



Christian
Reformed
Church



Challenging Conversations Next Steps Discernment

crcna.org/pcr/NextSteps

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***NOTE: this is a sample. A full, unredacted and
edited version of this resource is available to
those who participate in the [facilitator training](#).**

INTRODUCTION: WHY NEXT STEPS DISCERNMENT?

In June 2022, the synod of the Christian Reformed Church made a [series of consequential decisions](#) about the denomination's teaching (and the confessional status of the church's teaching) on human sexuality and same-sex marriage. In this season after synod's decisions, you may be wondering how those decisions will impact you and your church.

Our Anxious Moment

Many are feeling some anxiety about what Synod's decisions may or may not mean for them or their congregation. Yet no two individuals and no two congregations are feeling that anxiety in exactly the same way or with exactly the same dynamics or consequences.

At some churches, though most people may basically agree with Synod's decisions, they are feeling overwhelmed by the practical and pastoral challenge of living into this vision well.

At other churches, the decisions of Synod may feel like an imposition. Now, members and ministry leaders are asking whether they can remain a part of a congregation with which they might disagree on this issue.

In these and more churches, leaders are wondering how much difference in belief with each other or with our denomination we can live with, and how, practically, we can live with that difference.

Our Naturally Unhelpful Reactions

When faced with anxiety in our churches, most of our natural reactions prove quite unhelpful. We are tempted to run away, shut down, or pick a fight. We begin to see the world in simplistic, black/white, good/bad terms. We feel like we have to pick a side, and we feel like there are only two sides. We start attributing all kinds of negative motivations to those with whom we disagree. Our capacity for creativity is diminished. Our willingness to love fades.

As leaders in anxious times, we vacillate between avoiding the issues and hoping they go away on the one hand or trying to control people and outcomes on the other hand. We are eager to relieve the tension and we are tempted to cut corners to do so. We wonder if the right, good or true *ends* might justify some less-than-Christ-like *means*.

And so, right when we most need the trust of our congregations, we act in ways that corrode trust. Maybe we *rush* the decision-making process along, without considering the consequences of those decisions. Maybe we *hush* important voices: we don't listen deeply or well to the voices we most need to hear. We are not attentive to God's voice and we are not intentional about hearing the voice of others affected by our decision. Meanwhile, we may start cutting corners in the decision-making process itself. The process may become *mush*: it is unclear who has the authority to decide; it is unclear when, how, or if people will have the opportunity to speak into the discernment. It is unclear what the decision even means.

The impact of *rush*, *hush* and *mush* on a congregation is to diminish trust and sow confusion and frustration, even among those who basically agree with whatever decision is ultimately made.

This sample is incomplete.
The full version is available to those who [attend facilitator training](#).

A Better Way?

What if it didn't need to be this way?

What if the anxiety and conflict of this moment were not a distraction from your church's witness and discipleship, but what if they were actually an opportunity for making better disciples and offering a more winsome witness to the world? After all, aren't most of the instructions we have about Christian life together written in the form of letters to first-century congregations experiencing conflicts and tension of their own?

What if God knew that it would be hard to "bear with one another" and "submit to one another" and "be kind and compassionate to one another." What if those commands were not for *after* the conflict subsided and the differences disappeared but for *during* the conflict and *while* the differences persisted?

What if God used challenging seasons like these to *deepen* our dependence on him and *build up* our capacity to "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus?"

What if there were a way to love each other well even if we still come to the conclusion that we cannot stay together as we once were?

What if we could hear not just the most strident and polarized voices but also all the voices in between?

What if we acted as though God's voice really was the voice we most needed to hear and follow?

An Alternative Way Forward

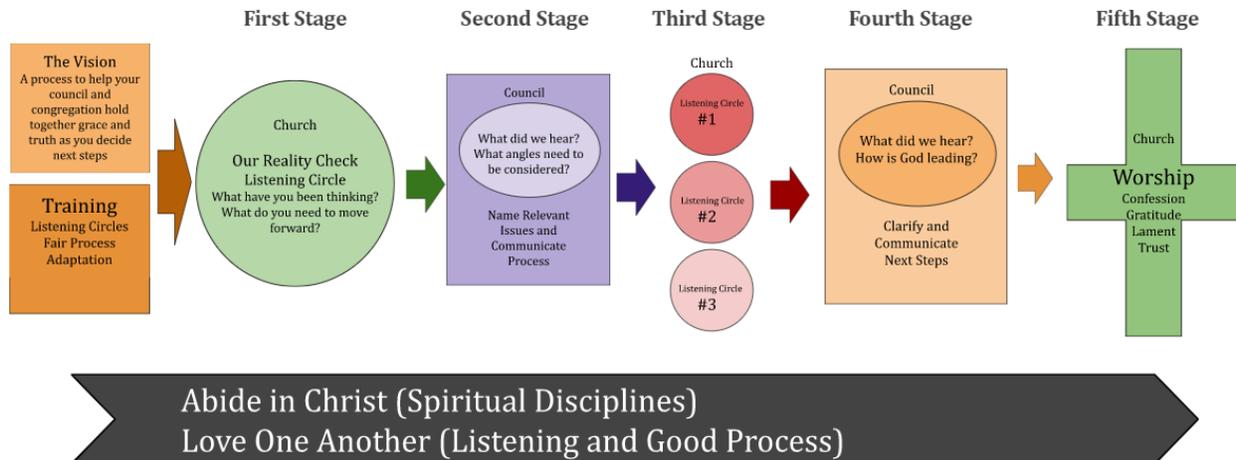
In Ephesians 4, Paul pleads with the church to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Maybe it is unrealistic to expect us to make *every* effort. But can we make some effort? Is this, perhaps, the season for making an effort?

Next Steps Discernment cannot make your differences and disagreements magically go away. It cannot guarantee you'll stay together; it cannot ensure a happy outcome. But this process does give you a chance to make an effort: to lean into the challenge of this moment in a way that is oriented to Christ and insistent on exhibiting Christlike love and humility.

What does it look like practically?

Next Steps Discernment provides a series of structured, facilitated listening circles for church members and church leaders to listen deeply to one another as the council discerns what, if any, next steps God is inviting the church to consider. During this season of discernment, your church will be sustained by ongoing spiritual disciplines as well as repeated prompts to love one another through listening and good process.

This sample is incomplete.
The full version is available to those who [attend facilitator training](#).



In preparation, a group of members and leaders from your church will be trained to facilitate listening circles and to apply the principles of *fair process* to any discernment and decision-making process.

In the first stage, trained facilitators from your church will convene *Our Reality Check* Listening Circles, to provide a quick sense for the council of what the main issues are in your church.

In the second stage, the council will identify and communicate the themes and issues they believe warrant deeper engagement and insight from the congregation while also laying out the details of the discernment and decision-making process.

In the third stage, trained facilitators will convene another series of two or three *Going Deeper* Listening Circles. In these circles, participants will engage with the themes and issues identified as priorities by the council, listening to one another and offering insight to the council.

In the fourth stage, the council will take the congregation's insights into consideration as they determine and communicate what, if any, next steps are warranted.

In the fifth stage, the congregation will offer a worshipful response: giving thanks to God for God's faithfulness in the process; lamenting the ways the process highlighted our shortcomings and sins; and confessing the ways we hurt one another before and during the process.

From start to finish, a congregation could complete this process in three months. However, it is meant to be adaptable. Some congregations will shorten the process, some will lengthen it. But the process (and its training) will give the council the tools it needs to set up a meaningful and helpful discernment process well-suited to the needs of your congregation.

The goal of this resource is to help you hold together grace and truth as you discern and decide next steps.

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Challenging Conversations: Next Steps Discernment

INTRODUCTION: WHAT YOU'LL FIND

Training and Support

Your leaders (both facilitators and council) [will receive training](#) to adapt this resource to your context and to facilitate the listening circles at the heart of the discernment. Through [Pastor Church Resources](#) (PCR), your leaders will also have access to ongoing support as they seek to adapt and use the tools and practices in this resource.

Flexible Practices

Every context is unique. The questions, answers, and consequences of discernment vary from place to place. This resource offers a discernment pathway that many churches can follow yet provides flexibility to adapt and modify the pathway to fit the needs of your community. The practices and listening circles are flexible enough to be used by many groups simultaneously across a congregation or by a single small group helping a few people discern their own next steps.

Prayers, Scripture, and Spiritual Disciplines

Christian Reformed churches are accustomed to relying on prayer, Scripture, and other disciplines, such as fasting and study when making weighty decisions. But in the heat of an anxious time of discernment, these practices are easily forgotten. This resource will encourage your church to lean into spiritual disciplines intended to form people in Christlikeness even as you make weighty decisions. Good discernment requires deep soul work, not just careful thinking.

Listening Circles

A [listening circle](#) is a way to structure a meeting so that participants are invited to speak to significant issues. The emphasis in a circle is on listening to and being heard by one another rather than debating. Instead of only hearing the strongest and most strident voices, a listening circle invites the participation of everyone: both the more and less strident, both the clearly convicted and the less certain. In this way, a listening circle equalizes voices across the ranges of volume and conviction, allowing many to be and feel heard. Further, when used as part of a discernment process, listening circles have the potential to get a clearer sense of the “pulse” of the congregation’s heartbeat while also helping participants grow in trust and love for one another by giving each other the gift of deep listening.

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A Fairer Process

Listening circles can be part of a larger effort to add intentionality to the discernment and decision-making process for your church. This resource provides numerous prompts for church leaders to communicate clearly with their congregation about the process, its participants, and its timeline. It will help you slow down while you listen deeply and well to God and to one another. By being clear, intentional, and explicit about *the way the decision is made and the role everyone has in the process*, a council helps build confidence in the final decision even among those who would not have personally preferred the chosen outcome.

WHAT YOU WON'T FIND

Shortcuts

There are no shortcuts to good group discernment and decision making. This resource assumes that it takes time and effort for a group to discern God's will. Fortunately, it is often through that time, effort, and even struggle (Genesis 32:28) that God's best work is done to shape and form us and our communities into Christlikeness.

Pain-free Solutions

We expect that following this approach will increase trust and help the council and church make decisions in God-honoring ways. But this process will not make substantive differences and disagreements magically go away. This process may make those differences more tolerable or less threatening, but this process cannot resolve every point of tension.

A Substitute for the Spirit's Work or for Christian Character

We recommend the practices in this resource because we have seen how they seem to help individuals and groups cooperate with the Holy Spirit to understand and build community with one another. Leaning into these practices provides ample opportunity to rely on the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), to clothe yourself in Christlikeness (Colossians 3:12-15), and to bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2). In other words, these practices help you *act Christianly* while discerning together. But these tools and resources are only as fruitful as a church and its leaders are reliant on the Spirit of God to work. This resource is meant to facilitate the working out of faith, hope, and love, but it cannot generate any fruit on its own. Only the Spirit of God can. If you see any fruit from this process, it will be because of the work of Christ in your midst, not because the tools were so clever or well designed.

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The full version is available to those who [attend facilitator training](#).

HOW TO GET STARTED

To receive the full resource, including the detailed guide for councils, the complete listening circle script, and adaptations for particular types of discernment, sign up to be [trained here](#). Those who sign up will receive a full PDF of the resource by August 31, 2022, with training dates available as early as September 7, 2022.

What is included in the training?

The three-hour, interactive virtual training includes:

- an introduction to the principles underlying this resource,
- instruction and practice in facilitating listening circles, and
- advice for adapting the resource to each discernment and each context.

Who should receive training?

Because this resource must be adapted for each context and because the issues addressed in the course of this discernment can be controversial, we require anyone using this resource to receive training. This includes anyone who will facilitate a listening circle and at least two representatives of a council using this resource for congregational discernment.

What if I'm already trained in [Challenging Conversations](#)?

If you are part of the team or the council overseeing the discernment, the training is required. If your only part in this process is facilitating a listening circle, and you have been trained in the *Challenging Conversations Toolkit* and have experience leading *Challenging Conversations* listening circles, you are not required (but are still encouraged) to participate in the training.

What does it cost?

Through [ministry shares](#), training is available at a subsidized rate of \$35 USD per participant. If the cost of training is an obstacle to your participation, contact discern@crcna.org for further-subsidized rates.

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THE FOUNDATIONS

Love One Another

One of the primary goals of this discernment process is to help your congregation and council love one another while you navigate anxious seasons or challenging decisions. In other words, we want to clothe ourselves with Christ or act in Christ-like ways while we talk, listen, discern, decide and act. The *ends* (the right decision, the just or true answer) do not justify less-than-Christlike *means*.

Listening

The main way that most people will be invited to express their love for one another during this process is by listening. The listening circle format, so central to *Next Steps*, is designed to create a container where we can listen well to one another and in so doing, love one another.

Of course, listening doesn't mean agreeing. Listening doesn't mean abdicating decision-making authority. Listening doesn't mean we'll only ever listen and never make decisions. But listening is a concrete way to love one another. It is also quite helpful at encouraging deeper insight and wisdom.

Fair Process

The other way that this process encourages you to love one another is by prompting the council to operate according to the principles of *fair process*. *Fair process* is associated with business and criminal justice, but it is also deeply consistent with church life. According to *fair process*, people are more likely to cooperate with systems and work well together if they feel like decisions were made fairly, even if they themselves do not agree entirely with the decisions that were made.

Fair process typically involves three characteristics. First, those affected by the decision had an opportunity to have a say (engagement). Second, those affected by the decision understand the reasons for the decision (explanation). Third, there is a shared understanding of what is coming next (expectation clarity).¹

Another way to look at *fair process* is to see what makes a process less fair. In a less fair process, you might expect leaders to *rush* the process along, without considering who is affected and how. Leaders might *hush* important voices: not listening deeply or well to the voices of those affected. Or leaders might cut corners in the decision-making process itself. The process itself becomes *mush*: it is unclear who has the authority to decide; it is unclear when, how, or if people will have the opportunity to speak into the discernment. It is unclear what the decision even means

The impact of rush, hush and mush on a congregation is to diminish trust and sow confusion and frustration, even among those who basically agree with whatever decision was made. The impact of engagement, explanation and expectation clarity is to make people feel loved and respected, even if they disagree with the outcome.

¹ International Institute of Restorative Practice: Canada

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Abide in Christ (Spiritual Disciplines)

Many Christians have found that practicing certain spiritual disciplines together can enrich discernment. Invite your council, congregation, or whoever else is involved in this discernment to engage together in disciplines including (but not limited to) fasting, listening prayer, study, and examen.

Some churches will choose to engage these disciplines as an intentional season of preparation before beginning the discernment process. Some will suggest that participants engage these disciplines during the season of discernment. These disciplines are meant to be a gift, not a burden—and certainly not a requirement. Use them in whatever way is most helpful to you and your community.

A. Fasting

Fasting is “an opportunity to lay down an appetite . . . in order to seek God on matters of deep concern.”² Practiced at significant moments in the Old Testament and throughout Jesus’ ministry, fasting is a practical act of self-denial that makes us more aware of what controls us and how we seek to comfort ourselves. Fasting makes us more sensitive to the strength (or not) of our hunger for the Bread of Life (John 6:35) and invites us to find deeper satisfaction in Christ.

In the context of discernment, fasting has at least two effects. First, time when you would otherwise be eating, shopping, or scrolling social media can now be used to be more attentively present to God. Second, it reveals our often-misaligned appetites (i.e., strong appetites for creature comforts, weaker for God and God’s will) and invites us to hunger and thirst for that which satisfies: the presence and Word of God and God’s righteousness (Matthew 5:6; John 4:13).

Practices

- Invite your congregation or council to practice a common fast from food: a meal, a day’s worth of meals, or more, depending on your level of experience with fasting. Consider hosting a prayer service (in person or online) during a meal time.
- Invite your congregation to abstain from social media beginning a month before and extending throughout your discernment season. Consider journaling what is most challenging and most life-giving about this fast.

Resources

- practicetheway.org/practices/fasting
- [*Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun](#)

² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 246.

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B. Study

The Belgic Confession, reflecting on how we know God, says that “God makes himself known to us . . . by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God’s glory and for our salvation.” Scripture is a gift that reveals God, God’s plan, and God’s character, and it is one of the primary means through which we relate to God.

Faithful discernment presumes that those engaging the discernment know God intimately through Scripture. Engaging the Word helps people recognize God’s will and character and then helps them distinguish God’s voice from other voices while discerning together.

Practices

- Invite your congregation or council to engage Scripture together in the weeks leading up to and during the discernment. Using the texts referenced throughout *Next Steps Discernment*, consider inviting small groups to take time to discuss each passage:
 - What resonates with you about this passage?
 - Where does your heart resist?
 - What does this passage say about God, our church, or you?
 - What might God be inviting you to do in response to this passage?

Resources

- crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/engaging-scripture
- bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible
- zondervan.com/9780310331650/how-to-read-the-bible-through-the-jesus-lens

C. Examen

The Bible is full of invitations and commands to remember: To remember what God has done (Joshua 4). To remember that God is good (Psalm 103). To remember Jesus’ sacrifice (Luke 22:14–20). God’s people are constantly called to remember because we otherwise so easily forget.

One way to strengthen our remembering muscles is to practice a daily or weekly examen. An examen is a routine in which people take time to ask and answer several questions about how they did (or did not) experience God in the past day or week. By regularly reflecting on our day, we become more aware of God and more aware of what circumstances seem to lead us closer to God or pull us further from God.

In the context of discernment, examen, like fasting, can raise our level of awareness of who God is and where God is active in our lives. It also can expose where we are resisting or distant from God.

This sample is incomplete.
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Practice

- Invite your congregation or council to practice a daily examen before and during the discernment period by spending five minutes each day to reflect on these questions:
 - What am I grateful for?
 - When did I notice God’s presence?
 - When did I ignore God?
 - What emotions did I experience today? What might God be saying through them?
 - What sins do I need to confess?
 - Pray for grace to be more available to God.

Resources

- practictheway.org/pray/week-two
- crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/remembering
- reformedworship.org/search/google?keys=remembering

D. Listening Prayer

Much of our prayer consists of us speaking to God—rightly so, as prayers of praise, lament, confession, and petition are well attested throughout Scripture and church history. But prayer can also be rightly described as communication *with* God. Communication involves both speaking and listening. Like the high priest Eli, we can enter prayer with a simple request—“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9–10)—and then proceed to be still in God’s presence. Some call this stillness in God’s presence “listening prayer.”

In the context of discernment, listening prayer reorients our expectation of whose voice we most need to hear. When we take the time for listening prayer, we may be pleasantly surprised by how God calls to our attention a particular Scripture, story, song, image, or other words. Even if we don’t perceive any particular “speech” from God, the practice of stillness in God’s presence can be a powerful reminder of our dependence on and closeness to the living God.

Practice

- Invite your congregation or council to practice listening prayer. Set a timer for 2, 5, or 10 minutes, depending on your level of experience. In a quiet space with few distractions, ask God a question or raise a thought. Then quietly pay attention.
- If you find yourself distracted, don’t worry. Distractions are normal. Maybe jot down the thing that distracted you and return to a posture of quiet attention.
- At the end of the allotted time, write down what, if anything, you observed or experienced during that time.

Resources

- crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/listening

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- anchor.fm/open-to-wonder/episodes/Is-It-My-Lunch-Speaking-Or-The-Lord---Faith-Practices-Listening-e1kr84h
- faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2017-Nov-Dec/Modern-Devices-And-Ancient-Disciplines

A Note about Readiness for Discernment

Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), one of the most influential teachers of Christian spiritual discernment, cautions Christians that there are better and worse spiritual seasons to engage in deep discernment. He wrote, “During a time of desolation (an experience of heavy darkness, turmoil, doubts, self-preoccupation, restlessness, anxiety, and feeling separated from God), one should never make a change. Instead, one should remain firm and constant in the resolutions and in the decisions which one had on the day before the desolation” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 318). Ignatius’s wisdom echoes that of the teacher in Ecclesiastes, who recognized “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

The first question you might ask as you prepare to discern how to respond to synod’s decision is whether now is the season in which God is inviting you to engage this discernment. During anxious times (and the last few years have been nothing if not filled with anxiety), we often feel pressure to make a quick decision. But speed and anxiety can be two of the most common impediments to hearing God’s voice.

If you or your church are in a season of “desolation” or feeling otherwise rushed, perhaps God’s invitation to you is to wait before discerning and deciding next steps.

This sample is incomplete.
The full version is available to those who [attend facilitator training](#).

FIRST STAGE: *Our Reality Check* Listening Circles

At the outset of a discernment or decision-making process, it's easy to assume that we know what other people are thinking, feeling and needing. After all, you may have a very clear sense of what's happened, how you feel about it and what you believe the next steps ought to be. The issues, as far as you are concerned, may be straightforward, even obvious.

But church leaders are wise to take the time to listen to their congregations early in a discernment process to make sure the main issues, as you understand them, really are the main issues as your congregation understands them. If they're not, the discernment process may need to be revised accordingly.

What happens in this first stage?

People in your church are invited to sign up for a structured and facilitated one-time, 90-minute listening circle to share what they've been thinking since Synod's decisions. If they haven't yet, encourage them to [read the decision of synod](#) and/or the [accompanying FAQ](#).

The group members will be given a chance to share confidentially with one another before deciding if there's anything from what they've shared that they want the rest of the congregation and the council to be aware of.

Listening Circles Questions (full script provided in appendix A)

1. What did you think when you heard about Synod's decisions?
2. What have you thought about since?
3. Who is affected? In what ways?
4. What's been the hardest thing for you?
5. What do you need to move forward in this next season?
6. What do you think our church needs to move forward in this next season?
7. What are you willing to do to move forward?

What outcomes are we seeking?

1. Increased trust: by listening and talking about what matters we build trust with each other.
2. Clarity about issues: we speak and hear what matters and what is at stake for us and our church
3. Insight for Council: the insights we share more broadly can help our council determine what, if any, kind of discernment God might be inviting our congregation to undertake.

What does council do with what they hear?

One way for leaders to build trust with their congregation is to demonstrate that they are listening to their congregation. Having hosted the *Our Reality Check* Listening Circles, share back to the congregation a report or a summary of the feedback received from the listening circles. At this point, you do not need to state your agreement or disagreement with every (or any) thing mentioned. But assure the congregation that you will take their feedback seriously by devoting a whole council meeting to talking about it as you decide what, if any, kind of discernment God might be inviting your congregation to undertake.

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SECOND STAGE: Council Listening and Discernment Process Design

As a council, arrange for a facilitator to lead a council meeting listening circle using the script provided in Appendix B. At the conclusion of the council listening circle, determine if and how the council will lead the congregation through next steps.

What happens in this second stage?

The council engages what they've heard and adds what they have been thinking by participating in a structured and facilitated listening circle among council members.

Having conducted a circle together, the council then transitions into making several important decisions: naming the most relevant issues or angles and determining and communicating the process.

Listening Circle Questions (full script provided in Appendix B)

1. What did you hear?
2. How does what you heard impact you?
3. How does what you heard impact the council and congregation?
4. What's been the hardest to hear?
5. Based on what you heard, what warrants deeper reflection?
6. Is there anything that you did not hear that warrants deeper reflection?

What outcomes are we seeking?

1. Increased trust: by listening and talking about what matters we build trust with each other.
2. Clarity about issues: we speak and we hear what matters and what is at stake for us and our church
3. The council will clarify and communicate what discernment and decision-making process the church will follow.
4. The council will designate three or more articles, videos or other media that future listening circles can engage in order to talk about some of the key issues relevant to your congregation. The goal is to curate material that represents important aspects of the discernment facing the congregation. These materials are meant to provide each listening circle a sense of focus and help participants become familiar with and reflect on the main issues. These might include the actual text of Synod's decision or the FAQ, a written vision of what a path forward could look like for your congregation or something else. Contact discern@crcna.org to see what resources other congregations like yours have used.
5. The process of discernment will be evaluated according to the principles of fair process.
6. Communicate the details of the discernment process to the congregation and invite questions for clarification and comment.

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THIRD STAGE: *Going Deeper* Listening Circles

What happens in this third stage?

Now that the council has an idea of what the most relevant issues are for your congregation, the council will have selected several resources that will act as prompts for listening circle engagement.

People in your church will now be invited to sign up to join a listening circle group that will meet three times. In these 90-minute meetings, participants will be invited to share their insights, concerns and priorities in response to the material prepared by the council.

As with the *Our Reality Check* circles, group members will be given a chance to speak confidentially with one another before deciding if there's anything from what they've shared that they want the rest of the congregation and the council to be aware of.

Listening Circle Questions (full script provided in Appendix C)

1. What's one thing that you affirm about today's material?
2. What's one thing that you resist about today's material?
3. What questions do you have about today's material?
4. Who is affected by what's asserted in today's material? In what ways?
5. What is the hardest part for you?
6. What do you need to hear, see, do or understand before you would feel ready to take next steps in this discernment?
7. Briefly, what do you wish to convey to the council of this church to help them give faithful spiritual leadership/ guidance to the congregation in this season?
8. If the council were to move in this direction, what would you want them to keep in mind as they took next steps? (especially important if this direction is not what you would prefer).

What outcomes are we seeking?

1. Increased trust: by listening and talking about what matters we build trust with each other.
2. Clarity about issues: we speak and we hear what matters and what is at stake for us and our church
3. Insight for Council: the insights we share more broadly can help our council determine what, if any, kind of next steps God might be inviting our congregation to take.

What does council do with what they hear?

In real time, collect the questions generated by each session of each listening circle group. When possible, seek and share substantive responses to these questions. Some congregations may wish to use their final session as a place for groups to respond to all the questions and responses accumulated by the council over the course of the previous weeks.

At the conclusion of the *Going Deeper* Listening Circles, share back to the congregation a report or a summary of the feedback received from the listening circles. At this point, you do not need to state your agreement or disagreement with every (or any) thing mentioned. But assure the congregation that you will take their feedback seriously by devoting a whole council meeting to talking about it as you decide what, if any, kind of next steps God might be inviting your congregation to take.

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FOURTH STAGE: Council Discerns and Decides Next Steps

The council makes a decision (or prepares a proposal for congregational vote) that reflects deep understanding of the issues and emerges out of the context of prayer and trust.

What happens in this fourth stage?

The council engages what they've heard and adds what they've been thinking by participating in a structured and facilitated listening circle among council members.

Having conducted a circle together, the council then transitions to determine if this season of discernment has clarified your sense of God's leading. Is more discernment or a period of waiting warranted before making a decision?

If a decision is made, that decision is communicated to the congregation, including, as much as possible, the reasons for and the expected consequences of that decision.

Listening Circle Questions (full script provided in Appendix D)

1. What did you hear?
2. How does what you heard impact you?
3. How does what you heard impact the council and congregation?
4. What's been the hardest to hear?
5. Based on what you heard and your own discernment, what has become clearer?

What outcomes are we seeking?

1. Increased trust: by listening and talking about what matters we build trust with each other.
2. Clarity about issues: we speak and we hear what matters and what is at stake for us and our church
3. The council will clarify and communicate what decision, if any, they have made.
4. The council will clarify the reasons for that decision and the expected consequences of that decision.
5. The council will clarify the means by which people can take next steps relative to this decision.

This sample is incomplete.
The full version is available to those who [attend facilitator training](#).

FIFTH STAGE: Worship

Through a discernment and decision-making process like this, there will be occasions to recognize and give thanks for God's faithfulness. There will also have been occasions where our sins or shortcomings in the past or present were revealed. There will also have been occasions where we said or did things that hurt or harmed other people. For these sins, we can confess. For these losses, we can lament.

What happens in this fifth stage?

The congregation finds ways to acknowledge what has been accomplished in this process through corporate worship and, as necessary, through interpersonal reconciliation.

Confession and Forgiveness, Lament and Assurance

Discernment and decision making about weighty matters, even when approached with love and good intentions, can still lead to or expose division, pain, and sin. Invite the council and the congregation to examine their own hearts (Psalm 51).

Provide space in worship for prayers of confession and lament to be spoken corporately. Encourage those responsible for pastoral care to be advocates for and models of personal confession and forgiveness.

Grateful Praise

Having come to a decision or at least some resolution, take time as a congregation to recall and give thanks for the ways that God showed up throughout this season.

Consider collecting and sharing personal testimonies of how people experienced God and God's presence during this discernment. Provide space in worship for the congregation to offer grateful praise to God.

This sample is incomplete.
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