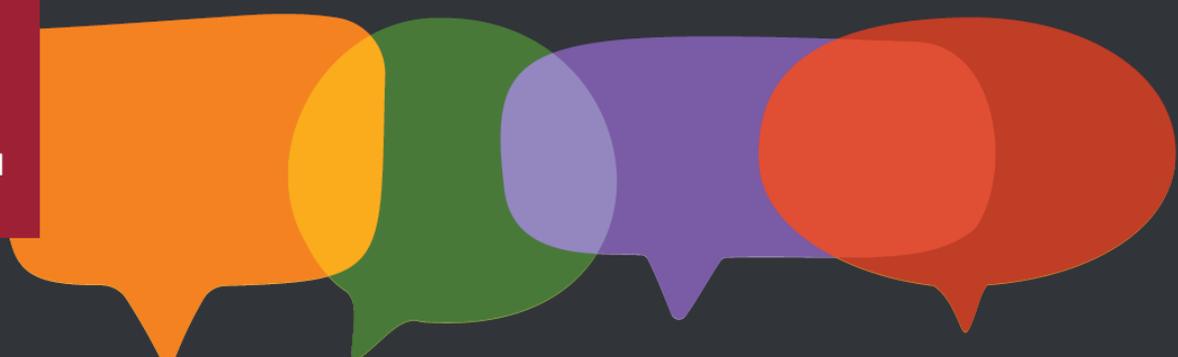




Christian Reformed Church



# Challenging Conversations Next Steps Discernment

[crcna.org/pcr/NextSteps](http://crcna.org/pcr/NextSteps)

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**\*NOTE: this is a sample. A full, unredacted version of this resource, including complete listening circle scripts, is available to those who participate in the facilitator training.**



# Introduction: Why *Next Steps Discernment*?

## Leadership in Anxious Times\*<sup>1</sup>

There are times in the life of a congregation when we sense that a decision on some issue must be made. But we also sense that once made, the decision will bring significant change to our church community. Perhaps a program or way of doing ministry will change or end. Perhaps our decision will prompt some people to leave (or join) our community depending on the path we take and the way we take it. Such moments have the potential to be filled with anxiety for both leaders and the communities they lead.

## 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 binary terms: right or wrong, good or bad. We feel as if we have to pick a side, and we feel as if 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. We find it hard to love.

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 what we perceive to be right, good, or true ends might justify some less-than-Christlike means.

In these times, right when we most need the trust of our congregations, we may act in ways that erode 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 or intentional about hearing the voices of others affected by our decision. Meanwhile, we may start cutting corners in the decision-making process itself so that the process itself turns to *mush*: it becomes unclear who has the authority to decide and who will have an opportunity to speak into the discernment, and it may be unclear what the decision even means.

The effects of rush, hush, and mush on a congregation are diminished trust, growing confusion, and deepening frustration—even among those who generally agree with whatever decision is ultimately made.

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<sup>1</sup> \* indicates a section has been revised since the resource was first published in September 2022.



## **A Better Way? What if it doesn't need to be this way?**

**Deeper Discipleship** - What if the anxiety and conflict of this moment were not a distraction from your church's witness and discipleship, but 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?

**Deeper Community** - 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?

**Deeper Faith** - 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"?

**Deeper Commitment** - 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?

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

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

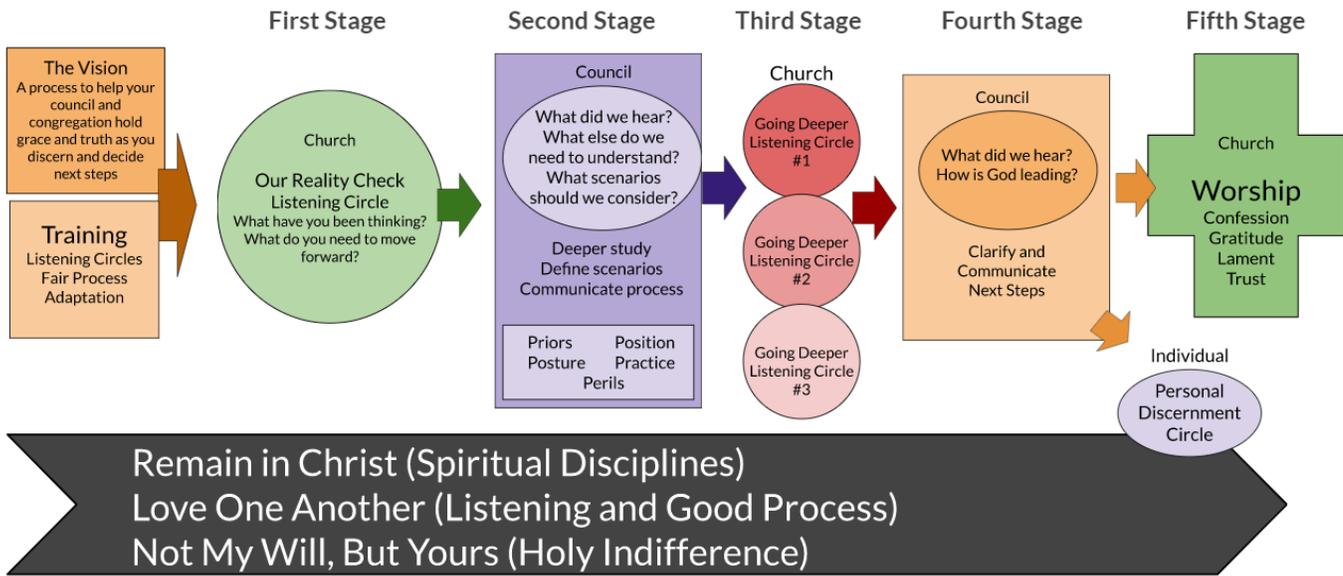
## **An Alternative Way Forward**

In Ephesians 4, Paul pleads with the church to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (v. 3). 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 in your church?

*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 this 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.



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 of what the main issues are in your church.

In the second stage, the council will identify the main issues for their congregation, the issues requiring deeper study, discussion, or understanding, and then possible scenario(s) for moving forward that they want the congregation to engage. At the same time, the council will communicate 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 issues requiring deeper understanding and/or the possible scenarios for moving forward.

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, but 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. Our hope for this resource is that it will help you hold grace and truth as you discern and decide next steps.



## 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 it 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 congregation's "pulse" while also helping participants grow in trust and love for one another by giving each other the gift of deep listening.

### 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 process 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 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.

### A Substitute for Spiritual Judgment\*

While the listening posture of this process will likely build trust, strengthen community, and clarify the issues and questions facing your community, listening circles themselves are not a substitute for a council's responsibility to exercise good and godly judgment. A council cannot take what they hear in the circles and treat that feedback as a binding vote regarding what should happen next. The listening circle format does not necessarily evaluate strengths and weaknesses in a position's theological integrity, biblical consistency or pastoral posture. And while Next Steps Discernment values the principle of respectfully hearing every voice, it does not presume that God's will can be determined merely by popular opinion.

## 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 for training [here](#). Those who sign up will receive a full PDF of the resource and a list of available training dates.



## 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 any church 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](mailto:discern@crcna.org) for further-subsidized rates.

## What kinds of questions can be discerned using this resource?\*

This resource was designed in light of the particular need of some Christian Reformed congregations to discern how they will move forward in light of the decisions we made about human sexuality at Synod 2022. But this resource can be adapted to help congregations and councils discern a variety of issues, which might otherwise generate anxiety or lead to division. For help adapting the questions and script to a particular discernment facing your congregation, contact [discern@crcna.org](mailto:discern@crcna.org)



# The Foundations

## **Not My Will, But Yours Be Done (John 15:14)\***

In any spiritual discernment process, it is tempting to start with the outcome we want and then seek the theological, biblical, or popular support to justify that outcome. But true spiritual discernment must start with a heart like that of Christ who, in the context of his impending passion and crucifixion, said to his Father, “not my will, but yours be done.” In John 15, Jesus calls his disciples to adopt that same posture of deep surrender when he tells them “you are my friends if you do what I command.”

At the start of each Going Deeper listening circle, participants will be prompted to ask God for the gift of “holy indifference.” “Indifference” is a concept with a long tradition in Christian spiritual discernment. In this context, it does not mean we are casual or uncaring about the outcome or the people affected. Rather it means being indifferent to any particular outcome except that God’s will be done. It means we ask the Spirit to help us hold our own desires and expectations loosely, trusting that God’s will is better, even if it is different from our own understanding.

Faithful Christian spiritual discernment resists the temptation to justify or “baptize” my personal preferences, and instead insists on seeking and submitting to God’s leading.

## **Love One Another (John 15:17)**

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, to clothe yourselves with Christ or act in Christ-like ways while you talk, listen, discern, decide, and act. Even the best ends (the right decision; the just or true answer) do not justify less-than-Christlike means.

### **Love One Another Personally by Listening (James 1:19)**

The main way in which most people will be invited to express their love for one another during this process is by listening. The listening circle format central to *Next Steps* is designed to create an environment 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 for encouraging deeper insight and wisdom.

### **Love One Another Procedurally by Fair Process (1 Corinthians 14:40)**

The other way 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 most often associated with business and with 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 as if decisions were made fairly—even if they do not agree entirely with the decisions that were made.



Fair process is marked by three characteristics. First, those affected by a decision have had an opportunity to express their thoughts (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).<sup>2</sup>

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 by not listening deeply or well to the voices of those affected. Or leaders might cut corners in the decision-making process itself so that the process itself becomes mush: it is unclear who has the authority to decide and who will have the opportunity to speak into the discernment, and it may be unclear what the decision even means.

The effects of *rush*, *hush*, and *mush* on a congregation are diminished trust, growing confusion, and deepening frustration—even among those who generally agree with whatever decision was made. The effect of engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity is to make people feel loved and respected even if they disagree with the outcome.

## Remain in Christ: Spiritual Disciplines (John 15:7)

Many Christians have found that practicing certain spiritual disciplines together can enrich discernment. Invite your council, congregation, and 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 they are certainly not a requirement. Use them in whatever way is most helpful to you and your community.

### Fasting

Fasting is “an opportunity to lay down an appetite . . . in order to seek God on matters of deep concern.”<sup>3</sup> 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 through social media can now be used to be more attentively present to

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<sup>2</sup> W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne, “Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy,” *Harvard Business Review* (January 2003), <https://hbr.org/2003/01/fair-process-managing-in-the-knowledge-economy>.

<sup>3</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 246.



God. Second, fasting reveals our often-misaligned appetites (e.g., a stronger appetite for creature comforts than 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 for 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*

- [practictheway.org/practices/fasting](http://practictheway.org/practices/fasting)
- [Spiritual Disciplines Handbook, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun](#)

### **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" (Art. 2). 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](http://crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/engaging-scripture)
- [bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible](http://bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible)

### **Examen**

The Bible is full of invitations and commands to remember: Remember what God has done (Joshua 4). Remember that God is good (Psalm 103). 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.

### *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](http://practictheway.org/pray/week-two)
- [crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/remembering](http://crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/remembering)

### **Listening Prayer**

Much of our prayer consists of us speaking to God—and 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 you observed during that time.

### *Resources*

- [crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/listening](http://crcna.org/FaithPracticesProject/listening)
- [anchor.fm/open-to-wonder](http://anchor.fm/open-to-wonder)



## 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. But church leaders would be 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. This first listening circle stage helps councils gain a sense of the church's shared reality.

### 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 during the opening questions before being asked questions whose answers will be written down and shared (anonymously) with the council and, typically, the congregation.

### Listening Circle Questions (full script provided in Appendix A)

1. What did you think when you heard about synod's decisions?<sup>4</sup>
2. What have you thought about since?
3. What's been the hardest thing for you?
4. What do you need to move forward in this next season?
5. What do you think our church needs to move forward in this next season?
6. Briefly, what do you wish to share with the council to help their discernment in this season?
7. Is there anything else that came up in our circle today that you'd like to communicate to the council?

### What outcomes are we seeking?

1. To love one another by listening, sharing and praying together.
2. To hear insight and perspective from the congregation for council to consider as it discerns and decides next steps.

### 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 anything that's mentioned, but assure the congregation that you will take feedback seriously by devoting a whole council meeting to talking about what you've heard as you decide what kind of discernment God might be inviting your congregation to undertake.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discernment unrelated to Synod, perhaps ask "What did you think when you heard that council would be discerning next steps on this issue?"



## SECOND STAGE: Council Listening and Discernment Design

As a council, arrange for a facilitator to lead a council meeting listening circle using the script provided in Appendix A. 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 issues requiring deeper study or understanding, sketching scenarios for moving forward, and determining and communicating the next steps in the discernment process. Note that making these decisions will often require forming a sub-committee or meeting more than once.

### Listening Circle Questions (full script provided in Appendix A)

1. What did you hear?
2. How does what you heard affect you?
3. How does what you heard affect 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 you did not hear that warrants deeper reflection?

### What outcomes are we seeking?\*

1. Loving one another personally by listening and procedurally by fair process.
2. Clear communication about the discernment and decision-making process the church will follow.
3. Council identifying articles, videos, or other media that can help the congregation understand important biblical, theological, or pastoral issues that warrant deeper study and engagement.
4. Council drafting plausible scenario(s) for moving forward as a church. This scenario(s) should include a consideration of the priors, position, posture, practices, and perils of a particular way forward. Contact [discern@crcna.org](mailto:discern@crcna.org) to see what resources other congregations have used.
  - a. Priors: what theological/biblical foundation is most prominent in this scenario?
  - b. Position: what is the Biblical position guiding this scenario?
  - c. Posture: how will we hold this position? Defensively? Passively? Proactively? Pastorally?
  - d. Practice: are their practical expressions of this position worth clarifying?
  - e. Perils: what risks or downsides do you foresee with pursuing this scenario?



## 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 **select resources or write scenarios** to act as prompts for listening circle engagement.

People in your church will now be invited to sign up for a listening circle that will typically meet two or three times, depending on how many resources or scenarios need to be engaged. 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 can speak confidentially during the first questions. In the final questions, where indicated, a recorder will write down responses to be shared with the council.

### Listening Circle Questions (full script provided in Appendix A)\*

1. What's one thing you affirm about today's material/scenario?
2. What's one thing you resist about today's material/scenario?
3. What is the hardest part for you?
4. What questions do you have about today's material/scenario?
5. Briefly, what do you wish to share with the council to help their discernment in this season?
6. If the council were to move in this direction, what would you want them to keep in mind as they took next steps? (This is especially important if this direction is not what you would prefer). Is there something the council could do or say, apart from NOT pursuing this scenario, that would help you remain a part of this community despite your misgivings?
7. Is there anything else that came up in our circle today that you'd like to communicate to council?

### What outcomes are we seeking?

1. Loving one another by listening, sharing, and praying together.
2. Insight and perspective for the council and congregation as they discern and decide what (if any) next steps God might be inviting our congregation to take.

### What does council do with what it hears?

As each listening circle meets, note the questions that are generated and, when possible, seek and share substantive responses to these questions. Some congregations may wish to use their final listening circle session as a time for groups to talk about 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 with the congregation a report or summary of the feedback received from the listening circles. At this point, you do not need to state your agreement or disagreement with anything that's mentioned, but assure the congregation that you will take its feedback seriously by devoting a whole council meeting to talking about it as you decide what (if any) next steps God might be inviting your congregation to take.



## **FOURTH STAGE: Council Discerns and Decides Next Steps**

As a council, arrange for a facilitator to lead a council listening circle using the script provided in Appendix A. At the conclusion of the council listening circle, the council will make a decision (or prepare a proposal for congregational vote) that reflects understanding of the issues and emerges from a context of prayer.

### **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 listening circle together, the council then transitions to determining 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 the decision and its expected consequences.

### **Listening Circle Questions (full script provided in Appendix A)**

1. What did you hear?
2. How does what you heard affect you?
3. How does what you heard affect 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. Loving one another by listening, sharing and praying together.
2. Council's clarity on the issues in order to discern and decide what (if any) next steps God might be inviting our congregation to take.
3. Clear communication from council about what decision (if any) it has made.
4. Clear communication from council about the reasons for that decision and its expected consequences.
5. Clear communication from council about how people can take next steps relative to this decision.

### **What about those who disagree?**

It is our hope that this discernment process will have cultivated enough trust that those who may be uncertain about the chosen next steps would still be willing to stay. However, if there are some who after this decision believe that they cannot remain with the church or continue in leadership, consider offering to convene a personal discernment circle (Appendix C).



## **FIFTH STAGE: Worship: Confession, Lament, and Gratitude**

Throughout a discernment and decision-making process like this, there will be occasions to recognize and give thanks for God's faithfulness. There will also be occasions where our sins or shortcomings in the past or present are revealed. There will also be 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.