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Study guide

“We need each other”

Congregations consolidate for mission and ministry

By Robert C. Blezard

As churches across the nation face continuing challenges in maintaining their membership and financial resources, congregations are increasingly looking to pool resources and work together. Though cooperation brings challenges, congregations often realize benefits, including cost savings that can mean more resources for ministry, a revitalized sense of purpose, fresh perspectives and new relationships.

EXERCISE 1: MISSION POSSIBLE

Some congregations find themselves struggling because they have lost a sense of what God wants them to accomplish in their mission field.

- For what general purposes do Christian churches exist? What’s their mission?
- What Bible passages provide guidance for Christian mission?
- What is your congregation’s specific mission? How is it articulated, celebrated, publicized?
- How well does your congregation live out their mission?
- How might your congregation better fulfill their mission if it cooperated or consolidated with a ministry partner?

EXERCISE 2: CHRISTIANITY IN DECLINE

A study by the Pew Research Center in 2019 confirmed what many have observed: The number of people who identify as Christians has been steadily falling. Pew found that Christians in the United States declined from 78% of the population in 1978 to 65% in 2019, a drop of about 13%. Discuss:

- From your vantage point, what are the reasons for the decline in Christianity in the United States?
- Why do some Americans no longer make church a priority?
- Why are some Americans now “too busy” for church?
- Why do many young people seem less interested in church?
- What social factors may have contributed to the decline? What economic factors? Political factors?
- How have churches changed in response to cultural and social changes? Have they changed in the right ways? Have they changed enough?
- What needs to be done? What could be done?



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- As a nation, in what ways can Christians, in general, and the church, specifically, respond?

EXERCISE 3: ELCA IN DECLINE

ELCA membership has followed the pattern of Christianity in our country. The denomination’s membership declined by about 20%, from 4.7 million members in 2007 to 3.3 million today. The number of congregations dropped from 10,448 in 2007 to nearly 9,000 today. Discuss:

- In your opinion, what are the reasons for the decline in the ELCA’s membership?
- Are they the same as in the question above, for the decline in Christianity as a whole?
- What differences and distinctions would you make about the decline in ELCA membership?
- What have you and your congregation observed and experienced during the 15 years of decline in the ELCA?
- Where is your congregation now?
- How have you and your congregation coped?
- What do you see as reasons for hope?

EXERCISE 4: COOPERATING CONGREGATIONS

In the article, Redeemer, St. Mark and Ascension Lutheran churches agreed to consolidate for several reasons: All were experiencing financial challenges, all were facing smaller membership numbers and they were within geographical proximity.

- How is your congregation doing?
- What are the most pressing challenges that your congregation faces?
- How severe are those challenges? Which word best describes them: “concerning,” “worrying,” “urgent,” “desperate”?
- What solutions have been tried to meet and overcome those challenges?
- How might a congregational cooperative or consolidation help those challenges?
- Has a cooperative arrangement or consolidation ever been discussed or considered? If so, what was the outcome? If not, why not, and might it be time?
- Given your knowledge of the congregation, how would a proposal for cooperative ministry or consolidation be received by the congregation? Why?

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Living
Lutheran

8765 W. Higgins Rd.
Chicago, IL 60631
(800) 638-3522, ext. 2540
livinglutheran@elca.org
livinglutheran.org

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EXERCISE 5: STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

Every congregation is strong in some areas, while it also has needs in other areas. Assessing strengths and needs can help a congregation evaluate what kind of cooperative partnerships would be mutually beneficial.

- What are the strengths of your congregation, both tangible (such as finances or physical plant) and intangible (such as attitude and commitment to mission). List as many as you can think of.
- Now list the needs (weaknesses?) of your congregation, as many as you can think of.
- Assessing your congregation’s strengths and weaknesses, brainstorm about the kind of ministry partnerships and congregational cooperative arrangements that would be most suitable.

EXERCISE 6: FINDING PARTNERS

As a follow-up exercise to the last set of questions, task your study group with finding potential partners with whom your congregation might engage in ministry—anything from a joint vacation Bible school to full merger.

- What congregations within reasonable proximity would make good ministry partners?
- As the most likely partners, start by exploring ELCA congregations.
- Continue with our “full communion” partners—the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- Finish with others that might be partners.
- Perhaps by exploring their websites, study the congregations’ relative strengths and needs.
- Determine which ones might best “fit” your congregation’s needs, and vice versa.
- Summarize your research and analysis in a report and present it to the congregation council or pastor for study or potential action.

EXERCISE 7: CHANGE IS HARD

There’s an old joke about a pastor who hung a poster in the narthex that read “Prayer changes things!” When he caught the council president removing it, he asked, “What have you got against prayer?” The president replied, “I love prayer! It’s change I hate!”

- In what way is reluctance to change a universal human condition? How has it surfaced in your life? In your congregation? How did you deal with it?
- Reading through the article, what problems or conflicts arose as a result of a reluctance on the part of members to change? Explain.

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About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard

is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.



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- How can leaders of a congregation work to overcome resistance to change? Why would such work be necessary if a ministry cooperative arrangement or merger were to take place?
- What lessons would you draw from the experience of All Saints Lutheran Church?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How are things in your congregation? How might a partnership with a nearby congregation help it accomplish ministry and provide a brighter outlook?
- Has a partnership or consolidation with another congregation ever been discussed in your congregation? What was the result?
- After the three congregations consolidated into All Saints Lutheran Church, less than half the members of the former three congregations transferred into the new church. Why do you think this is so? How might leaders of All Saints encourage more participation?
- Why, in God's name, does your congregation exist? What's its purpose? How well does it fulfill that purpose?



LaTesa Williams (left), All Saints president and former Redeemer president; Gloria Blankinship, former Ascension president; Brian Campbell, pastor of All Saints; and James Burkhart, former St. Mark president, gather in the sanctuary of All Saints. The new congregation was formed by a merger of three ELCA congregations in Oklahoma City.

“WE NEED EACH OTHER”

By Cindy Uken

In 2018, three small congregations within a 10-mile radius of downtown Oklahoma City—Ascension, St. Mark and Redeemer—were struggling financially to maintain their buildings and meet associated expenses. After Brian Campbell was called as the congregations’ pastor, they started discussing how they might pool their resources. They started with

combined services on fifth Sundays and talked about a weekly joint meeting. Discussions about a formal merger had just started when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

As part of the transition to online worship, the congregations combined their three live services into one Zoom session, with the feed left open afterward for fellowship. People began

to share with each other what their fellow congregants needed in order to deal with the pandemic, and the others responded.

Campbell said their priority wasn't helping someone from Ascension or St. Mark or Redeemer but helping a member of the Covenant—the umbrella term for the three congregations. Sometimes the fellowship feed lasted for hours. “That showed the members that they could work together,” he added.

“IT’S A GREAT DEAL OF CHANGE, BUT WITHOUT EACH OTHER, WE ALL FAIL.”

In February, the congregations held a chartering service and meeting to become a new church in accordance with ELCA guidelines. On March 2—Ash Wednesday—they officially began worshiping together as All Saints Lutheran Church.

Services are held at the former St. Mark building; Ascension's was sold to a neighboring business during the consolidation process, and there are plans to turn Redeemer's building into a community center.

In addition to financial savings, the merger has reduced the number of volunteers needed. In a congregation such as Ascension, with 20 active members, almost everybody had to play some role. Now, in a congregation of 70-plus people, members can pick and choose how they serve.

Overcoming challenges

The merger made sense economically and logistically, but Campbell is the first to acknowledge that it's not all “puppies and rainbows.” In fact, he said, it's a “full-contact game with cuts and bruises.”

“The challenge during consolidation, and now as All Saints, is how we work together,” he said. Members are still trying to figure out how to merge their various ministries. People are hesitant to step on each other's toes and are inclined to follow the routines of their old church, he added.

John and Winifred Russell, who were members of St. Mark and then Ascension for a total of 43 years, lobbied for the merger because membership was dwindling and included no youth or young adults. The congregations were also forced to dip into their limited savings to pay monthly bills.

“We had hoped that more members would transfer their membership,” Winifred said.

“But more than 50% of the former members of the three churches did not transfer their membership or commit to joining All Saints.”

Campbell doesn't dispute the numbers but adds three qualifying words: at this time. “Our membership numbers are not fixed,” he said. “Some are still coming and deciding if they want to be members.”

One unique aspect of the consolidation is that the congregations were quite different. Redeemer's membership was majority Black, whereas Ascension and St. Mark were majority white. This, as well as other issues of inclusion, required close attention as members worked through combining the three cultures.

LaTesa Williams is president of All Saints' congregation council and was president of Redeemer, where she was a lifelong member. She said that, in the beginning, she wasn't ready to merge. Williams called Redeemer a “safe spot” where she didn't have to deal with politics or racism.

“There's a lot you have to think about,” she said. “There was a process I had to go through to get to this point. It's a great deal of change, but without each other, we all fail. We need each other.”

William Carr is chair of the property committee, which includes members from each of the previous congregations. He said the merger involved a significant amount of moving property, from an altar to office supplies to about 2,000 pounds of books.

Carr also served on the consolidation task force and said it was concerned that no group be “owner and host” to the others as they selected a building for their new worship center. The sanctuary has become a symbol of something new; the members have rearranged it twice and incorporated the altars and pulpits from the other two buildings.

“Becoming a new congregation is hard, [which is] ironic for a church that was founded on change,” Carr said. “The symbolism of the different furnishings and arrangement of the sanctuary has been a very positive image to reinforce the idea that All Saints is something new and, although we retain some of the old from each previous congregation, we wish to move forward with the new one.” †

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