's blessing on the action you have chosen to pursue.

Remember "Congregations tend to overestimate what they can accomplish in a year and underestimate what they can accomplish in three years" The good news is you can't fail at this!

Thank you for participating. Please share your experience and/or plan with the Congregational Ministry Committee!

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Rocky Mountain Synod

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God's work. Our hands.