

# **At Risk to Risking Mission**

## **A Guide for Congregations and Their Future**

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## PREFACE

We are “claimed, gathered, and sent...” This defines us as Lutherans in Christ’s Church. We are formed as congregations to reach new people with the Gospel, inviting them into a new life of faith, and calling them to join in doing God’s work in the church and in the world.

Reflecting the ELCA’s emphasis, “Making Christ Known,” we exist for one thing only, mission. If we are to be faithful to our calling as God’s people, reaching out to our neighbor with the Gospel has to be our first priority. This is true for individual Christians as well as for whole communities of faith.

Keeping this as our central emphasis, we in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, along with all churches in North America, must be aware that our Church exists for mission in the context of a changing world. As our Vision for Mission states:

*“This mission is lived in our context as Lutheran Christians in south central Pennsylvania, which is changing from an agrarian and light industrial region to one that is increasingly urbanized and suburbanized. We live as part of a population that is becoming more and more diverse ethnically, culturally, and religiously. Congregations continue to decline in terms of worship attendance and fiscal resources; some have settled into a “maintenance mode.” New and exciting opportunities for missions exist that call for courage to face risk and openness to new form and vision.”*

None of us, of course, like to think about a church closing. Yet, between 4,000 and 8,000 churches do so every year in North America. The best possible advice for any church that is considered “at risk” is to remain vigilant. Once a problem is spotted, insure that all possible measures are taken to reverse decline before it leads to drop out and death of the congregation.

### **From “At Risk” to “Risking Mission” congregations**

#### “At Risk”

Using the data from “Evangelical Outreach Analysis and Strategy” from 2003-2004, an “At Risk” congregation can be defined by using the following benchmarks:

- 50 or fewer weekly average attendance
- \$50,000 or less in annual contributions
- Over-reliance on building use or endowment income (more than 35% of operating budget).

#### “Risking Mission”

Mission Theology: The basis for all mission endeavors lies in the fact that God is already at work in the world and desires to bless and save the world. The impetus to start new mission sites is found in the ELCA mission statement: *“Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world.”*

To move from an “At Risk” congregation to a “Risking Mission” congregation it would be beneficial to ask:

- Why are we here as a church?
- How do we engage all of the people of the church?
- How might the Great Commission provide the key to move us to a “Risking Mission” congregation?
- What might prayer make happen in your setting?

It is probable that you are reading this because your church may be going through difficult times. Namely, the church you love and have worshiped in for years may be slowly losing its effectiveness in its ministry to your community. If this is so, there may be questions that you are asking:

1. What are you to do?
2. Where do you go for answers?
3. Is there a bright side to this difficult time?

This is what we hope this manual helps you to discover.

## Survey Questionnaire: Do We Need to Change?

### Take a careful look at your church in these areas:

(See the Trend Report for your congregation on the ELCA website for helpful information about your congregation: <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Research-and-Evaluation/Congregation-Trend-Report.aspx>)

1. History. Make a timeline of key events in the history of your congregation going back 50 (or 100 years, if able.) Label events in these categories: 1) dates of pastorates; 2) building-related events, such as an addition or major purchase; 3) when paid staffing positions were added or removed; 4) times when you became involved with other congregations for ministry; 5) times when the congregation was involved in a community project; 6) times when Bible study groups were formed and/or ended; 7) worship-related events, such as a change in service time, style, or frequency of communion, etc.; 8) times when the congregation was faced with a decision to take on more debt and accepted and/or declined. Looking over the timeline, what are the major events that have shaped the congregation to what it is today? What are the trends? What is the congregation's attitude toward change?.....debt?.....use of the facilities?
2. Mission Statement. What is the congregation's mission statement? Does it reflect the sense of mission that the congregation shares today? When was the last time it was revisited and/or modified? Does that need to happen soon?
3. Attendance/Membership. Use a graph to enter the last 20 years of statistics on church attendance and membership. What patterns does this show? If these patterns continue, what will happen in 5 years? 10 years?
4. Age profile. Use a graph to illustrate the age distribution of church members. Compare to those of 20 years and 10 years ago. What are the dominant age groups? Is our congregation getting older or younger? How does this compare to the age profile of our surrounding community? What might we look like 10 years from now if things continue?
5. Giving profile. Chart regular offerings for a 20-year period. What is the trend? Chart the regular offerings by how they were spent: benevolence or mission dollars, salaries, and building improvements. What does this chart say about our priorities as a congregation? If this trend continues, will we still be expanding our ministry in 10 years or merely paying the bills?
6. Membership distribution. Take an area map and place thumbtacks where current members reside. Label by color households under age 55, over age 55, and new members that have joined in the last five years. Draw a one-mile, three-mile, and five-mile radius around the church. Where do most members live? Is this congregation reaching the immediate community? What might our mission field look like in 10 years?
7. Facilities. What is the condition of our 1) worship space, 2) education/fellowship areas, 3) parking, 4) restrooms, 5) childcare facilities, 6) property, including primary sources of heating. What percentage of our regular offering will be needed to keep up the facility for 10 years?
8. Commitment profile. Use a graph to illustrate the age and years of service of church leadership, including council and committee members. Is there shared leadership among the congregation, or are the same people the only volunteers? What will happen if this trend continues in 5 or 10 years?

## A Ready for Renewal Checklist

Answer the questions below as honestly and prayerfully as possible by checking one of the three boxes at the right:

		Yes	We Think So	Honestly, No
1	This church conveys, in word and deed, a message that is “good news.” We are known and respected in our community for genuine strengths.			
2	We are outreach-oriented with a consistent focus on people who are not members.			
3	When differences arise we address each other with openness and respect.			
4	We have clear goals and expectations between the pastor and the congregation and we communicate them both ways regularly.			
5	We are successful in involving the entire congregation in various leadership and other active roles.			
6	We know who we are and why we are here as a community of faith.			
7	We are willing to commit the financial resources it may take to bring about intentional renewal in our congregation, including hiring a consultant.			
8	Our leadership and several key “influencers” of the congregation agree that God may be calling our congregation to embark in a new direction.			
9	Our leadership is ready to listen to God, each other, and the surrounding community.			
10	Our leadership agrees that the desire to know and do God’s will for the congregation is stronger than the desire to survive as a congregation. (The pain of staying as we are is greater than the pain of changing.)			
11	Our leadership and a critical mass of the congregation will commit to daily prayer for our future.			
12	Our leadership and a critical mass of the congregation will commit to regular Bible study around our future.			
13	Our leadership and a critical mass of the congregation will commit to growing their personal financial stewardship.			
Totals				

## **Results:**

Mostly “Yes”: Your congregation is ready to embark on a journey of intentional renewal. Please contact your Assistant to the Bishop for further guidance in this process.

Mostly “We Think So”: Your congregation is ready to enter into a process of discerning intentional renewal. Read on to see what kinds of steps you may feel God calling your congregation to take as it reshapes itself for mission and ministry in its context.

Some “Honestly, No” and some “We Think So”: Your congregation may be ready to discuss some initial steps toward renewal. Read on and begin the discussion of your options at your next council meeting or other meeting of key leaders in the congregation.

Mostly “Honestly, No”: Please read on about some of the options your congregation may wish to discuss as they look toward their future ministry. Invite your Assistant to the Bishop to meet with your leadership and discuss these and other options.

## Worksheet on Congregational Sustainability

Using attendance figures for the previous ten years, chart your congregation's average attendance. Then use the following questions as a springboard for further discussion.

- | YES | NO  |   |
|-----|-----|---|
| ___ | ___ | 1. Do we have a pattern of growth in attendance?  |
| ___ | ___ | 2. Will our trend of growth, plateau, or decline allow us to thrive and develop ministry for the future in this place?  |
| ___ | ___ | 3. Can we maintain our own existence as a congregation and provide ministry in the community, synod, and ELCA?  |
| ___ | ___ | 4. Can we survive without some form of life support from bequests, special gifts?   |
| ___ | ___ | 5. Do we have sufficient numbers of people to volunteer for ministry within the congregation and outreach into the community?                                   |
| ___ | ___ | 6. Are new efforts in evangelism and Christian Education feasible?  |
| ___ | ___ | 7. Are there sufficient funds and interested membership to do ministry within the congregation as well as outreach and evangelism into the community and world? |
| ___ | ___ | 8. Are we experiencing the presence of first-time visitors on a regular basis?  |
| ___ | ___ | 9. Do they return for a second or a third visit?  |
| ___ | ___ | 10. Do 20-25% of our first-time visitors eventually join the congregation?  |
| ___ | ___ | 11. Is the congregation's main focus on outreach/evangelism?  |
| ___ | ___ | 12. Is the congregation striving to do more than trying to survive/keep the doors open?   |
| ___ | ___ | 13. Has the congregation grown in the last five years?  |
| ___ | ___ | 14. Do we have enough members to do ministry well?  |
| ___ | ___ | 15. Does giving in the congregation enable "Great Commission" work, or does most of the giving go toward maintenance and survival?                              |
| ___ | ___ | 16. Are there young families active in the church?  |
| ___ | ___ | 17. Has the congregation maintained a good level of stewardship including several families (10-12) who tithe faithfully to the congregation?                    |
| ___ | ___ | 18. Is the congregation willing/able to adapt its ministry and lifestyle in order to develop the ministries that will meet the needs of a changing community?   |
| ___ | ___ | 19. Is the present facility physically adaptable for use?   |
| ___ | ___ | 20. Can the congregation afford the repairs that are needed to use these facilities for ministry?   |

**If you marked 5 answers “No,”** we suggest you contact the Assistant to the Bishop for your conference to discuss the trends that are revealed.

**If you marked 8 or more answers “No,”** this may suggest a serious condition of decline for your congregation. It is time to look courageously and honestly at your situation and consider what options you have as a congregation.

**Worksheet**  
**Assessment of Options**

Following are the options available to your congregation. Carefully read, think, and pray about each option. Then as a group rank the options from most desirable to least desirable.

**1. Shared ministry**

Are we willing to share the time of a pastor with another congregation? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to change our worship times to accommodate another congregation?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to have times when a pastor may not be available to our congregation?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to cooperate with another congregation to oversee joint administrative matters?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to change meeting times to accommodate another congregation's needs?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Consolidation or merger**

Are we willing to give up our congregation's name for a new name? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Can we work with the members of another congregation to form a new identity?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to move to another building for our worship and ministry? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would a fresh start as a congregation excite our members? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to change our worship and ministry practices to accommodate the worship and practices of another congregation? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Shared facilities**

Are we willing to actively seek another congregation to use our facilities? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would we willingly change worship and meeting times to accommodate another congregation?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would we not mind if some of our materials were used by another congregation?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would we share expenses for another congregation to use our facilities? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would we be willing to invest time each month for meetings to negotiate issues about use of facilities and expenses? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. Consultant

Are we willing to invest a significant amount of time for a consultant to work with congregational leaders? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to pay a significant amount of money for a consultant to work with us? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would we accept and implement a consultant's recommendation if it meant significant changes for the congregation? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would we accept and implement a consultant's recommendations if it involved a considerable cost for the congregation? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do we easily accept direction from other than our own members? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

#### 5. Synodical Administration

Would we be willing to have the synod assign a pastor to serve us? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to develop accountable guidelines in consultation with the pastoral assistant to the bishop and the pastor? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Would congregational leadership be willing to meet regularly with a synodical appointed review committee and follow the committee's recommendations? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Has the congregation been involved in setting and evaluating goals? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Are we willing to commit to a three-year agreement for this process? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If you cannot give at least three affirmative answers to a option, that option is probably not a good option for the congregation.

**As the result of our discussion, it appears that option \_\_\_\_\_ is best.**

If no clear option appears to be best, contact the Assistant to the Bishop for further guidance on how to proceed.

## Some Options for Ministry

The following list of options includes material from a presentation by Alice Mann of the Alban Institute, which raises the question: “What if we can’t be small and strong (alone)?”

**Shared facilities:** In this scenario, a congregation shares its building with another congregation or with another ministry. This works best when the relationship is more than a “landlord-tenant” model and when there is real shared ownership and management of the facility. With a shared campus, each congregation retains its own identity. It often works for different denominations to share space. This is an under-utilized cooperative strategy, and has a fairly good track record.

**Shared pastoral staffing:** When a congregation cannot support a full-time pastoral compensation package, it may be possible to share a pastor with one or more nearby congregations.

One option is to become a “**yoked parish.**” Here each congregation retains its identity, finances, and administrative structure, but enters into a formal agreement with one or more other congregations to call a pastor. A joint council meets occasionally to oversee common finances and other administrative matters. This arrangement may go more smoothly if the congregations have something in common (such as shared mission field or shared ministries) beyond financial necessity. Each congregation may also have to make adjustments in such things as worship or Sunday School times to make the arrangement work.

Another option is for one congregation to contract with another nearby congregation to **purchase pastoral services.** In this scenario the pastor has been called by one congregation, but contracts to serve as a part-time interim pastor for the other. This is a somewhat more ad hoc arrangement than becoming a yoked parish.

**Cooperative ministry or cluster ministry:** In this option, multiple congregations retain their own facility and identity, but work together to provide better ministry than would be possible alone. There is a joint council or board that oversees common ministries and administrative matters. Each congregation would retain its own finances, but there would be a common budget as well. Cooperative ministries work best as a penultimate (“for the meantime”) strategy for mission rather than simply as a survival strategy. They are more likely to do well when there is a fairly high level of trust and common purpose among the congregations. In a cooperative ministry, congregations may share a single ministry staff. They may work together in such areas as youth ministry, confirmation, or social ministry.

A variation on cooperative ministry is a “**service coalition**” in which congregations form a joint ministry structure (often, a nonprofit organization) with a clear, specific goal of service to the community. For example, congregations might work together to support a food ministry or a housing ministry. Such coalitions work best when they are organized with a passion for some specific unmet community need.

**Consolidation or Merger:** The terms “consolidation” and “merger” are often used interchangeably. They both involve two or more congregations joining together. However in Lutheran parlance, the relevant difference between them is this: A merger is when one (or more) congregation(s) dissolves and joins another existing congregation. The merged congregation is incorporated or absorbed into the already existing entity. A consolidation is when two (or more) congregations dissolve and come together as a new legally incorporated entity. These are two different legal processes. Also, consolidation and merger can have different emotional and power connotations. Both involve a good bit of careful planning and legal work.

According to the Alban Institute, the success of consolidations and mergers depends to some extent on the reasons for coming together. Two small declining congregations coming together do not automatically make a larger, stronger congregation. If the purpose of merger is primarily for survival alone (maintaining traditions and continuity with the past), the most likely result is continued decline. A merger that tries to minimize change and that lacks a clear vision may seem like the least painful step at the time, but may only postpone closing the doors.

One model of merger with a good track record is an “absorption merger” in which a small congregation joins with a larger, healthy one. Such a move might be inspired by leaders in the small congregation who are tired and burned out, but see that this might be a way for the congregation to have a legacy and a continued mission. In this model, the larger congregation doesn’t (usually) change its name nor change its basic approach to mission and ministry. The larger church becomes the custodian of the heritage, institutional memory, and perhaps a few selected traditions of the smaller church.

A consolidation (which involves the intentional dissolution of previous entities) is more clearly a new start with a new identity. It tends to work best with a new location and new clergy leadership. Consolidations are most likely to succeed when 1) there is a high of dissatisfaction with the status quo; and 2) there is a clear sense of purpose or mission, and this mission shapes decisions about property and worship.

These are conditions that can hinder a consolidation or merger: 1) satisfaction with the way things are; 2) too many ‘sacred cows;’ 3) too big an endowment; 4) unwillingness to change leadership; 5) fear of ‘losing anyone;’ and timidity about strategic decision; and 6) an inward focus that fails to engage the wider community.

Yet another option for renewal might be developing a **specialized ministry** for a particular ethnic or language group or with a focus on serving one specific population (e.g. hearing-impaired; children with physical disabilities and their families). Obviously, this depends not only on congregational vision but also on what opportunities might be presenting themselves in a given community.

**Synodical Administration:** The purpose of synodical administration is for the congregation to engage in a neutral process. Synodical Administration is the Bishop’s way of caring for a congregation that may be undergoing significant transition, trauma, or may have reached a turning point in their ministry and are excited about redevelopment.

If the Congregation Council has agreed to this option for ministry, the bishop appoints the pastoral leader. The council and pastor interview each other and agree whether or not to proceed. A covenant is developed between the congregation, pastor, and the bishop’s office. This covenant includes mutual expectations, term of call, and financial obligations. Following a regularly called congregational meeting, the covenant is voted upon by the congregation. If the vote is affirmative, the Synod Council issues a call to the pastor for a three-year term, unless a different term is stated in the covenant. A review committee, composed of at least three persons, one of whom is a member of the Synod Council, meets with the Congregation Council throughout the years for support and feedback. Following the conclusion of the covenant, a regular call can be extended by the congregation to the pastor per the standard call procedure.