

A Handbook for Collaborative Ministry

A Choose Your Own Adventure Guide

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Please see the [acknowledgments](#) for a broader list of the people and places that have influenced the creation and content of this handbook.

This handbook is a living document, it will be continually edited, added to, and changed as new learning is obtained and shared. To go to the most up-to-date version of this handbook visit the link bit.ly/CollaborationRCA. In addition, if you are viewing this handbook within Google docs or as a pdf, there are links throughout to help you navigate back and forth in the document. You can also select the view to “Show tabs & outlines” in order to see the full outline and better navigate wherever you like.

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Introduction

The **Collaborative Ministry Learning Community (CMLC)** emerged from the recommendations of the **Adaptive Change Task Force** of the Regional Synod of Albany, recognizing the need for new approaches to ministry in an ever-changing landscape. We are committed to exploring innovative models of shared ministry—reimagining what has been done before and discovering what has yet to be tried.

We see ourselves as pioneers and practitioners in collaboration, embracing both the successes and setbacks that come with experimentation. Our role is not just to implement what is already known, but to test, adapt, and refine models of ministry that respond to the needs of today's church. *We believe that collaboration is not merely a practical necessity for churches and ministers, but a theological and missional calling - a way of being the body of Christ together.*

Our Commitments

- **Courageous Experimentation** – We are willing to try, fail, learn, and try again in order to discover faithful and sustainable ways to do ministry together.
- **Spiritual Readiness** – Collaboration requires more than logistics; it demands discernment, humility, and openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit.
- **Lifelong Learning** – We seek to equip leaders and congregations with tools for continuous growth, strengthening their ability to serve and adapt.
- **Practical Resourcing** – Our vision is to provide congregations and pastors with guidance, best practices, and real-world examples for engaging in collaborative ministry with confidence.

Our Vision

Through this handbook and the ongoing learning of many who are involved in collaborations of various kinds, we aim to equip and encourage congregations, pastors, and church leaders as they step into collaborative ministry. We believe that when churches work together—sharing leadership, resources, and mission - they become stronger, more resilient, and better able to serve their communities.

Whether you are just beginning to explore shared ministry or are looking to strengthen an existing partnership, our goal is to walk alongside you, offering insights, encouragement, and practical tools to navigate the journey ahead.

How to Use This Handbook

This handbook is the result of several hundred hours of conversations and learning, interviews with many who have first-hand experience with collaborative ministries, and compiling resources to help others learn and better understand collaboration. There is a lot of overlap within the stories and learning content that has been (and will continue to be) collected,

which has demonstrated that there is no one pathway for a church to jump into collaboration. In fact, most churches are very likely *already* working with other churches or organizations or their history is filled with examples of this work, and they only need to highlight these partnerships to find the joy and energy to continue these endeavors.

Since there is no one pathway toward this handbook has been set up like a “choose your own adventure” book. The compilation of topics and stories do not necessarily flow from one into another, and it is highly likely that one topic won’t hit home for church leaders as much as another topic will. Which is why this handbook is a living document, with links embedded within to guide you toward similar stories or case studies, or to take you to resources, practices, or reflective exercises. So jump around and have fun!

But first, let’s delve into the idea of Collaborative Ministry in general...

Part 1: What is Collaborative Ministry?

Collaboration literally means “working together”. And churches and church leaders have been working together since the beginning of Christ’s Church in Acts 2. There have always been forms of collaborative ministry that involve different individuals or groups working together in a shared mission of service, worship, and community engagement. In the Reformed tradition, clergy have been heavily connected with one another in various ways for support and camaraderie, through friendships to ongoing clergy networks to formal alliance groups. Ordained clergy have served alongside gifted elders, deacons, youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, and other congregational leaders to meet the needs and fulfill the mission/vision of their congregations. Ministers volunteer as chaplains or on non-profit boards. In addition, many churches have utilized staff/team ministry, co-pastorates, mutual support with neighboring churches, as well as supporting local nonprofits, mission organizations, overseas missionaries, and more. And let’s not forget that the greatest form of collaboration our churches regularly take part in is *the potluck*.

Collaborative ministry takes on several forms depending on the formality and structure needed in working together, as well as the resources and personnel being shared and the levels of flexibility allowed in the ongoing relationship. Because of this, congregations and church leaders often seek to clarify the different levels of engagement and commitment, depending on the needs and the roles of those who are involved. To some extent, some of the “regular” forms of mutual support that come naturally (or prescribed) to churches and church leaders will not be explored in depth within this handbook, as we seek to offer several other collaborative efforts that may likely require greater commitment to deeper learning, and thus the opportunity for greater impact within a community. The forms of collaborative ministry shared here are not mutually exclusive, as several overlap in various ways depending on the context and relationships.

Here are some forms of Collaborative Ministry:

1. Church to Church Collaboration

- a. The sharing of life and witness together through shared worship, discipleship, and mission opportunities, leadership development, and general resourcing.
- b. This form of collaboration takes a lower amount of commitment and expertise, utilizing existing relationships, while often deepening relationships and broadening practices of collaboration.
- c. Examples: Joint worship services (whether seasonal or one-off events), joint VBS or the sharing of VBS materials, joint learning initiatives, etc.

2. Linked (aka Yoked) Collaboration

- a. This is a more formal partnership between two congregations sharing in certain aspects of church-life, such as the employment of ministers or local mission work.
- b. This form takes a slightly higher level of commitment, as the relationship is formalized for specific purposes depending on the shared needs of each congregation.
- c. Examples: [One minister or co-pastor team serving in two churches](#), two churches providing a warming station for the homeless within their community, etc.

3. Co-Vocational Ministry

- a. Co-vocational ministry is the practice of engaging in a formal ministry calling while *simultaneously* working in a “secular” job or another form of ministry, viewing both as complementary expressions of one’s vocation and mission.
- b. This form requires clear commitment and shared understanding for the minister and congregation.
- c. Examples: [Being a ‘Tent-maker’](#), [a minister serving a church part-time while working within another job/career](#), a minister serving within a church and another nonprofit, etc.

4. Multi-Parish Collaboration

- a. A formal partnership between three or more congregations for the employment of ministers or other capacities.
- b. This form takes an even higher level of commitment, as more groups and systems are required to interact with one another.
- c. Examples: A [minister or ministers serving a group of churches](#) (each with their own local leadership), a [collegiate model](#) with shared leadership between several congregations, a group of churches employing a youth minister, etc.

5. Ecumenical Collaboration

- a. Different congregations from different denominations working together for a common purpose, such as social justice, mission work, or dialogue for understanding.
- b. This requires a greater commitment of understanding of the practices and traditions of different ecumenical partners, and the denominational structures and requirements of each.
- c. Examples: Joint worship services, [shared community outreach programs](#), local ecumenical organizations, [mission organization](#), etc.

6. Interfaith Collaboration

- a. Cooperation between different religious traditions for the common good of the community or in the sharing of resources.
- b. This requires the development of relationships with leaders in other faith organizations, as well as work around interfaith dialogue and the mutual understanding/valuing between those who come together from different faiths.
- c. Examples: Multi-faith initiatives in disaster relief, social justice advocacy, interfaith prayer gatherings, [the sharing of buildings for prayer and/or worship](#), etc.

7. Mission-Oriented Collaboration

- a. Multiple groups coming together to engage in opportunities to work together toward a shared mission.
- b. Some forms of this require higher commitment from congregations to take part in mission work, as well as a deeper understanding of mission in general.
- c. Examples: [Short-term mission teams](#) (local, national, or international), [nesting ministries](#), formal support of international mission organizations, etc.

8. Community Collaboration

- a. Churches working alongside other local organizations in long-term, formal partnerships, to meet local needs.
- b. This form requires high levels of connection and commitment, not just in supporting another community organization's mission, but actively working together for a shared or similar mission.
- c. Examples: [Food Pantries](#), homeless shelters, prison ministries, addiction recovery programs, social services, education programs for the public, after school programs, etc.

These forms of collaboration (along with others that will surface at various times) enhance the effectiveness of ministry by leveraging the varying strengths, skills, and perspectives of many to serve communities with greater impact. Which is why a learning community was created to gather resources, collect stories of successes and failures, and wonder together how to equip churches toward “working together”.

Don't know where to start? [Try Part 2 on Preparing for Collaborative Ministry](#)

Part 2: Preparing for and Deepening Collaborative Ministry

Assessing Readiness and Willingness

Reflect on the following five traits below. Make an honest inventory for where you are, personal and congregationally, living into these traits. These traits are written about by Brian Sanders in his book *Five Keys To Cross-Organizational Collaboration*, where he writes that any compromise on these traits will set back the learning and outcomes of the group effort being taken on. As you process your current ways of being in each of the areas, use the questions to wonder what it might take within yourself and your church to turn up the dials on each of these.



Global Thinking

- **Seeing the Bigger Picture**

- How effectively do we grasp broader social, economic, and cultural trends—and integrate these insights into our local planning?
- How are we working to find lasting and meaningful changes within our community, without having to promote our own church or any specific agenda?

- **Recognizing a Wider Calling**

- Do we view our ministry as part of the wider work of the Holy Spirit that extends beyond us and into every facet of our community?
- How do we demonstrate that we, alongside other individuals and organizations, long to create a better world?

- **Engaging with Diverse Ideas**

- Are we open to learning from those with diverse perspectives and innovative ideas, in order to better serve and love our neighbors?
- How do we foster an environment within our church that values the voices and insights of those outside our church?

Communication

- **Articulating and Sharing**

- How effective are we at expressing our vision and mission to both our community and potential partners?
- How are we at sharing our tiredness and our frustrations, as we search for others who are tired of how the world looks/works?

- **Active Listening and Understanding**

- How well do we practice active listening to genuinely understand and integrate others' perspectives?
- What structures are in place to gather feedback and address misunderstandings constructively?

- **Internal Communication Practices**

- Have we established transparent channels to keep everyone informed about decisions and changes?
- How do we ensure internal communication fosters collaboration and continuous improvement?

- **External Communication**

- In what ways do our external communications reflect our mission and invite collaborative partnerships?
- How do we balance sharing successes and challenges to build credibility and trust externally?

Personality

- **Team Orientation and Humility**

- How do we cultivate a culture that values teamwork over individual accolades?
- In what ways do our leaders demonstrate humility and a willingness to learn from others and wisely adapt when needed?

- **Relational Qualities**

- Are we recognized for being approachable, good-natured, and supportive in our interactions with others in our community?
- How do we ensure that love and respect remain central to all our being, while relating to and working alongside others?

- **Trust and Rebuilding Trust**

- How effectively do we trust one another and others outside of our congregation? How can we deepen trust through transparency, integrity, and consistency?
- What processes do we have in place to rebuild trust when it has been compromised?

- **Equality and Collaboration**

- Do we treat those outside our church as equals, valuing their insights as opportunities for growth?
- How do we demonstrate a commitment to collaboration by learning from and partnering with external organizations?

Passion

- **Commitment to Service and Love**

- How deeply are we committed to serving and loving those in need inside and outside our congregation?
- What tangible examples best demonstrate our passion for making a positive difference in our community?

- **Gifts and Talents**

- Do we effectively recognize and nurture the unique gifts that equip us to serve our community in God's love?
- How are individual passions aligned with our overall mission to maximize our impact?

- **Championing Specific Causes**

- Who in our congregation exhibits a strong passion for particular issues, and how are they empowered to lead?
- What mechanisms do we have to support and celebrate these champions in their advocacy efforts?

- **Sustaining Energy and Momentum**

- How do we convert our passion into consistent, long-term actions that yield measurable impact?
- What practices help reinforce our commitment and sustain our collective energy over time?

Organizational Indifference (*“organizational indifference” is the degree to which church leaders/members can set aside self-interest to better meet a vision/mission.*)

- **Transcending Self-Interest**

- Are we willing to set aside our usual institutional priorities (butts, bucks, and babies) when a greater cause calls for us to move beyond these? Are we able to get beyond “how will this benefit us”?
- How do we evaluate and pursue opportunities that require us to set aside our traditional practices for broader impact?

- **Humility and Letting Go**

- How open are we to relinquishing control of what we perceive as ours (our building, our property, our agenda, etc) for the benefit of a collective effort?
- What cultural shifts might be necessary for us to foster shared leadership and collaborative decision-making?

- **Balancing Priorities**

- Is our focus primarily on operational survival, or are we actively building a community that seeks to transform lives?
- How do we ensure that the Gospel’s long-term mission of seeing all people flourish remains prioritized over short-term concerns?

Again, what might it look like to turn the dial up on aspects that you and your church need to work on? Remember, start small; work toward small wins as you seek to learn your way into deeper ways of being.

Understanding Technical Problems and Adaptive Challenges in Church Leadership

As church leaders, we often face obstacles that hinder our ministry's growth and effectiveness. These obstacles typically fall into two categories: **technical problems** and **adaptive challenges**. Recognizing the difference between the two is crucial for effective leadership and problem-solving.

Technical Problems: Clear Issues with Solutions

Technical problems are straightforward challenges with known solutions. They can often be resolved through existing knowledge, expertise, or established procedures. Examples include:

- A broken sound system for Sunday worship
- A scheduling conflict between two church events
- Outdated church management software that needs an upgrade

These issues, while sometimes frustrating, have clear answers. They require problem-solving skills, resources, and sometimes expert help, but they do not require any fundamental shifts in the way the church operates.

Adaptive Challenges: Deeper Issues Requiring Change

Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are more complex and require a shift in mindset, behavior, or culture. These challenges often don't have a clear-cut solution and may require experimentation, learning, and change. Examples include:

- Declining church attendance
- The need for a more diverse and inclusive congregation
- Generational differences in church involvement

Unlike technical problems, adaptive challenges cannot be solved by simply implementing a new program or finding the perfect resource. They require leaders to engage themselves and others in the process of change, fostering open dialogue, transforming the church's approach to ministry, and practicing their way into a new way of thinking and being. If it's difficult to clearly define a problem, you may likely be dealing with an adaptive challenge.

How Church Leaders Can Respond

1. **Diagnose the Problem** – Ask: Is this a technical problem with a clear solution, or an adaptive challenge requiring deep change?
2. **Use the Right Leadership Approach** – Technical problems may require delegation, but adaptive challenges need leaders to guide the congregation through transformation.
3. **Encourage a Culture of Adaptation** – Adaptive challenges require patience, experimentation, and learning. Leaders must empower their teams and listen to their congregation.
4. **Seek Collective Wisdom** – Adaptive challenges require input from multiple perspectives. Engage church members, leaders, and even outside voices to discern the best path forward.

Understanding the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges helps church leaders lead wisely and effectively, ensuring that the church continues to grow and thrive in an ever-changing world.

A Mapping Exercise: Strengthening Organizational Relationships

Objective:

This exercise helps church leaders identify existing relationships with other organizations, to surface opportunities for deeper collaboration, and discern how to leverage these partnerships for greater community impact. This exercise could take 1-2hr to accomplish.

Materials Needed:

- Large sheets of paper or a whiteboard
- Large sticky notes or index cards
- Markers and/or Dry-Erase Markers

Opening Reflection

Reflect together on a few of the following Scripture passages:

- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27
- Romans 12:1-8
- Philippians 2:1-4

Step 1: Identify Key Organizational Relationships

Consider all of the organizations with whom your church and church members interact (volunteer, employment, fun, etc). These might include:

- Nonprofits and charities
- Associations and clubs
- Other churches or faith groups
- Schools and educational institutions
- Government agencies
- Businesses and employers
- Health and social services

Write down the names of organizations on individual sticky notes or index cards.

Step 2: Categorize Relationships

Organize each organization into one of three categories:

1. **Existing Strong Partnerships** – Organizations with whom your church has an active, thriving relationship. Outline these notes/cards with an orange marker.

2. **Emerging Relationships** – Organizations with whom your church has worked with or alongside of, but have room for deeper collaboration. Outline these notes/cards with a blue marker.
3. **Potential Partners** – Organizations with whom you are loosely connected, but could be valuable partners. Outline these notes/cards with a green marker.

Step 3: Assess Strengths & Contributions

For each organization, ask:

- **What does this organization provide to our church and community?** (e.g., funding, volunteers, expertise of some sort, advocacy, etc)
- **What does our church offer in return?** (e.g., facilities, spiritual care, volunteers, funding, advocacy, etc)
- **What shared goals might we have?**
- **Are there gaps or areas for growth in our collaboration?**

Write answers next to or around each organization's name.

Step 4: Map the Relationships

Draw a **relationship map** on a large sheet of paper or a whiteboard:

- Place a sticky note or card with your church's name in the center of a whiteboard or on a large piece of paper.
- Place all the other organizations around your church, with the orange cards closest, the blue cards next out, and the green cards furthest away.
- Draw lines to connect organizations for action. Don't categorize based on similarities, connect for action. Wonder together:
 - What would happen if we connected two or more of these organizations together with us?
 - What organizations could we partner with to get something specific done? What assets of ours can we use to accomplish this?
- Think outside the box: Choose two organizations that you do not think go together at all, and think of a project or action that would put those two plus your church together in a new way.
- Brainstorming actions on this relationship map could include things like: Projects, Events, Performances, Campaigns, Demonstrations, Models or pilot projects, Celebrations, Protests, Making things, Growing things, Fixing things, Learning things, and more.

Step 5: Discern and Prioritize Next Steps

Discuss as a team:

- Which relationships or connections surprised you?
- What partnerships should we develop and strengthen?
- Are there overlapping efforts that could lead to greater collaboration?
- How can we deepen relationships through shared projects, meetings, or mutual support?

Step 6: Create an Action Plan

Using the table at the end of this document:

- Identify **three to five key relationships** to strengthen.
- Set **concrete steps** to deepen engagement and relationship (e.g., meeting with leaders, joint events, developing shared projects, etc).
- Assign responsibilities and set a timeline.

Closing (for now): Reflection & Prayer

Reflect on this exercise. What energized you? What frustrated you? What else are you seeing that needs to be shared?

Close with a time of prayer, asking for wisdom in stewarding relationships and collaborating for greater community impact.

Theology of Change: Embracing the Spiritual Discipline of Transformation

Change is not an interruption to the Christian life—it is the essence of it. From the beginning, God has been in the business of transformation, calling creation into being, shaping history through covenant, and leading people into new and deeper relationships with the Divine. The Gospel itself is a story of radical change: sinners redeemed, outsiders welcomed, and a crucified Christ resurrected into new life.

Yet, change is often met with resistance. It disrupts what is familiar and comfortable, making us long for stability and certainty. However, when we view change through the lens of faith, we see that it is not something to fear but something to embrace. Change is one of the primary ways God moves in the world, inviting us into continual renewal.

By understanding change theologically, we come to see it as more than just a necessary adjustment to external circumstances. Change is a reflection of God's active presence, shaping us into the people and communities we are called to be. It is a process through which we are invited to deeper trust, greater faithfulness, and a fuller participation in the unfolding Kingdom of God.

Change in the Biblical Narrative

Scripture is filled with stories of transformation that remind us that change is not an obstacle but a pathway to encountering God's presence and purpose.

- **Abraham's Call (Genesis 12:1-4)** – Abraham is called to leave everything he knows and trust in God's promise of an unknown future. This shift is not just geographical—it is a transformation of identity and faith.
- **The Exodus (Exodus 16)** – The Israelites' journey from slavery to freedom is marked by uncertainty, wandering, and struggle. Yet, the wilderness becomes the place where they learn dependence on God, receive the law, and form their communal identity.
- **The Prophets' Call for Renewal (Isaiah 43:19)** – God declares, "*See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?*" The prophetic tradition reminds us that faithfulness is not about preserving the past but remaining open to God's ongoing work of renewal.
- **Jesus' Ministry of Transformation** – Every encounter with Jesus leads to change. The blind see, the outcast is restored, and sinners are forgiven. Jesus calls people not just to believe but to be transformed.
- **The Early Church's Shift in Mission (Acts 10-11)** – Peter's vision and the inclusion of Gentiles upend the early church's assumptions about who belongs in God's family. Change here is not just structural—it is theological, challenging the church's very identity.

In each of these examples, change is not incidental; it is central to God's redemptive work. These stories reveal a pattern: God calls, people resist or struggle, transformation occurs, and new life emerges. This same pattern continues today.

The Challenge of Change in the Church

For many congregations, change is one of the greatest struggles. Churches often desire growth but resist the shifts that growth requires. Communities cherish their traditions but fear that adapting to new realities might mean losing their identity. The tension between stability and transformation is real, yet faithfulness demands that we engage with change rather than avoid it.

The church cannot simply be a guardian of what once was. It is called to be a living, breathing body that responds to the movement of the Spirit. If we truly believe in resurrection, then we must believe that **God's church is always in the process of being made new**. This does not mean abandoning tradition or core beliefs, but it does mean holding them with an open hand, trusting that God's vision is always larger than our own.

Reformed Theology and the Call to Be Always Reforming

The Reformed tradition emphasizes the idea of *semper reformanda*—"always being reformed according to the Word of God." This is not change for the sake of change but a theological posture of openness to God's continuous work.

Being "always reforming" means recognizing that the church is not static. Just as the early church had to wrestle with including Gentiles, just as the Reformers had to challenge corrupt practices, just as past generations had to adapt to new cultural realities, so too must we continually discern how God is calling us to live out the Gospel today.

Faithfulness is not about rigidly preserving the past but about remaining attentive to where God is leading. When we resist change, we risk becoming like the Pharisees—so invested in our own systems that we fail to see when God is doing something new right in front of us.

Why Change is Central to Our Faith

At its core, Christianity is a faith of transformation:

- **Repentance is change** – turning from sin toward new life.
- **Discipleship is change** – following Jesus requires leaving behind old ways of thinking and living.
- **Resurrection is change** – the ultimate transformation, where death gives way to new life.

Change is not merely an unfortunate reality to endure. It is the very space where God is at work. If we avoid change, we may be avoiding an encounter with God's transformative grace.

When we shift our mindset and see change as a theological reality rather than a logistical burden, we open ourselves to deeper trust in God. We move from fear to faith, from control to surrender, from maintenance to mission.

Living into Change with Faith

So, how do we faithfully engage with change? It begins with a posture of openness:

- **Trusting that God is in the process, even when the outcome is unclear.**
- **Recognizing that discomfort does not mean something is wrong—often, it means growth is happening.**
- **Being willing to let go of what no longer serves the mission, while holding onto what truly matters.**
- **Seeing change not as a loss, but as an opportunity to participate in God's ongoing work of renewal.**

If the Gospel is about transformation, then embracing change is not optional—it is essential. It is the means through which God continually calls us deeper into faith, into mission, and into new life.

God is always at work, doing a new thing. The question is: *Do we perceive it?*

Leaning into Discernment

There has been a growing chasm within the leadership of many churches that has come to value organizational decision making over the spiritual practice of discernment. Churches value making quick decisions with the knowledge we have at hand, and usually do not take the extra time required to seek God's in any given area of life and ministry. And yet, the truth remains that the Church is a spiritual body, not a business or corporation; we proclaim that Jesus Christ is the only head of the Church, not even ourselves. And yet, we regularly plow through decision-making with only our own wishes at hand and our preferred timeline ahead, without ever considering what the Spirit of Christ would want of us. Working collaboratively with others, whether out of true calling or out of necessity, means that we are willing to slow down in order to discern what the will of God is - what is good, acceptable, and perfect (Romans 12:2).

Ruth Haley Barton's book *Pursuing God's Will Together* contains the following five foundational building blocks for the practices of discerning God's will:

1. Spiritual discernment is a process that occurs in and through the Trinity, with the Holy Spirit playing a crucial role. The Spirit, as the one who understands and interprets God's deep truths, was given to us by Jesus to lead us into truth. Embracing discernment—both personally and as a community—requires a commitment to Christ and an openness to the Spirit's guiding presence, which we can engage with through disciplined practices of listening.
2. The second building block emphasizes that the very impulse to discern – an urge to respond to Christ – is a positive force (a “good spirit”) that must be cultivated. Leaders must rely on the Holy Spirit to help them differentiate between imposing their own will and surrendering to God's will. They must learn how to submit to the work of the Spirit, who alone is able to transform our willfulness into willingness.
3. The third building block centers on cultivating a deep, personal trust in God's goodness. While many Christian leaders speak of God's goodness, truly participating in discernment means believing that God's goodness applies to our lives, even when we've faced disappointment or self-reliance. Rather than just agreeing intellectually, we must experience and trust that God's will is ultimately the best for us. Truth be told, we don't really want to trust anyone but ourselves. The only way we can freely participate in a discernment process is if we trust that God is good, not merely as a general attribute but as it relates to us specifically.
4. The fourth building block stresses that our ultimate calling is love – love for God, oneself, others, and the world. Scripture makes it clear that success is measured by our capacity to love. However, in the hustle of organizational life, leaders may drift from genuine care toward expediency. The Holy Spirit is given to guide us in real time, helping us discern what love truly requires in each situation.
5. The fifth building block is that we are committed to acting on God's revealed will. It's not enough to discern God's will; we must be willing to obey it even before fully understanding it. Rather than treating discernment as a game – waiting to see if we like what we learn – true commitment means embracing God's will wholeheartedly, which in turn makes us part of Jesus' family.

How do you respond to the idea that discernment is what distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership? How would you describe the way your leadership group makes decisions currently?

[Ruth Haley Barton's book](#) deepens the conviction for Christian leaders to develop and transform the ways in which they practice their faith through leadership, and how they discuss and decide on matters around the present and future of the church. We greatly encourage you and your leadership group (consistory, mission team, etc) to study this book together!

There's a lot more to the practice of discernment. See the other [Resources](#), or take a look at the [Prayers and Devotions for Discernment](#).

Minister and Collaboration: Calling and Discernment

Over the years I have ended up in a lot of touristy trinket shops, whiling away my time as my wife does her vacation shopping. I am often drawn to the signs and plaques that share folk wisdom. One that I used to see frequently read - "When you are up to your neck in alligators, it is hard to remember that your original intention was to drain the swamp." I have found that these words apply to ministry as a whole, and to collaborative ministry in particular.

There probably aren't too many who enter ministry today because they are drawn to fame and fortune. My grandmother was born at the end of the 1800's, and she thought ministry ranked in prestige above medicine and law, a real VIP in the community. I don't think too many people in 2025 see ministry in that light. We enter ministry because we feel called by God. For each of us the call is slightly different. Our gifts and abilities help shape how that call is lived out. Our calling is affirmed and refined during seminary and early ministry as we learn more about God and about ourselves. But the call is the foundation of who we are and how we minister.

I'm belaboring this point because there are times in ministry when we feel like we are up to our hips in muck and the alligators start swimming around. It is easy to get discouraged and depressed at these times. It is easy to become cynical or to just give up. There is a vertical dimension to dealing with this problem, we need to reach out to God and seek his help in pulling us out of the muck. But one of the important things to do from the human dimension is to get back in touch with our sense of calling. What am I called to do? What does God want me to do? How is the present situation helping me to fulfill my calling; how is it hindering me from fulfilling my calling? Re-connecting to our call can give us perspective and help us prioritize. It can give us renewed energy to attack the alligators because it is necessary in order to respond to our call; or maybe it

gives us permission to move on, draining that particular part of the swamp is not what we were originally intending to do in response to our call.

Collaborative ministry can be a particularly swampy endeavor. By definition, there are two or more parties collaborating together. That means that resistance, traditions, communication styles and other alligators come swimming from multiple directions. It is easy to lose focus and let our energy be poured into dealing with the problems and disagreements and issues. It is easy to forget why we started collaborating in the first place. And when our energy and focus is directed away from the essential ministry we tend to do a poor job in that ministry.

Right at the very beginning stages, a pastor providing leadership in a collaborative effort must discern and clarify what their call and purpose in ministry is, and then discern how this possible collaborative ministry aligns with that purpose. Then through prayer and discernment the leaders exploring the collaborative possibilities need to agree on and articulate what the purpose and goals of their collaboration are. This allows clarity of communication as new people are drawn into the work of the ministry so that they too may have a vision of where they are going and how they fit into the ministry.

When the purpose and goals of a collaboration are clear up front, some of the alligators can be avoided before they get too close. Decisions can be made concerning how they align with our purpose, whether they help or distract from achieving the goals. Sometimes an alligator that seems big, can be disarmed when it is realized that it has nothing to do with the main ministry objectives. And sometimes the difficulties help to alter the direction we are going so that we can get back to doing the ministry, get back to draining the swamp.

One of my favorite cartoon characters is Henry, the little chicken hawk. His nemesis is Foghorn Leghorn, a large rooster who towers over Henry. In one scene, Henry is tugging on Leghorn's leg, trying to carry him off. Leghorn shakes him off and intones, "What are you doing son? You're bothering me!" Henry stands up straight, puffs out his little chest and declares "I'm a chicken hawk, and you are a chicken." Henry knew who he was; Henry knew his purpose in life. Nothing else, no problem or difficulty mattered, he was focused on that goal. In ministry, especially collaborative ministry, we need to be like Henry. We need a clear sense of who we are, of what God has made us, and what God has called us to do. We need to articulate our purpose and calling, and we need to share that purpose with others and enlist them in the work. Problems will definitely arise, but if we keep focused on the ministry God has called us to, nothing can stand in our way of serving.

Grief as a Systemic Force in Church Life

In the life of any church community, grief is always present—sometimes quietly humming beneath the surface, other times roaring through moments of crisis or transition. Yet, it often goes unrecognized, miscategorized as a purely individual experience. A widow mourns her spouse, a beloved pastor retires, a long-standing family moves away. These are all seen as personal losses. But in truth, grief is not an isolated emotion; it is communal. When one part of the body suffers, the whole body feels it (1 Corinthians 12:26). The church, as a system, absorbs loss in ways far deeper and broader than we may acknowledge.

Grief is not just about what happens to individuals. It is a hidden, systemic reality that seeps into the identity and relational fabric of congregational life. It is contagious and connective, weaving its way through unspoken expectations, roles, traditions, and hopes. And when the church experiences change—when it restructures, declines, or reimagines itself—grief rises to the surface in powerful, disruptive ways. Members grieve the loss of the way things used to be. They grieve the fear of an uncertain future. They mourn the displacement of long-held roles or traditions, or the disorientation that comes when long-trusted identities and relationships begin to shift.

Change, after all, is a form of loss. And when multiple forms of loss collide, the church as a system can become anxious, reactive, or even paralyzed. Resistance to change often stems not from stubbornness or fear of innovation, but from unprocessed, unnamed grief. When grief is unacknowledged, it doesn't disappear—it embeds itself in the system, quietly influencing every part of congregational life.

This systemic grief begins to manifest in subtle but telling ways. Communication breaks down. Conversations become emotionally charged or avoidant, with people skirting around the issues instead of confronting them directly. Decision-making becomes erratic—either delayed out of fear or rushed in an effort to escape discomfort. Relationships can fray. As trust erodes, factions form, and old conflicts re-emerge, newly inflamed. Energy wanes. Morale dips. Spiritual vitality can feel elusive or lost.

In many churches, grief becomes a kind of spiritual and emotional background noise—an undercurrent that everyone senses but no one names. But naming it matters. Recognizing grief as a communal and systemic force allows the church to respond with compassion, honesty, and intentionality. It allows leaders and congregants alike to engage change not only strategically, but pastorally—making space for lament, honoring what has been lost, and opening new pathways toward healing and hope.

Grief, in this way, is not the end of the story. It is part of the transformation. But only when we name it. Only when we let it be seen.

Facing Grief Well in Times of Change

If grief is a systemic force in the life of the church, then it deserves a communal, intentional response. Too often, faith communities try to move quickly through discomfort, rushing toward

solutions or silver linings. But grief, especially collective grief, cannot be bypassed—it must be faced. And when it is, the church finds not only healing, but unexpected strength and renewal.

Here are some pathways to face communal grief with intention:

1. **Name the Grief Openly**
Create intentional spaces—worship services, listening sessions, storytelling forums—where people can *name what they are losing*. Don't rush to solutions. Lament is holy work.
2. **Normalize Grief as Part of the Journey**
Teach and preach that grief is not a sign of failure but a sign of *deep investment and love*. Normalize sadness as a healthy spiritual response.
3. **Tend to the Emotional Undercurrents**
Equip leaders to recognize the emotional dynamics beneath surface disagreements. Equip teams with emotional intelligence tools, and possibly engage a transitional consultant or spiritual director.
4. **Mark Endings Well**
Rituals matter. Have closure services, blessing ceremonies, memory walls. Grief needs ceremony to metabolize.
5. **Build a New Story Together**
Grief doesn't disappear—but it transforms when the community co-creates a new purpose or identity. Use visioning exercises, asset mapping, or prayerful discernment to invite people into new possibility.
6. **Practice Communal Lament and Hope**
Incorporate prayers of lament, songs of sorrow and hope, and spiritual practices that help people bring their whole hearts to God. Lean into the Psalms and Good Friday—not just Easter Sunday.

Grief and Change in the Church: A Four-Session Group Study

Recognizing past and current grief is key to moving into a new future. Even entering into a new relationship with the intent to collaborate in ministry comes with grief. So we need to know what will hold us hostage? Why are we resistant to this idea of collaboration (or any new idea)? What follows is a four session group study on grief.

Session 1: Naming Our Grief

Theme: Grief is a faithful response to loss, and naming it is the first step toward healing.

- **Scripture:** Psalm 13; John 11:32–36 (“Jesus wept”)
- **Focus Questions:**
 - What kinds of losses have I experienced in the church?
 - What losses has our community experienced recently or over time?
 - How does Scripture model honest grief?
- **Activity:** Create a “Grief Wall” or “Lament Board” where people can post sticky notes naming personal and communal losses.
- **Spiritual Practice:** Breath prayer or guided lament using Psalm 13.

- **Optional Resource:** Walter Brueggemann on the importance of lament in faith communities.

Session 2: How Grief Moves in a System

Theme: Grief is not just individual—it’s systemic. It shows up in group dynamics, anxiety, and resistance to change.

- **Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 12:12–26 (“If one part suffers...”)
- **Focus Questions:**
 - How does unacknowledged grief affect group behavior?
 - Where do we see signs of systemic grief (conflict, fatigue, confusion)?
 - What has our system lost that we haven’t mourned yet?
- **Activity:** Diagram your system’s grief—use a timeline to name major events and losses in your church’s life.
- **Spiritual Practice:** Silent reflection with journaling: “What loss am I carrying for this community?”
- **Optional Resource:** Family Systems Theory in congregational life (Peter Steinke or Edwin Friedman).

Session 3: Grieving Together with Hope

Theme: We are called to grieve in community, with God and one another—not alone.

- **Scripture:** Romans 12:9–15 (“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”)
- **Focus Questions:**
 - What has helped me in seasons of grief? What has hurt?
 - How can we offer grief hospitality to one another?
 - What does it mean to hope even while we mourn?
- **Activity:** Break into pairs or triads to share stories of personal or church grief and moments of hope or healing.
- **Spiritual Practice:** Group candle lighting or anointing for communal healing.
- **Optional Resource:** “A Grief Observed” by C.S. Lewis (short excerpt).

Session 4: From Grief to Vision

Theme: God meets us in grief—but also invites us toward newness, rooted in what has been.

- **Scripture:** Isaiah 43:18–19; John 20:11–18 (Mary Magdalene weeping at the tomb)
- **Focus Questions:**
 - How might God be doing “a new thing” in our midst?
 - What do we want to carry forward from our past?
 - How can we grieve what was and still move into what is becoming?
- **Activity:** Visioning exercise—create a collage or timeline of “gifts from our past” and “hopes for our future.”

- **Spiritual Practice:** Communal prayer of remembrance and commissioning for what's ahead.
- **Optional Resource:** "Practicing Resurrection" by Nora Gallagher (excerpt on hope after loss).

Sources Informing the Study on Grief and Change in the Church

1. **Edwin H. Friedman – *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue***
 - Friedman's work on family systems theory is foundational for understanding how emotional processes like grief function within congregations, not just individuals.
2. **Walter Brueggemann – *The Prophetic Imagination***
 - Brueggemann emphasizes the necessity of lament as a faithful, prophetic act. He critiques the church's tendency to deny grief and calls for a recovery of the language of loss.
3. **Ronald A. Heifetz – *Leadership Without Easy Answers***
 - Heifetz introduces the idea of "adaptive leadership," which often requires leaders to help communities grieve losses inherent in necessary change.
4. **Susan Beaumont – *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going***
 - Beaumont offers practical spiritual leadership wisdom for congregations navigating liminality—times of transition, uncertainty, and grief. She also incorporates systems theory and spiritual practices.

Additional voices and influences include:

- **C.S. Lewis – *A Grief Observed*** (on personal grief and faith)
- **Nora Gallagher – *Practicing Resurrection*** (grief and renewal through spiritual memoir)
- **Peter Steinke – *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*** (anxiety and systemic disruption)
- The **Psalms** and other biblical texts of lament and transformation.

Part 3: Case Studies of Shared Ministry

Linked Collaboration

A Catskill Case Study

This case study reflects the lived experience of two co-pastors serving two yoked congregations from different denominations, highlighting both the possibilities and tensions of cross-denominational yoked collaboration.

While there are many models for yoked ministry, this reflection focuses on the unique experience of yoking two churches from different denominations. The two churches were Jewett Presbyterian and the Reformed Church of Prattsville. Though the original yoking arrangement had gone for generations (well before the Formula of Agreement), my husband and I had the privilege of serving both congregations as co-pastors. As young ministers, it was an incredible opportunity to build relationships and learn from two distinct denominational traditions.

One of the most surprising blessings of this dual-denominational yoke was the breadth of resources available when the RCA and PCUSA collaborated. The Reformed Church in America brought a strong sense of mission to the partnership, while the PCUSA's Board of Pensions offered generous support for pastors just starting out (though it's important to note that the RCA's Board of Benefits has since changed these requirements considerably). This also came with us being able to deepen relationships in both denominations as we attended both Presbytery and Classis meetings.

Of course, yoked ministry also came with real challenges: leading two worship services every Sunday, juggling two hymnals, and being accountable to two assemblies/judicatories - Schoharie Classis and Albany Presbytery. Over time, we also noticed a theological divergence growing between the two congregations. One was more shaped by a theology of God's judgment and fear, the other by a theology of God's covenant grace. At times we could preach very similar sermons at both churches and folks at the Reformed church would comment and converse about the sermon in edifying ways, while folks in the Presbyterian church would want to argue and disprove various points we had made. These various interactions and differences of theologies and opinions were always intriguing to us, and looking back created a wedge within the yoke.

Our experience took a dramatic turn when Hurricane Irene devastated Prattsville, where we lived and where the Reformed Church was located. We lost much of our home (the parsonage) and a considerable portion of the church building; the entire town was nearly wiped out. Just seven minutes away, Jewett sat untouched—both physically and emotionally. The contrast was stark. We were reeling with trauma, living in a parishioner's home with our toddler, pregnant with our second child, and grieving the loss of our home, personal books, notes from college and seminary, and several irreplaceable family items. Some in the PCUSA congregation said things like, "Well, you didn't lose anything, so you should be okay," not understanding that even though the parsonage wasn't ours, we had lost what felt like everything. That marked yet another wedge in the yoke.

Later, we began participating in what was then called the Ridder Church Renewal Process - now known as Churches Learning Change. We found deep connections and transformation through that experience with a small group from the Reformed church, but despite our efforts, we couldn't get anyone from the Presby church to join. As we shared that journey with Prattsville - grieving, learning, growing, and transforming - a deeper bond formed with the community in Prattsville, and the gap with Jewett widened.

Eventually, the yoke came to an end. It was a painful conclusion to what had been, for several generations of ministers, a creative and faithful way for two small congregations to share pastoral leadership. But the theological distance, the lack of shared experience, the willingness or unwillingness to discern God's future, and the diverging trajectories of the two churches made continuing the partnership unworkable. Still, we remain grateful for what we learned, for the people we met, and for the ways God met us in the midst of both joy and hardship.

In time, Prattsville found a new partner in ministry. They formed a yoked relationship with Roxbury, another RCA congregation in a neighboring town. This new partnership has proven fruitful, as the two churches now share a minister and actively participate together in several forms of ministry and leadership development. Rather than existing as separate yet parallel congregations, they engage collaboratively with one another - worshiping together, discerning together, hold joint consistory meetings, and supporting one another in shared mission and spiritual growth. The connection has brought renewed energy and possibility, showing that even after a painful transition, new forms of faithful collaboration can emerge and flourish when those involved come with an open spirit and a willingness to learn and try something different.

- Rev. Rebecca Town

KEY IDEAS:

- **Cross-denominational yoked ministry offers rich opportunities**
Serving two congregations from different denominations can bring valuable resources, wider relationships, and formative ministry experiences to both the ministers and the churches involved.
- **Theological and contextual differences can create tension**
Diverging theological emphases and the willingness to adapt can lead to increasing strain and misalignment between two yoked churches. Can two churches with different cultures and expectations stay yoked?
- **Separation is painful, yet necessary at times**
Different levels of openness to discerning God's future of ministry for each church can lead to necessary separation.
- **New collaborations can bring renewal**
Separation was able to bring about a fruitful partnership with another church, showing that with openness and shared mission, collaborative ministry can thrive again.

Adapting to the changes around us (and within us) is part of our theology!! Take a moment to reflect on [how you view change](#) or perhaps [what grief you and your church need to process](#) as you venture into new partnerships.

Co-Vocation

The Wine Store Pastor

Living in a small, rural town opens up all sorts of connections. In 2012, a neighboring business owner, Jason, was designing and building a new wine/liquor store across the street from the parsonage. Having connected with Jason a few times over my 5 years living in town, I stopped into the half-built store one day, prior to its opening, just to see how things were going. Jason was not all that tech-savvy, and at the moment was rather frustrated with the point-of-sale program on a new computer. I'm no computer expert, but I've done my fair share of setting up a new computer, and I certainly had no experience with a point-of-sale (POS) program for retail inventory and sales, but I stepped behind the counter to see if I could figure anything out for him. The POS program, however, was intuitive for me, and I was able to accomplish far more than Jason had ever expected. I walked him through the tasks he needed most out of the program. He laughed and offered me a job, which I thought was a joke at the time. However, a few days later when I stopped by again to check on things, he told me he was serious and needed a store manager, he had already forgotten how to do simple tasks on the computer, and wouldn't have any way of teaching employees how to use the system.

I took a week or so to think about this opportunity. Our church's finances were incredibly tight (having to rebuild the parsonage and church building after a major flood), and the other church Becky and I pastored had let us go. It seemed the Spirit was working ahead of us, to keep us in our church and in the community we had grown to love. Thus began a 3 1/2-year chapter of my co-vocational career.

By working *almost* full-time at the wine and liquor store, I was able to serve as minister in the church for several years more than otherwise would have been financially possible for the congregation. In addition, being a pastor in a non-traditional role within the community allowed me to connect with people who would never enter the church building or come to worship with the congregation. Some people found it odd that a pastor would have a discerning taste for whiskeys, gins, pinot noirs, and sauvignon blancs. And yet, patrons of the store grew to trust my recommendations and knowledge. Heck, some regulars even asked me to pray over their lotto tickets, just to "cover all their bases"!

Interested in other details, [see this cheatsheet](#). Through this experience, the church leadership and I came to a better understanding of [how time is given to ministry](#) that several other co-vocational ministers have found helpful.

The Starbucks Pastor

After graduating seminary, I went back to North Carolina to be with my parents who were experiencing health issues. Being an only child and just going through something personal myself, I wanted to be close to my parents during this time. Finding a call at a Reformed Church

in NC was definitely not an option since there was only one Reformed church that already had an installed pastor. So, knowing that I needed a job and one that would be flexible, I applied to and was offered a job at Starbucks as a barista. This was not ideal; however, it worked for me at the time and not to mention, I loved being a barista as I was one all through college. It was one of the best things I have ever done in my life as I truly believed Starbucks saved my life in a way. Working as a barista and then as a store manager, I learned a lot about life, leadership, creating connections and relationships, and believe it or not ministry.

As I wrestled with not finding a call and my situation, the pastor at my home church in NC gave and encouraged me to read the book *The Working Preacher*. In seminary, we spent time learning about and exploring the idea of what church is. Often it is thought that church is the building we come to; however, the scriptures that refer to the early church give us a different understanding of what church can look like. The early church often met in people's homes, and the early disciples travelled to different areas to proclaim the Word. Church was not necessarily tied to the idea of a building; rather church was where two or three were gathered in the name of Christ. This does not mean that our current day church buildings have no place in our ministries, but this early model of church can help broaden our view and understanding of church and ministry.

After reading *The Working Preacher*, looking at the model of the early church, and multiple talks with my pastor, I recognized that I and others were ministering to people every day at Starbucks. Each day was filled with making connections with partners (employees) and customers through listening to them share their experiences and life stories, engaging in curiosity with them, and dialoguing about many different topics and issues. Over time I witnessed a community being built among partners and customers. We became a community that shared in life together as we walked with each other through the pain and grief as well as the celebrations and joys of life.

The community created at the Stonehenge Starbucks in Raleigh, NC by the partners and customers was a place where people were encouraged to use their gifts, cared for each other and people of the greater community, and shared in abundant life together. They did so as they interacted with each other on a daily basis through conversation, extending compassion and grace, helping one another, uplifting and building each other up, studying the bible together, acting justly, and coming together in the challenging and wonderful times. Throughout the years, the partners and customers changed and adapted with the times and needs of the community but also held onto tradition as they continued to create an environment where people were welcomed and felt belonging.

At that store, memorial services were held for long time customers, weddings held and celebrated, Ash Wednesday services and imposition of ashes offered outside on the store patio, angel tree for people in a local nursing home which provided more than we could have ever imagined each year, a workshop taught by a missionary to Ethiopia about the history and tradition of coffee in the Ethiopian culture, and so much more.

The community of the Stonehenge Starbucks truly lived out the Starbucks mission statement, "To inspire and nurture the human spirit one person, one cup, one neighborhood at a time." They truly embodied and exemplified the ways of Christ as they loved and served each other

over a cup of coffee or tea each day. They helped me and others to see that ministry doesn't just happen in a church building but in the ordinary moments of our everyday lives.

Starbucks may be just a place to get coffee for many people or a place not to get coffee due to taste preferences and other reasons. But for many people and myself, Starbucks is so much more than just a coffee shop, it is a place where God's extravagant love is embodied and shared. It all happens through creative ways of collaborating as a community.

Interested in other details, [see this cheatsheet](#).

There's so much potential and opportunities for collaborative ministry!
Take some time to wonder about [discerning collaborative ministry in your calling and context](#).
And perhaps moving from a traditional model of ministry (one church, one minister) [creates anxiety and grief that you and others need to process](#).

Multi-Parish Collaborations

Turning Point Churches Over the Years (1980s- 2025)

In the early 1980s, three Reformed Churches in Schuylerville, NY recognized the need to engage in collaborative ministry to further support the ministries of their churches and to serve the greater Schuylerville community. This led to a gathering of 35-40 representatives made up of the pastors, consistory members, and laity from the three churches to explore the idea of collaborative ministry.

During their meeting, videos were shared to highlight the benefits and the challenges of collaborative ministry. Then space was created for those attending to get curious and ask questions which then was followed by a time of breakout groups to dialogue about collaborative ministry. Afterwards, people were invited to share their concerns and thoughts with the whole group.

At this meeting, no decisions were made immediately about collaborative ministry as this was not something to enter into lightly. Rather, it was a process that would happen over time as each church would need to continue to individually explore collaborative ministry through visioning, discussing, and praying about it. So, the representatives from each church were encouraged to organize a meeting at their own church to share learnings and create space for curiosity, discussion, and vision about collaborative ministry with their congregation.

After all the individual churches had gathered, the representatives from those churches regrouped and came up with a few small ways they could lean into participating in collaborative ministry. A few of the ways they started engaging in this were by creating a shared youth group

and each church hosting different events that created collaboration through shared volunteers to support the events and inviting people from all three churches to attend. The representatives from the churches then returned to their individual churches and presented the collaborative ministry ideas to their consistories and congregations who then prayerfully decided to adopt, support and engage in these new ministry initiatives.

Collaborative ministry was practiced for many years between the three Schuylerville Reformed Churches. However, certain factors brought about change and the collaborative ministry between the three churches adapted and transitioned to become part of an ecumenical clergy and churches group that engages in collaborative ministry.

Over the years, the Schuylerville ecumenical group has collaborated in multiple ways and currently still does to this day. The clergy of the Schuylerville area churches gather monthly to check in and fellowship with each other, share about the different events happening at their churches, study and reflect on scripture together, and plan seasonal collaborative events and ministry for the area churches.

After the clergy meet, they then bring the information about events and worship services back to and share it with their consistories who then are empowered to share it with the congregation through announcements, in the bulletins, and newsletter articles. The leaders and people of the churches wonderfully work together as a team to meet, communicate, and plan the events as well as encourage people to participate by using and sharing their gifts to serve God and others.

Some of the ways the churches have and still do collaborate are an ecumenical bible study, ecumenical Lenten worship services that are held at a different church and led by a different pastor each Wednesday evening through the season of Lent, a Christmas concert that is a benefit to support a different organization or need within the community each year, supporting each church's suppers and fundraiser events, a summer BBQ, etc.

Collaborative ministry within the ecumenical clergy and churches group has helped people create and deepen relationships with each other and build community. In doing so, it has allowed the churches to work together towards a shared vision of being the body of Christ in this place and time.

In 2017, the Regional Synod of Albany created the Fellowship Program which paired newer ministers with churches that had installed seasoned ministers who were like mentors to them. This program allowed the newer minister the opportunity to live into their calling, to create relationships with other ministers and congregants, to learn and grow in their faith and ministry, and to use their God-given gifts to serve God and minister to and with the people of the churches.

The three Schuylerville churches together were offered the chance to participate in the Fellowship Program. Together the churches embarked on a journey of exploring what it would mean to collaborate in the Fellowship Program. The process of discernment alone took collaboration. Letters were written to and shared with the three churches explaining the program and the logistics. Afterwards people from the three churches were invited to meet to hear more about the program through information shared with the church leaders by the Synod

staff. Much like in the past, space was created for people to ask questions as well as voice their thoughts and concerns. After the larger gathering, leaders brought the information back to share with their consistories and congregants. Throughout the process of discernment, there were many conversations held by the leaders and people of the three churches. Together the three churches discerned that the Holy Spirit was calling them to do ministry together and led them to call a newer minister to walk with them. They stepped out in faith, trusting the Lord to lead, provide for, and sustain them as they embarked on a journey that held much uncertainty about what the future would look like as they collaborated in a new way.

I had the privilege of being called as one of the newer ministers to participate in the first round of the Fellowship program. I had the honor and blessing to be called to serve with the three churches in Schuylerville which became known as the Turning Point Churches. We chose this name because the Battle of Saratoga which was fought in Schuylerville was a turning point in the Revolutionary War which led to the surrender of the British and gave a renewed sense of hope to American citizens. We too experienced a renewed sense of hope as we embarked on a journey to embody collaborative ministry in a new way which now was a turning point in our lives and the life of the three churches.

Two representatives plus the ministers from each church with myself made up the Turning Point Churches team that met monthly at first and then quarterly later in our ministry together. Our meetings created space for us to vision and discuss ideas for collaborative ministry. Over time it became a space where we checked in and debriefed about the collaborative ministries and services that we shared in together. We would celebrate what went well and discuss the challenges we faced if there were any. It was important to continually be open to the work of the Holy Spirit by checking in and adapting as needed over time.

Congregants from the three churches were encouraged to share their questions, thoughts, and constructive feedback with any member of the Turning Point Ministries team which then would be appropriately shared at the next meeting unless it was an urgent matter to attend to. The representatives from each church were tasked with sharing our learnings and ideas with their consistories and congregations through discussions, announcements, bulletins, and newsletter articles.

Some of the collaborative ministry ideas we came up with were restarting a collaborative youth group, a community picnic hosted by the three churches to get to know our neighbors better, an evening bible study, leadership retreats, a prayer group, A Room for All information session, women's retreat, outreach opportunities like supporting and volunteering at a local food pantry or non-profit organization that filled backpacks for kids with supplies and food, and three combined worship services in which each church hosted once per year. These were exciting new ways that the diverse body of Christ came together to worship, serve, and glorify God.

Some things we learned throughout our journey together:

As we planned combined worship services, we found a few best practices that might be helpful for others who do so as well. For example, we had three offering plates – one for each church – that were placed at the back of the sanctuary and as people left, they would drop their offering into their churches offering plate that way no church went without an offering one

week. A representative from each church was asked to collect the offering and bring it back to their home church. Another best practice we found helpful was announcing the combined worship service in church multiple Sundays beforehand. Also, we put signs up at our churches that Sunday letting people know that worship was being held at another church with the address of that church.

As we experienced these new ways of collaborating, we found that things were done imperfectly at times which were learning opportunities for us to grow in our ministry together and afforded us opportunities to extend grace along the way. We learned to be more open to the calling and work of the Holy Spirit. As much as we liked planning things, we learned that not everything would go according to what was planned. Instead of being discouraged, criticizing, or giving up when it didn't go how we hoped, we reflected and shifted our perspective to think about how the Spirit was at work in a different way – how the Lord's presence was being revealed to us in that moment.

In sharing some best practices, I am aware that these were/are best practices that worked well for and were gleaned from the context and ministry with the Turning Point Churches. I want to encourage others to explore these practices but also know that they may not work in your context, and that is perfectly fine. In exploring best practices, we learned that it was important to open our minds and hearts to discern how God was calling and guiding us to work together. Often, it meant having faith and trust in God – to not be afraid to try something new and different – to step out of our comfort zones even if it meant just taking baby steps. When we did, we were often surprised by the work of the Spirit in bringing about abundant life in and through us as individuals and as the church. So, give yourself permission to lean into listening for the guidance of the Spirit and to try something new and different even if it means you might fail at it because failure is an opportunity to continue to learn and grow together.

Paul reminds us that there are different parts of the body, and each part has its own unique function. Paul goes on to say that the body is stronger and functions healthier as a whole when each part functions well and is in a symbiotic relationship with one another. We learned instead of grasping and clinging to self-preservation to instead embrace a new way of being which was working together because it made us stronger and cultivated a beautiful community.

Walking with, leading, and observing the three churches in collaborative ministry was a joy as I experienced the beautiful life-giving work of the Holy Spirit working in and through us together. It was a true blessing to visibly witness the diverse body of Christ come together in unity to serve and glorify God. And it was a blessing and a joy to collaborate with other pastors and leaders - to learn and grow together - to support and encourage one another - to uplift and compassionately hold each other accountable - to extend and receive grace from one another - to witness and experience abundant life together.

Collaborative ministry for the Turning Point Churches may not have continued in the same way throughout the years; however, the spirit of collaborative work changed and adapted over the years as the needs of the churches and community shifted. I truly believe that learning to continually change and adapt over time is at the heart of collaborative ministry and allows the Spirit to continually be at work transforming us and the world.

Interested in something more, [see this cheatsheet](#).

Whew! That's inspiring and daunting all at the same time!

Why not take a minute to reflect on how the [spiritual practice of discernment](#) or [the theology of change](#) might help you move beyond those feelings of disillusionment to seeing the Spirit of Christ empowering you and your church?

Albany Classis, Hilltown churches collaboration

Similar to many other areas across NY, there have always been multiple RCA congregations within a few miles of each other. These churches have their unique histories that are intertwined with one another in various ways. Some congregations within geographical areas come to shared collaboration with openness and creativity, while other congregations remain silent to invitations and resistant to working with other churches.

Within Albany Classis a group of churches in the Hilltown communities (Knox, East Berne, Berne, Clarksville, Onesquethaw, Feura Bush, Unionville, and Westerlo) have shared life with one another in all sorts of ways. They've organized shared special worship services for various holidays and seasons, they partner together in local mission work (like a food pantry), and they support one another in other ways. They even formally partnered in the 1970s, with a grant from the Regional Synod, to share an administrator and other ministries for a few years. Some of these churches have had installed pastors (full-time or part-time) over recent years, a few have yoked to share a minister at times, a few have gone for long stints between pastors, while others seem to have grown comfortable with a long-term vacancy of a pastor.

In 2024, due to a number of circumstances, [a proposal was put together](#) by Revs Greg and Rebecca Town for the consideration of 7 consistories to enter into a formal multi-parish collaboration where a group of churches would covenant to partner together for a certain number of years to support one another and to share the expenses for 2 or 3 ministers. Similar to the collegiate model, the BCO contains only one sentence on a multi-parish model: "A multiple parish is a group of local churches sharing the services of one or more installed ministers." - BCO I.1.1.e. So the details of how this gets worked out is between the churches and the classis.

The process of initial conversations was orchestrated to include conversations about the proposal within each consistory to gain feedback and questions, as well as gaining input from the Albany Classis Congregational Support Committee. After this initial phase, a gathering was organized for leaders from all the congregations to talk with one another and discern together how a multi-parish collaboration might work. From this gathering, two working groups were

created to work through concerns and questions particular to 1) structure and logistics, and 2) financial implications for the churches.

Throughout the process there has been learning around how to [lean into the spiritual practice of discernment](#), recognizing that church leaders react to internal/external anxiety by jumping at quick-fixes. In order not to jump at this proposal as a quick-fix, the process was slowed down, giving time for thoughtful conversations and wise creativity.

This is where the process has come, at the time of this writing.

Interested in something more, [see this cheatsheet](#).

Collegiate Model

“A collegiate church is two or more congregations served and governed by a single consistory, constituting one church organization.” – BCO I.1.1.d

And that is about it. When I began to think about collegiate churches and how they might be a way to link smaller churches with struggling and overburden leadership, I was hoping for a bit more. But there is just the one line, and I knew that already.

A collegiate church is not a model that is used very often these days. If people know about it at all, it is because they are familiar with the Collegiate Church Corporation of New York City, which according to their website, is “a single historic church with four city-wide ministries.” But just because this church is the largest, or the best known, does not mean that they need to be the only. In fact, many of the things that have allowed them to survive and thrive for centuries are the very attributes that make this model one that would be useful for smaller, rural churches, especially in light of the denominational restructuring that is underway.

Sharing of Resources

The collegiate church model allows for the sharing of resources across congregations. Of course, the most obvious items will be buildings and bank accounts. But we can think more broadly than that.

A shared Consistory will allow churches to find the members that are best suited to leadership and vision casting to serve as Elders and Deacons, rather than each church having to recruit and beg those whose gifts might be elsewhere just because there is a need to fill the seats. With those best suited to serve, they will be able to best utilize their God-given gifts and bring that vision and passion back to their individual congregations.

Pastoral leadership would also be able to serve and work together. Each church could have its own pastor. Or one minister could serve multiple churches within the system. By making ministers, commissioned pastors, preaching Elders, and retired ministers a team, working for the benefit of multiple churches, rather than each working on their own, they can truly live into

the fullness of their calling. They can help one another as Christ has called those who serve to do, and leadership is often not the best at doing.

The possibilities would also be there for shared Bible Studies, retreats, youth groups, and missions. All of the things that bring life to the church and often lead to struggles in leadership and energy.

And from a practical standpoint, the joining together would allow for sharing of other staff, who could be hired at a higher rate and have the possibility of other benefits being offered. One full-time administrator could do the clerical work for multiple churches from a single, fully stocked office. One or two custodians could make sure that the buildings are clean, safe and ready for use. A groundskeeper or service could rotate among the churches in the summer to care for the grounds. These arrangements are possible now, but a formal joining and commitment to one another makes them more sustainable in the long term, which will allow churches to hire the best people for their work.

A Wider Vision for Ministry

The collegiate system allows congregations to continue to be a worshipping presence in the communities that they have served and know. This means they can each have their own character, style and outreach to those communities. But the joined resources aid them in working with one another and casting larger, common visions. The joint vision will also help each church to identify blind spots in their ministry – areas in which they have been doing things for so long that they no longer see what they are doing or feel a passion for the work.

One of the concerns raised by some small rural churches in the current restructuring conversations in the RCA is that their voices will be lost in a larger Middle Assembly. A collegiate church would give a place for these congregations to continue to be in relationship with one another on a regular basis and still bring their voices to the larger Middle Assemblies. The current BCO provides for each congregation to have one Elder delegate at a Classis meeting, and considering that the Middle Assemblies are currently set up to have delegations in the same way, each congregation will have a voice. In fact, if the several voices have worked together and have a common purpose, they might be able to make a larger impact at the Middle Assembly level than any of them would be able to individually.

The Human Problem

Of course this pooling of resources and combining of voices on Consistory will bring a sense of loss for some. The minister might not be where you would like her or doing what you think he should do. Some of “my church’s” money might get spent to support the ministry of “**that** church.” Every decision might not benefit each congregation the same, or some congregations might flex the power that their money or history brings to control the agenda for the whole.

This is the human problem of any type of church work. The fact is that Christ created the church and placed it in human hands. And ever since, we humans have been dealing with trying to run it as Christ would, without the benefit of being God.

There is no way to anticipate and eliminate everything that might come up. But as a strong marriage is formed when the couple talks out their concerns and their priorities before the wedding, so creating a collegiate church would need much conversation and trust. It also would need the flexibility to change and adjust as things come up that no one could have imagined. A strong foundation of trust in one another and trust in God will be needed to see the best possibilities of all.

In case it all still seems to weird to work, Allan Janssen in his book *Constitutional Theology* reminds us that often large congregations are functioning as collegiate churches. There are several worship services, maybe meeting different needs or containing different groups. They are governed, however by one consistory, who does its best to make decisions that will benefit all under its care even though they might not know or understand everyone in all of the various congregations meeting under their roof.

Janssen asks if this is a contemporary expression of an old system. I would wonder if this is the time for our contemporary church to explore the old expression to deliver the Gospel to this current world.

Intrigued by what you're reading?

Take some time to reflect on something like the [Theology of Change](#) or [Assessing Readiness for Collaboration](#) to delve deeper.

Ecumenical Collaborations

Cary, North Carolina

I have been part of many ecumenical pastors groups over the years. Most of them meet for fellowship. They often do a Thanksgiving Service or a Good Friday Service, often not much beyond that. But in Cary, North Carolina I experienced something far different, an amazing ecumenical ministry.

This ministry began in the 1970's, a quarter century before I became involved. The impetus was the desegregation of schools. At the time, there was no state mandated kindergarten. Many of the white, middle class 5 year olds would go to private kindergartens, children of color often ended up staying home. When 1st Grade started, there was a large disparity in preparedness and often performance.

Several women from a few mainline churches became aware of the issue and decided to do something about it. They worked with the AME church and received space for classes. They tapped the churches that formed the ministers' group for start-up costs. As they neared the end of the first year, these perceptive women realized that there would be another issue in the fall -

clothing might well set their students apart. They also realized that just to give their students clothing was not the best answer. So they went back to their churches and started gathering gently used clothing. They then had a day when parents could buy clothing for 25 or 50 cents. They had also ended up with adult clothing so the parents could buy clothing as well. That was the start of Dorcas Ministries. The key was finding and focusing on a clear ministry need, and serving that need in a Christian, grace-full manner.

Over the years, the second hand store flourished and grew. Volunteers from the churches of the ministerial group would fill a slew of jobs - intaking new donations, sorting and sizing, minor repair, putting it on the shelves and racks, running the cash register, etc. The ministerial group tapped the churches for yearly contributions to pay for a person to run the shop. As years went by, the ministerial contributions continued, but the shop sold enough items to take over most of the salary. Everyone in town knew this ministry as "The Dorcas Shop."

While the need for a separate kindergarten eventually waned, a social ministry grew. Money made in the retail shop, went to pay for the social ministry. There were a few volunteers who were trained to do this ministry. They would deal with the issues that people had, and either connect them to the appropriate government agency, or tap into the Dorcas Shop funds to help them. A food pantry was developed, there were programs to help pay utilities on an emergency basis, rent help, a doctor's bill, tuition for special needs children for nursery school, tuition help for mothers to get job training, etc. This side of the ministry was headed by a part-time person with a social work background. Many churches helped support this ministry, and would refer people who came to the church needing help to this one central agency.

For several years in the early 2000's, I was the clergy representative on the Executive Board for this ministry. I happened to become involved at a critical point in the ministry. The retail side had, by far, the most volunteers. They were pressed for room and sales were growing. Their focus was on getting a bigger space. If I remember the figures, the store had over \$600,000 in yearly income, and the social ministry had a budget of \$200,000. And many of the retail volunteers didn't think that all of that money should be given away.

To some of us, it was evident that the ministry had lost its way, that its original purpose had been forgotten by many. A couple of the original women got re-involved and were elected to the executive board. At the time there was an organization of retired business executives who would help small businesses and organizations. We had a few of them come and lead a couple of retreats. But basically the need was to clarify the purpose and goal of the ministry. Why are we here? Why are we doing this?

There were some tense volunteer meetings, but the ministry got back on track. They focused on meeting the needs of others for Christ. There were some important visible changes that helped emphasize the united purpose of the ministry. When I began, the total ministry had some generic name related to the pastors group; the retail shop was "the Dorcas Store," and the social ministry group just kind of existed. The entire ministry was renamed "Dorcas Ministries," and the two wings were together under the one umbrella and one name. The person who had been the paid manager of the retail shop resigned, and we were able to hire an executive director who had been a manager at IBM. He was over the entire ministry.

When I left town, the ministry was still flourishing and growing. They had spun off a separate ministry for transitional housing that would help the working homeless have a place, provide financial training, and help them start saving for a downpayment on their own apartment. When the “Great Recession” hit, they connected with other groups and developed a retraining and job search program. And they finally got their bigger building. A supermarket had closed in a local strip mall. The Dorcas Ministries was able to attain a loan and buy the entire row of buildings. Habitat for Humanity rented one large space from them. A Christian Health ministry meeting the needs of the underserved took another spot. The entire plaza was becoming a ministry center.

As I look back, the key to the amazing narrative was the purpose - to reach out in the name of Christ to serve those in need. That was their focus when the ministry began. When dollar signs became the focus, the ministry started falling apart. When the purpose was reclaimed, amazing ministry happened. - Rev Charles Wiessner

Southern Columbia County (NY): An Ongoing Case Study

I have been making Gumbo for congregations for over 30 years. I have learned some life lessons and some pastoral lessons from making gumbo. The first learning came to me when I realized that my Chicken Gumbo had many of the same ingredients as my Grandma’s chicken soup. While I generally enjoyed my Grandma’s cooking, I found her chicken soup to be rather bland and tasteless. I much preferred Gumbo. Both were centered on chicken and chicken broth. Both had similar vegetables. There was some change in preparation - flour and oil were made into roux for Gumbo, and became part of the noodles in her soup. And the seasonings were different! My Dutch Grandma relied mainly on salt and pepper. Gumbo has garlic, paprika, hot pepper spice and sauce. I much preferred Gumbo.

I think this is one of the tasks of the church. We need to take the essential doctrines and practices, our chicken and broth and veggies into an ever changing society. For many people today, Grandma’s soup is rather bland and they are not too interested in eating it. Grandma’s church is also seen as bland and tasteless, and they are not too interested in partaking. As congregations we need to try to prepare and “put together” church differently, we need to add a little spice, and allow the ageless nourishment of God’s Word to be tasted and enjoyed by people today.

This lesson was taken to another level when I moved to my present church. There were a handful of vegetarians, and if they were to participate in a Mardi Gras fellowship event I would need to make a vegetarian gumbo. I couldn’t find an appropriate recipe in a cookbook, so I had to start from scratch. What were the essentials that made gumbo gumbo? In Cajun cooking you need the trinity - onions, bell peppers and celery. You need the pope - garlic. So they all went into the recipe. You need the roux, but I have found out that gluten-free flour works pretty well. You need broth, but it can be vegetable broth, not chicken broth. In place of the chicken, I added mushrooms and beets for a little umami flavor; and I added carrots and sweet potatoes to add some color and some bulk. Our vegetarian people like the results and appreciate the effort

to meet their needs. Some of the chicken gumbo people will even have a small bowl of the veggie gumbo for seconds.

I am a part-time contract pastor at a small RCA congregation in a semi-rural part of southern Columbia County. Over the last 7 months we have been talking with a three congregation Lutheran parish in the area. It started with a lunch meeting with a couple of the denominational leaders connected to the Lutheran parish; my original purpose was to pick their brains on how they have been doing collaborative ministry. But the Spirit seemed to be moving over lunch, and we felt led to explore the possibilities of collaborative ministry with the four congregations. That, I think, is one key to collaborative ministry - being open to the working of the Spirit

After the possibility had been discussed by the separate congregations, we next had a joint meeting with the lay leadership of each congregation represented. Communication is important. Communication between the leaders, and the communication between the leadership and the people in the pews. We have had a few glitches, but so far we keep moving forward.

I think the leadership is in the process of making a new gumbo; partially because the old chicken soup wasn't sufficient anymore. We are working on what are the essentials of being Christians, being congregations. Is our main identity being Lutheran or Reformed, or is it more important to be Christians? Can we better serve Christ and our community working together rather than being four little congregations working alone? Are we museums or active parts of the body of Christ? I think the leadership is committed to this process. And at least in my congregation, many people agree with the necessity of working with others, even while their hearts occasionally long for the good old days.

We are moving ahead slowly, step by step. The leadership group has been meeting monthly. The Lutheran churches were invited to our congregation's fellowship soup supper in October. We worshiped together in one of the Lutheran sanctuaries on the first Sundays of Advent. I attended the two Lutheran Christmas Eve services on the morning of the 24th, and we advertised the services for those in my congregation who were looking for a daytime service. That evening we hosted our candlelight service and welcomed the Lutherans who were willing to go out at night.

March 1st was a big day. I officially became the "transition pastor" for the Lutheran Parish of Southern Columbia County. This is not so much "transition" in terms of "intentional interim" but is their nomenclature for a ministry of about 20 hours a month. The job description is sort of like a Classis Supervisor on steroids. I need to be part of the occasional meeting, some pastoral care, working on trying to discern future directions; as well as the steroid part - lining up pulpit supply and musicians for weekly services. I have chosen to commit myself to preaching once a month at the two Lutheran services. I figured that if I am doing pastoral care, they should recognize the face of their pastor, and it also seemed like an important step in perhaps drawing all of the churches closer together. A preaching elder from my congregation has committed to preaching for me on the Sundays I am at the Lutheran services. My preaching is considered over and above the transition pastor duties and is compensated separately. The contract seemed to set reasonable expectations, and included the stipulation that if time continually goes over the 20 hour figure, that a new contract needs to be negotiated.

March 1st also was Mardi Gras/Gumbo night. Last year we had 34 people attend from our church and the area. This year we had 10 from the Lutheran Churches and community people for a total of 70. People were excited. Our congregation had stopped doing Ash Wednesday services because of a small turnout. This year we had one service at one of the Lutheran churches that people from all 4 congregations attended. We are working on some Holy Week services, and have started to plan an outdoor worship at a park for Pentecost.

Going back to being open to the work of the Spirit, the leadership has not tried to present a detailed, comprehensive plan of what the collaboration will look like 2 or 3 years down the road. We just don't know where we are being led. Some congregants (in my church at least) ask questions like "What building(s) will we worship in? What time will worship be?" I can honestly answer, we don't know. We need to see where God is leading us. We have some time to explore working and worshiping together, time for the Spirit to lead us into the future.

I am sure there will be lots of hurdles we will face in the next couple of years. I hope that when I fully retire that the 4 congregations will be able to move forward together. But I can't guarantee that will happen. So we take our small steps together, finding out where the Spirit is leading. And when issues arise, when parishioners raise concerns, it will be important to get back to the core values - what are the essentials, what is our ultimate purpose/calling, how can we best serve Christ and our neighbors? - Rev Charles Wiessner

FOCUS Churches: A Legacy of Faith and Service in Albany, NY

FOCUS Churches was founded in 1967 when four downtown Albany congregations - First Presbyterian, Emmanuel Baptist, Westminster Presbyterian, and Trinity United Methodist - came together in response to the era's sweeping social and urban changes. The construction of a new state office complex was transforming the cityscape, while the civil rights movement and anti-war protests were reshaping the social landscape. Recognizing that they faced many of the same challenges, these churches united under a simple yet powerful mission: *"to do together what we could not do alone."*

What began as a partnership in faith quickly expanded into direct action. In 1976, the FOCUS Food Pantry was launched, followed by the Breakfast Program in 1984 - both initially intended as temporary solutions to growing food insecurity. Decades later, these programs remain at the heart of FOCUS's mission, sustained by dedicated volunteers from member churches and the wider community. Advocacy has also become an essential pillar of their work, addressing systemic issues of poverty, hunger, and homelessness. For FOCUS, charity and justice go hand in hand.

Over the years, the FOCUS Churches have deepened their collaboration in various ways, including:

- **Shared Worship** – Joint services featuring guest preachers, special music, and Easter Dawn celebrations.

- **Faith Formation & Education** – Book studies, retreats, Advent and Lenten devotionals, Non-Violent Communication workshops, and partnerships with the Capital Region Theological Center.
- **Community Gardening & Food Justice** – Initiatives such as the FOCUS Community Garden, Harvest for the Hungry, Grow an Extra Row, and Gardening in a Bucket.
- **Addressing Community Needs** – Efforts like the Task Force for Humanity in Justice (inspired by the Attica uprising), Kairos Counseling Center, Albany Area Housing Opportunities, and the AIDS Care Team.
- **Interfaith & Social Justice Collaboration** – Partnering with organizations such as the Hunger Action Network of NYS, Labor-Religion Coalition, Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless, and others.
- **Programs for Children & Families** – Offering resources such as Singing City Camp, Project Love, Computers for Kids, Stars & Bells, and school supply drives.

Today, FOCUS Churches has grown to include six covenant churches and five interfaith affiliates, expanding its reach and impact. Current programs continue to reflect its mission, including the Interfaith Food Pantry, the First Church of Albany Food Pantry, the Winter Breakfast Program, Breakfast Express, and ongoing advocacy to combat hunger and poverty. Gardening in a Bucket remains a staple, encouraging healthy eating habits and self-sufficiency.

Through faith-driven service and unwavering collaboration, FOCUS Churches remains a beacon of hope and action in Albany, demonstrating the power of unity in addressing both immediate needs and long-term justice.

WOW! Think of the possibilities of partnering with other churches! How about discerning the partners (or potential partners) God has already placed around you with [this Mapping Exercise](#)? Or consider what it might take to [discern the needs](#) within your community.

Interfaith Collaboration

Brookville Multifaith Campus

In 1732, the residents of what was then known as Wolver Hollow came together with a shared vision—to build a church. Thus, the Brookville Church was established on Long Island. The earliest records, all written in Dutch, reflect the heritage of the European settlers who called this area home. Over the centuries, the building has undergone repairs and renovations, yet it continues to preserve its colonial-era charm.

Nearly 300 years later, in 2013, a new chapter of inclusivity and cooperation was written with the dedication of a sign celebrating the unity of four diverse faith communities that now share

the same sacred space. This unique collaboration includes a Christian church, a Jewish synagogue, a Muslim study and prayer group, and an interfaith community that embraces both Jewish and Christian traditions, providing dual-faith education for their children. Within this shared space, Jewish and Christian households worship freely, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and spiritual harmony.

While each faith group maintains its distinct identity and traditions, they have also come together under a singular umbrella—Brookville Multifaith Campus. Officially recognized as a nonprofit organization in 2020, the campus serves as a model for interfaith unity. Beyond worship and religious observances, the communities engage in shared experiences, including interfaith life cycle ceremonies and occasional joint celebrations. This collaboration has created an environment where cross-cultural and multifaith friendships flourish, making the Brookville Multifaith Campus a shining example of coexistence and mutual respect.

Mission-Oriented Collaboration

Overview:

Planning and participating in a mission trip—whether domestic or international—can be a significant and transformative ministry opportunity. However, for many congregations, the cost, logistics, and volunteer burnout make it difficult to sustain this kind of initiative alone. A collaborative model allows churches of all sizes and capacities to participate meaningfully, regardless of whether they send travelers.

This model outlines how churches can work together to organize and support a shared mission trip, offering multiple entry points for involvement that go beyond simply traveling to a mission site.

Why Collaborate on a Mission Trip?

- **Shared Resources:** Budgeting, planning, and leadership responsibilities are spread across congregations.
- **Increased Participation:** More people can be involved in various roles—travelers, prayer partners, fundraisers, educators.
- **Stronger Witness:** A visible sign of unity and partnership across the broader Church.
- **Deepened Relationships:** Partnerships built during the trip often lead to future shared ministry.

Key Elements of the Collaborative Mission Trip Model

1. Form a Planning Team

Invite representatives from each participating congregation to join a planning team. This team should include individuals with experience in logistics, budgeting, communications, and spiritual formation. Shared leadership prevents burnout and fosters buy-in across all churches.

2. Identify Mission Partners and Purpose

Choose a mission site and partner organization—either locally or abroad—that aligns with shared values and ministry goals. Work together to discern a purpose that is meaningful and appropriate for the context (e.g., construction, education, medical, relational ministry).

3. Offer Multiple Levels of Participation

Not every church needs to send travelers. Create diverse and accessible ways for all congregations to engage:

- **Send Participants:** Individuals or small teams from each church.
- **Provide Financial Support:** Through church giving, special offerings, or fundraisers.
- **Host Fundraising Events:** Meals, silent auctions, raffles, etc.
- **Offer Prayer Support:** Match travelers with prayer partners from participating churches.
- **Share Skills or Resources:** First aid kits, tools, crafts, handmade items, or care packages.
- **Participate Locally:** Offer a parallel “Mission at Home” day or week for those who can’t travel.

4. Prepare Together Spiritually

Hold joint gatherings, Bible studies, or prayer services in the months leading up to the trip. Share liturgies, devotionals, and stories across congregations to foster a sense of shared mission.

5. Commission and Send

Include a collaborative commissioning service before departure. Invite all congregations to participate—whether in person or virtually—and use a unified liturgy for the blessing and sending of the team.

6. Return and Share the Story

After the trip, invite participants to speak at each of the partner churches. Create a slideshow or video testimony that can be shared regionally. Consider hosting a shared worship service or potluck to celebrate and reflect on what was learned.

7. Sustain the Relationship

Use the mission trip as a starting point—not the endpoint—for ongoing collaboration. This might include:

- Planning another trip in the future
- Starting a shared mission fund
- Exploring new local outreach opportunities together
- Continuing spiritual formation or youth partnerships

Benefits of a Collaborative Mission Trip

- **Flexibility:** Churches of all sizes and financial means can be involved in meaningful ways.
- **Inclusivity:** Older adults, youth, families, and those who cannot travel can still participate fully.

- **Multiplication of Impact:** Every church extends its reach and influence through shared effort.
 - **Sustainability:** Ongoing collaboration becomes easier with each successful partnership.
-

Very often, just the thought of having to give up or share a ministry with another organization means [confronting the loss and the grief](#) that comes with these changes.

Nesting Ministries

Blooming Grove Diaper Program: A Collaborative Ministry

The **Blooming Grove Diaper Program** is a **community-driven ministry** that operates within **Blooming Grove Reformed Church**, serving families in need by providing essential diapering supplies. This program is **nested within the church's broader mission**, reflecting our commitment to serving our neighbors with dignity, care, and hospitality.

A Ministry Within a Ministry

The Diaper Program is not a standalone initiative; it is **a ministry within a ministry**—a vital part of the church's outreach efforts but also a collaborative effort that extends beyond our walls. While it is housed within Blooming Grove Reformed Church, it thrives through **partnerships with local organizations, donors, and volunteers** who share our vision for supporting families.

Collaboration & Community Partnerships

At the heart of this program is **collaboration**. We recognize that no single church or organization can meet every community need alone, so we intentionally partner with:

- **Local food pantries** and social service agencies that help connect families to additional resources.
- **Nonprofits and community organizations** that support maternal and child health.
- **Businesses and donors** who contribute funding or diaper supplies to sustain the program.
- **Volunteers from within and beyond the church** who help with distribution, organization, and outreach.

How the Program Works

The Diaper Program operates on a **scheduled distribution model**, ensuring that families receive the assistance they need in a **dignified and organized manner**. Families sign up in advance, and distribution days are carefully planned to provide a welcoming, supportive experience.

As a **nested ministry**, this program is an expression of the church's larger mission but remains flexible enough to **expand through partnerships, evolve based on community needs, and integrate into other forms of outreach**.

Why This Matters

Diaper need is a significant challenge for many families, impacting the well-being of infants and young children. By addressing this basic necessity, we are:

- Reducing **stress for families** who struggle to afford diapers.
- Creating **opportunities for deeper connections** between the church and the community.
- Demonstrating **God's love through practical action**—meeting immediate needs while opening doors for broader support and engagement.

A Model of Collaborative Ministry

The Blooming Grove Diaper Program exemplifies **collaborative ministry**—where a church **leverages community partnerships** to create a greater impact than it could alone. It serves as a model for how churches can **embrace shared ministry**, ensuring that resources, relationships, and compassion come together to meet real needs.

By **nesting** this ministry within the church while building strong **external collaborations**, we create **sustainable, community-centered outreach** that reflects the ongoing work of God's love and justice in the world.

Think of the possibilities of partnering with other churches or creating a nesting ministry within your church! How about discerning the partners (or potential partners) God has already placed around you with [this Mapping Exercise](#)?

Or perhaps you need to do some work around [accessing the needs within your community](#) or [discern what sort of partnership](#) could create a nesting ministry for your church?

Community Mission-Oriented Collaborations

A Food Pantry for All: A Community-Driven Initiative

With a commitment to supporting the well-being of the Helderberg community, three organizations—Knox and Thompson’s Lake Reformed Church, Helderberg Family and Community Organization (HFCO), and Hugs for the Hilltowns—came together to launch a food pantry. This initiative repurposed the largely unused Thompson’s Lake Church facility into a vital community resource for food security.

This case study outlines the step-by-step process of bringing this vision to life, from introducing the concept to the church leadership and congregation to working alongside existing nonprofits and volunteers to make the pantry a reality.

Phase 1: Assessing and Introducing the Concept

Engaging the Church Leadership (Consistory)

The idea of a food pantry was first introduced to the church's consistory after the pastors and a few church leaders had discussed the growing needs within the community with other organizational leaders. The discussion focused on:

- The opportunity to repurpose the underutilized Thompson’s Lake facility for community benefit.
- Gaining insights on the growing need for food security in the Helderbergs and how other food pantries in the area have all seen increases.
- The potential partnership with HFCO and HUGS to ensure efficient operations and distribution.

After presenting the vision and discussing logistical concerns, the consistory approved the initiative, recognizing it as an extension of the church’s mission to serve the community.

Introducing the Concept to the Congregation

Once the leadership was on board, the next step was bringing the idea to the congregation. This was done through:

- Announcements during worship services.
- Discussions in church newsletters and bulletins.
- Information sessions (congregational meetings) to answer questions and encourage participation.

The congregation initially had questions, such as whether the church would continue supporting the existing local food pantry and whether the facility would generate rental income. However, once these concerns were addressed, the initiative was met with enthusiasm, with many members eager to contribute through volunteering, donating food, and offering financial support.

Phase 2: Partnering with Existing Nonprofits

Recognizing the importance of collaboration, the church partnered with two key local nonprofits:

- **HFCO (Helderberg Family and Community Organization)** – This group played a crucial role in conceptualizing the food pantry and helped connect the initiative with broader community support.
- **HUGS** – As an existing food pantry, HUGS provided expertise in food distribution and storage, ensuring that collected food reached those in need efficiently.

These partnerships allowed the new food pantry to integrate seamlessly with existing resources and avoid duplicating efforts.

Phase 3: Laying the Groundwork

Creating a Visual Identity

A volunteer stepped forward to design a logo and a layout for the pantry space, giving the project a professional and welcoming identity. This branding helps communicate the mission and build recognition within the community.

Setting Up the Space

With the Thompson's Lake facility selected as the pantry location, efforts began to prepare the space:

- **Shelving Acquisition** – The team worked diligently to collect shelving units to organize food donations. Local stores found out about the projects and made donations.
- **Space Layout** – The pantry layout was designed to maximize accessibility and efficiency.

Demo Days & Community Engagement

To build momentum, the team organized **demolition days**, allowing community members and volunteers to visit the space, learn about the project, and offer feedback. These events also served to ready the space and served as opportunities to recruit more volunteers and gather additional support.

Outcome & Future Goals

While significant progress has been made in preparing the space, the food pantry is still in the development phase as the team continues securing grants to revitalize the building. These funds will support necessary renovations to ensure the facility is fully functional and accessible for food distribution.

Looking ahead, the key next steps include:

- Completing Facility Upgrades – Using grant funding to improve the space, including structural repairs, shelving installations, and storage solutions.
- Launching Food Collection & Distribution – Once the facility is ready, efforts will shift to actively collecting and distributing food in collaboration with HUGS and HFCO.
- Expanding Community Engagement – Continuing to build awareness and recruit additional volunteers and donors to sustain the pantry long-term.

This initiative has already demonstrated the power of community collaboration, and with ongoing support, the food pantry will soon become a fully operational resource, ensuring greater food security for the Helderberg Mountains region.

There are so many issues and problems in the world that we can and should be working to alleviate and heal. Knowing when we're facing [technical problems or adaptive issues](#) might help as we [discern our part in the healing work](#) of the Spirit.

Part 4: Ending Well - Continuing God's Work through Legacy Partnerships

A Theological Perspective on the Death of a Church

In the life of faith, we proclaim that **death is not the end**. This truth is at the heart of the Gospel. Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, teaches us that what seems like an ending can, in fact, be the beginning of something new. *"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"* (John 12:24).

This is true not only for individuals but also for communities—including churches. The reality is that many churches today face closure due to financial constraints, declining attendance, or

demographic shifts. But just as resurrection followed Christ's death, so too can new life emerge from the legacy of a church that has reached the end of its gathered ministry. The question we must ask is not simply how to avoid death, but how to die well—how to ensure that the work of the church continues, even if the congregation as it once existed does not.

Dying Well: Leaving a Legacy of Ministry

Too often, when a church closes, its assets default to the judicatory with little input from the congregation on how its resources could continue to serve the community. But what if we approached closure differently? What if the death of a church became an intentional act of resurrection?

Rather than simply dispersing a congregation and selling off a building, churches can plan for their legacy, ensuring that their resources—physical, financial, and spiritual—continue to serve the community. The land, the relationships, and the history of a congregation do not have to disappear. Instead, they can be transformed into something that continues to reflect God's love and mission in that place.

Biblical Foundations for Leaving a Legacy

Scripture is filled with stories of faithful transitions, where one season ends so that another can begin:

- Moses and Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:7-8) – Moses does not enter the Promised Land, but he ensures that the people of Israel have leadership and a vision for what comes next.
- Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:9-15) – Elijah's prophetic ministry does not end with him; he passes his mantle to Elisha, ensuring that God's work continues.
- Jesus and the Disciples (Matthew 28:19-20) – Jesus' earthly ministry ends, but his disciples are empowered to carry on his mission.

In each of these cases, faithful transition is not about loss but about preparing for new leadership, new expressions of mission, and new ways for God's work to unfold.

Practical Ways to Continue the Mission of a Closing Church

A church that is nearing the end of its life has the opportunity to ask: What is the best way to ensure that our ministry continues, even if we as a congregation no longer exist in the same way? There are several ways to approach this faithfully:

1. **Sell the Building to a Nonprofit with a Mission that Aligns with the Church's Values**
 - If the congregation is closing, but the church building still has value, selling it to a nonprofit—such as a community center, childcare facility, or outreach ministry—ensures that the space remains dedicated to God's work.
 - This allows the church's legacy to continue in a tangible way, providing vital resources to the community rather than simply being sold to the highest bidder.
2. **Convert the Church into a Chapel for Ongoing Worship**

- The church may no longer be able to sustain full-time ministry, but the building can still be used as a chapel space for worship, even under new ownership.
 - A congregation can arrange for occasional services, weddings, funerals, or other gatherings, ensuring that the spiritual life of the church continues even if the organizational structure changes.
3. **Create an Endowment or Legacy Fund to Continue Community Outreach**
 - If a church has financial assets, creating an endowment fund dedicated to local ministry projects, scholarships, or food assistance ensures that resources continue to bless the community long after the church's closure.
 - This could be managed by the judicatory with clear guidelines, or by partnering with local nonprofits to fund specific initiatives.
 4. **Merge with Another Congregation but Retain a Local Mission Presence**
 - Sometimes, churches cannot sustain themselves alone but can merge with another church while maintaining local outreach efforts.
 - This might mean joining with a nearby congregation but using the original church property for mission work, such as a food pantry, refugee resettlement, or youth programs.
 5. **Gift the Building to a Community Agency with a Commitment to Continued Ministry**
 - Rather than selling the church building, congregations can donate it to an organization committed to serving the community, such as a housing initiative, social services program, or counseling center.
 - This ensures that the church's physical space remains dedicated to healing, justice, and hospitality.

Why This is a Deeply Pastoral Act

The closing of a church is often painful. It carries grief, loss, and sometimes a sense of failure. But ending well is a deeply pastoral act. Just as we care for people as they transition from life to death, we must care for churches as they reach the end of their journey.

- **Honoring the Grief:** Congregations need space to mourn, to remember their history, and to name what they are losing. A liturgical process—a closing worship service, a gathering to share stories, or a symbolic passing of the mission—can help provide closure.
- **Naming the Legacy:** Instead of seeing closure as failure, we can help churches recognize the impact they have made—the baptisms, the meals served, the lives transformed.
- **Ensuring Resurrection:** Just as Jesus' death was not the end of the story, the death of a church does not mean that God's work in that place is over. It simply means it is taking a new form.

When churches close without intention, without planning, and without care, the loss is not just emotional—it is a loss of potential, a missed opportunity for continued ministry. But when churches die well, they leave behind a legacy that carries forward God's mission in new ways.

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” – 1 Corinthians 3:6

The work of any single church is part of a larger story. We plant seeds, knowing that our faithfulness is not in preserving an institution but in ensuring that God’s work continues. By thinking creatively, embracing collaboration, and planning for the future, churches that close can still bear fruit for generations to come.

A Case Study of Collaboration and Legacy

The first definition of “legacy” in my old Webster’s Dictionary is “a gift by will, especially of money and personal property.” I know that the dictionary is using “will” in terms of a legal document normally connected to death. But for our discussion it is more useful to think of “will” in terms of “conscious choice or decision” about what a congregation chooses to do with its resources of property and finances. Our congregations all leave legacies in a broader sense beyond property and money, often without it being a conscious choice or decision.

My home church, the First Reformed Church of Kalamazoo, had occupied the corner of Academy and Church streets for over 150 years when the Classis came in and transferred the members to Second Reformed and gave the building to a new church start community. I don’t think any of the members viewed this as a legacy they were giving to a new body of believers. It was not a choice they made after a period of spiritual discernment. It was a decision someone else forced on them. So how can congregations collaborate to provide a legacy?

I have had the experience of selling church buildings, once in a congregation on the way up and another time in one on the way down. In both cases, zoning issues were making it hard to purchase property and build a new house of worship. So the decision was made, that if at all possible we wanted to sell to another congregation, not to a commercial entity. In the first instance we connected with a Messianic Jewish Congregation that we were able to collaborate with and developed a continuing relationship with them. It felt good to sell the building to them and people were happy that “their building” was being used by others - a legacy. In the other case, the congregation had been “mothering” a non-denominational Hispanic congregation. Over a period of several years the Hispanic congregation began to flourish. When the Reformed congregation needed to downsize, it ended up that the Hispanic congregation was able to buy the building. There was pain and grief in having to leave the building, but there was also a positive sense that there was a legacy being left behind.

The key to collaboration and legacy is to make it a conscious decision. Like mentioned elsewhere in this handbook, discernment is the foundational step. What is the purpose of our congregation(s)? What is God calling us to do? How can we best use the resources we have to serve Christ? The next step is to discern the needs of the community you are serving. This step calls for more than sitting in a church basement and talking about it among yourselves. Many city and county offices have a variety of demographic needs that may be helpful. A church could send members to walk through their neighborhoods, asking questions of people about what needs they experience or are aware of. Once you settle on a need or two that your resources might help meet, then you need to discern what other non-profits or agencies that you might collaborate with to start meeting those needs and leave a legacy. And then begins the work of establishing this ministerial legacy.

The Reformed Church in Hudson, NY has experienced a considerable drop in worship and membership, but still has significant resources of property and building. A congregational member or two along with the contract pastor felt a calling to serve the needs of the homeless within the community. They visited other “rescue missions” and shelters. Then they collaborated with a county agency and the area ministerial group. They found some grant money and used some of their own to refurbish and repurpose much of their building. They began serving as a “warming shelter” to provide a meal and a bed and showers during extremely cold nights. The program quickly began to expand to a more permanent program run in conjunction with the town and county. Supervision during the day, evening meals, and other tasks are done by a collaboration of agencies, private businesses, and volunteers (many from other congregations). They still have a very small worshipping community, but by collaborating with the others they are building a meaningful legacy.

Many times, collaborative ministry involves two or more congregations worshipping and serving together. At some point the issue becomes do we really need multiple buildings to heat and care for. My first congregation was a Methodist-Reformed Federation. I fortunately started 30+ years into the process. As an “outside” observer I came to understand that one factor that had helped the federation succeed was that one of the sanctuaries had burned down a few years into the collaborative ministry. That was a blessing but rather drastic! A better way to deal with the issue is to go back to those early discernment questions - who are we and what are we called to do? And then, what kind of legacy do we want for our beloved spiritual home? How can we use this wonderful resource God and our predecessors gave us to further the work and ministry of Christ? Then start looking for a collaborative partner(s) who share a similar dream and can put the building and property to good use. Food pantries, childcare, counseling

centers, nonprofit offices may all be possibilities to take over or use the building and grounds. If you have land, it might be used for senior housing or subsidized units. Your legacy can continue serving the community, even when you are no longer in the building.

At a recent event I was introduced to the St. Paul's Center in the Capital Region. In 2001 St Paul's Lutheran Church in Rensselaer was merged with St Timothy's in North Greenbush. The question became "what to do with the St Paul's building?" The congregation answered that question by voting unanimously to donate the building so that it could provide shelter for families experiencing homelessness. Today their legacy is carried on through the "St Paul's Center." The church building is now providing 19 beds for homeless families as well as training, case management, and support to move these families through the process of achieving their own housing. The program has expanded and now has a program that provides bridge housing and support as a first step into housing. A senior housing facility is being renovated for that population.

Does your church have a will, a will to continue ministry and serving Christ and the community? Are you building a legacy, "a gift by will, especially of money and personal property?" - Rev Charles Weissner

Part 5: Best Practices for Collaborative Ministry

COMING SOON!!!

- Building Trust
 - Activities to foster trust between congregations and leaders.
 - Tips for resolving conflicts.
 - Setting Clear Expectations
 - Sample Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs).
 - Guidelines for Healthy Communication.
 - Navigating Challenges
 - Strategies for addressing cultural differences, theological diversity, and logistical hurdles.
 - Ongoing Grief work
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Part 6: Expanding Collaborative Ministry

COMING SOON!!!

- Sharing stories of bright spots
 - Encouraging nearby congregations or pastors to join existing collaborations.
 - Building a vision for growth
 - Sustaining the Ministry
 - Evaluation tools to assess effectiveness and health
 - Stories of long-term success
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Part 7: Other Practical Resources

A Cheatsheet for Collaborative Ministry

One of Robert Schuller's ministerial mantras was "find a need and fill it." It sounds pretty simple and straightforward, but the reality is significantly more difficult! That is especially true if you want the ministry to truly fill a real need and to have that ministry be a sustainable entity into the future. Here are some things to consider when you are looking for an ecumenical ministry.

Discerning the Need:

1. Be open to the Spirit, spend time in prayer. Open your eyes and your heart to the neighborhood or wider area in which you seek to minister.
2. You can learn a lot just by walking around the area with an open mind. Talk to others who are doing ministry in the area, see what needs they feel aren't being met. Similarly, talk to agencies and find out what their experience is.
3. Winnow down the possibilities to one or two actions you can take. Spend time in prayer seeking God's guidance and direction.
4. Define the principles and priorities of your proposed ministry. Be able to communicate your vision and principles in writing; be able to articulate them verbally so that when you are recruiting support you can share your vision clearly.

Evaluating the vision:

1. Can you make a difference in filling the selected need in this ministry area?

2. Is the need a result of a larger issue? Does that larger issue need to be addressed, or can the selected need be ministered to separately?
3. What resources do you need?
 - a. Physical: space, equipment, furniture, office, etc.
 - b. Financial: what do you need to start up? Monthly? First year? Are there grants available?
 - c. Human: how many people do you need to accomplish this ministry?

Preparing to Fill the Need

1. Start networking and finding collaborative partners - Individuals; congregations; agencies or groups working on the same or related issues. Maybe you can join together to more effectively meet the need. Make sure everyone understands and agrees with your principles and purposes.
2. Start identifying and procuring the resources previously identified.

Filling the Need

1. Start serving God and others. You may not feel 100% ready, you may never feel fully ready, but there comes a time to get started doing ministry. It is easier to steer a bicycle once it is in motion than when it is standing still with your feet firmly planted on the ground.
2. Continually evaluate your ministry. Use the original vision and the principles and purposes you articulated. Are the needs being met? Are we doing everything in a way that fulfills our principles and purposes? If not, what do we need to change? Are there related issues that affect the needs that we may have to address.

Factors Running through Everything:

1. Prayer
2. Communication: within the groups and individuals collaborating. With your target “clients” (“build it and they will come” only works in movies). With the larger community.
3. Evaluate constantly. As you look back, as you make new decisions:
 - a. are we meeting the need; does this help us meet the need
 - b. are the principles and purposes being upheld or impeded

A Cheatsheet for Co-vocational Interest

What you need to know about co-vocational ministry?

When calling a co-vocational minister — when a pastor serves in ministry while also working in a “secular” job or in another non-profit — a church needs to understand and address several unique aspects of this type of ministry. Conversely, when a minister is considering the need or

opportunity for working co-vocational, they need to consider many things before jumping into it.

There are many different scenarios that could arise. A pastor's other job might require them to be on-site for specific days and times, and therefore they cannot readily shift their schedule to allow for pastoral emergencies or whatnot. Or a minister might have their own business (they're their own boss), which may allow them more flexibility. Or a pastor has a boss at their other job who understands their role as a pastor and is somewhat flexible (or they *don't* understand at all and are uncompromising with work schedules). Or a minister might have to commute a distance to another job to help support their household income.

There are also a number of considerations that need to be taken into account when a church is searching for a part-time minister where co-vocationality is being considered. Co-vocation adds an extra level of discernment and readiness for both the minister and the congregation. What other job experience or training does the minister have that would allow them to find an additional job (and would those jobs be within the community or a distance away)? If the pastor lives outside the community and is being asked to move close to the church, will anyone in the church help the minister make connections in their search for an additional job? How will a search committee and/or consistory clarify the church's needs, while remaining flexible with candidates?

Here are some key considerations:

1. Clarify the Role and Expectations

- a. **Time Commitment:** Understand that the minister's time is divided between ministry and their other job. Set realistic expectations for availability, including evenings and weekends. Understand that the pastor likely won't be available for all congregational emergencies, and that these will need to be handled by others in the church or wait until the pastor is able to take it on.
- b. **Responsibilities:** Clearly define the scope of the minister's duties to avoid overloading them. Prioritize tasks that align with their gifts and the church's needs. Consider the abilities and gifts of others to lessen the load on the minister in various areas of ministry (preaching elders, stewardship team, etc).

2. Flexibility and Support

- a. **Scheduling:** Be flexible with meeting times and events to accommodate the minister's other job, just as scheduling meetings accommodates other's jobs. It is likely that there is more flexibility with their pastoral responsibilities than with their other job. See also some insights on [why a minister should not be asked to log their hours](#).
- b. **Work-Life Balance:** Encourage the minister to maintain a healthy balance between their vocational roles, personal life, and ministry. If extra tasks are needed for church (like a funeral), be sure to lighten the pastor's tasks the next week.

3. Compensation and Benefits

- a. **Fair Compensation:** Even though the minister is part-time with the church, ensure they are compensated fairly for their work, including benefits and other necessary compensation (like mileage and professional development, etc).

- b. Co-vocational Considerations: Recognize that their other job might not cover ministry-related expenses, health insurance, benefits, or time off for church responsibilities (like attending denominational meetings or continuing ed programs). On the other hand, their other position might cover health insurance, which could be a savings to the church, but shouldn't be expected.
- 4. Communication and Boundaries**
- a. Clear Communication: Establish open and regular communication between the minister, church leadership, and the congregation. There also must be clear communication of the pastor within their other job (with their boss or co-workers). Would a death in the church necessitate the pastor taking a personal day off their other job?
 - b. Boundaries: Respect the minister's boundaries regarding their secular job and personal time (their sabbath days and days off).
- 5. Congregational Understanding**
- a. Educate the Church: Help the congregation understand the nature of co-vocational ministry, including its benefits (e.g., broader community connections, allowing the minister's tenure to be extended) and limitations (e.g., limited availability).
 - b. Manage Expectations: Ensure members understand the minister's dual roles and do not expect the minister to be available on a full-time basis.
- 6. Leverage the Minister's Secular Work Appropriately**
- a. Community Connection: A co-vocational minister often has natural connections to the broader community through their secular job. Leverage these relationships carefully and appropriately, so as not to cause undue stress within their work relationships.
 - b. Practical Insights: The minister's experiences in a secular or non-profit workplace can bring fresh perspectives and practical applications to their leadership and to the ministry of the entire congregation.
- 7. Leadership Development**
- a. Shared Leadership: Develop lay leadership competencies to support the minister by handling what church-related ministry responsibilities can be given over, such as discipleship, stewardship, or assisting in pastoral care.
 - b. Succession Planning: Build a team-oriented culture where ministry does not depend solely on the co-vocational minister.
- 8. Legal and Tax Considerations**
- a. Tax Compliance: Understand the tax implications of co-vocational ministry (for both the minister and the church), particularly regarding housing allowances, self-employment taxes, and other benefits.
 - b. Employment Call/Contract: Provide a clear agreement outlining expectations, compensation, and terms of employment that align with standards set in place by the middle assembly.
- 9. Spiritual and Emotional Support**
- a. Encouragement: Regularly affirm and support the minister in their calling. Ensure the church provides spiritual and emotional support as appropriate, recognizing the challenges of balancing multiple roles.
 - b. Clergy Self-Care: Pastor, you know what this is, please do it.

10. Vision Alignment

- a. **Shared Mission:** It helps immensely if the minister's vision for their role aligns with the church's mission and values.
- b. **Mutual Investment:** Recognize that a co-vocational minister is deeply invested in both their ministry and their other workplace.

By addressing these factors, a church can foster a healthy, productive relationship with a co-vocational minister and maximize their impact on the congregation and community.

A Cheatsheet for Links, Yokes, and Multi-parish Ministry

What you need to know about linking, yoking, or multi-parish, collaborative ministry...

When a minister serves multiple congregations, it requires intentional planning, communication, and resource management to ensure the needs of each congregation (and the ministers) are met effectively.

Here are some key considerations and strategies:

1. Discernment

- a. **Be Open and Curious:** Lay aside past practices around the “search process” and work toward openness in conversation as all parties share possibilities and options.
- b. **Recognize Resistance:** Stop and wonder with one another what's behind statements like, “We did that in the past and it didn't work” or “We've always done it this way”, or “We don't want to share our pastor”, or the automatic agree/disagree responses.
- c. **Clarify Values and Purpose:** What gets/keeps us partnering in mission? Why do this? What are we shooting for?

2. Leadership Development

- a. **Build Relationship Skills:** All key leaders must be involved in developing healthy communication, personal mindfulness, and emotional intelligence so that present and future anxieties can be addressed in appropriate ways. This is ongoing!
- b. **Lay Leadership:** Empower lay leaders to take on responsibilities and projects, especially for tasks that don't require ministerial presence.
- c. **Ongoing Training:** Provide leadership training and learning opportunities for everyone to increase their competence and effectiveness.

3. Communication

- a. **Centralized Communication:** Use tools like shared calendars, newsletters, or group messaging apps to keep all leaders informed.

- b. Liaison Team: Appoint representatives from each consistory to communicate needs and updates and feedback to the minister and to one another.
 - c. Congregational Communication: Openly share roles and expectations with the congregation, receive feedback with humility, work toward transparency. If any concerns or questions arise, be sure the Liaison Team is ready to help.
- 4. Clear Agreements and Expectations**
- a. Role Clarity: Establish clear responsibilities for the minister and each congregation, as well as any key leaders taking on specific roles (ie- Preaching Elders).
 - b. Call or Contract: Create agreements outlining time allocation, duties, and compensation.
 - c. Mission Alignment: Ensure congregations understand and agree on the minister's shared mission and goals.
- 5. Scheduling and Time Management**
- a. Service Times: Coordinate worship schedules to allow the minister to travel between congregations as needed. Or the consistories can coordinate that the minister is present/preaching at each church on alternating Sundays, thus allowing the minister to be fully present with both congregations.
 - b. Special Services: Coordinate a shared schedule for seasonal and holiday services, so as not to burn out the minister.
 - c. Pulpit Supply: Arrange guest preachers or preaching elders for weeks when the minister cannot be present.
 - d. "Office Hours": Designate times at each congregation for administrative duties or pastoral care visits, while recognizing the new realities of a hybrid work environment. See ['A Word on Time'](#) for more reflection.
 - e. Flexibility: Plan for the unexpected. Recognize that some weeks may require an increase of the minister's attention toward one congregation, and that these adjustments will balance out in the long run.
 - f. Technology (where appropriate): Utilize scheduling apps to allow individuals to connect with the minister at specific times. Use Zoom, if travel isn't required for a meeting.
- 6. Travel and Logistics**
- a. Transportation: Plan for efficient travel to and between locations. Be aware of what portions of travel are reimbursable, what is tax-deductable, etc. Check out resources like [this](#) for further details.
 - b. Office space: What appropriate office space is available at each location? What is required for the minister to accomplish their work (internet, phone, copier, etc)?
- 7. Financial Considerations**
- a. Shared Compensation or Separate Compensation: Agree on a fair way to divide salary and benefits among congregations. Will the call/contract be split evenly between the congregations involved or does one church require more time (and thus compensation) for the minister? Will there be separate calls issued from each church or one joint call?
 - b. Resource Sharing: Consider shared budgets for things like travel expenses or ministry resources.
- 8. Care (and Self-Care) for the Minister**

- a. Boundaries: Avoid over-scheduling to prevent burnout.
- b. Support Networks: Encourage the minister to connect with peer groups, mentors, a coach, and/or a therapist for support.
- c. Joint Support Committee: Forming a joint minister support committee between the congregations involved helps keep open communication between the minister and the various leadership teams involved, creating mutual support for all. This group can possibly serve as 1) a “sounding board” for the minister when needed for worship ideas, etc, 2) scheduling jointly for vacations, or 3) an authentic group that confidentially holds the concerns of the minister and shares these if/when appropriate with the consistory.

9. Unified Ministry Initiatives

- a. Joint Events: Plan occasional joint worship services, mission projects, or social gatherings to build relationships between congregations.
- b. Collaborative Planning: Work together on sermon series, Bible studies, fundraisers, or outreach initiatives.

This approach fosters strong relationships, efficient operations, and a shared sense of purpose among congregations while supporting the minister’s capacity to serve and lead effectively.

A Word on Time

When ministers begin serving and working in various locations, a natural curiosity for church leaders is to wonder how a minister is fulfilling the appropriate and needed amount of hours within ministry. While scenarios differ depending on context, relationships, and personal boundaries, it is a common understanding that ministers should not be asked to log their hours. Here’s some thoughts on why that’s so:

- 1) **Ministry Is Not a 9-to-5 Job:** Ministry is a vocation, not a time-clocked profession. Pastoral care, sermon preparation, prayer, crisis response, spiritual direction, relationship-building, and the mental processing of all manner of things often happen outside of typical office hours - at night, on weekends, and in moments that aren’t scheduled. Logging hours fails to capture this fluidity and the emotional and spiritual labor involved in being a minister.
- 2) **It Reduces Ministry to Measurable Outputs:** Requiring ministers to log hours can subtly shift the focus from faithfulness and service to metrics and measures - encouraging pastors to “do” more rather than “be” present, prayerful, or discerning. Ministry often involves invisible, intangible labor, such as: taking time for prayer, study, or reflection, holding space for grief and uncertainty, discerning with leaders, wrestling with Scripture, patiently listening to others, etc. These don’t always “show up” well on a timesheet.
- 3) **It Undermines Trust:** Requiring time logs can communicate suspicion, micromanaging, and be seen as means of controlling a pastor. It can also communicate that the minister might not be working hard enough unless proven otherwise. This risks eroding the trust that should exist between the pastor, who has taken vows of

faithfulness and often goes above and beyond without being asked, and the congregation or governing body.

- 4) **It Can Be Spiritually and Psychologically Draining:** Constantly tracking hours can foster burnout and even guilt. Ministers may feel like they're never doing enough or may become obsessed with proving their worth. Ministry should be rooted in grace, not in performance metrics.
- 5) **Accountability Should Be Based on Fruitfulness, Not Hours:** A better measure of pastoral health and effectiveness is found in spiritual fruit, relational depth, and congregational vitality - not in hours tallied. Healthy accountability comes through mutual discernment, supervision, pastoral reviews, and spiritual direction—not timesheets.
- 6) **Ministry Is a Calling, Not a Gig:** Theologically, ministry is a response to God's call. It is about service, presence, shepherding, and being an instrument of grace in the lives of others. Reducing it to hourly labor undermines this sacred calling and commodifies spiritual work.

When is recording hours given towards various tasks appropriate?

1. For Self-Reflection and Time Stewardship

- a. Logging tasks (not necessarily every minute) can help a pastor understand where their time is going—e.g., pastoral care vs. admin vs. preaching prep.
- b. It's useful for identifying imbalance, overwork, or neglected areas of ministry.

2. To Advocate for Fair Compensation or Role Adjustment

- a. If a job is described as part-time but routinely requires full-time engagement, time tracking can provide needed evidence for negotiation or role revision.

3. For Occasional Accountability

- a. If a church employs a pastor on a part-time basis, logging hours helps ensure expectations are realistic and mutual.
- b. It can clarify boundaries, especially in settings where the temptation is strong for a minister to "over-function" (doing more than they are meant to).
- c. Logging hours for accountability should be taken on only after honest discussion and mutual understanding, and should only be done for a short amount of time. It should not be used on an ongoing basis or trust may be undermined (see above).

Prayers and Devotions for Leaders

A Prayer for Church Leaders

Gracious and faithful God,
You are the One who makes all things new,
who calls us to step forward in faith,
even when the path ahead is unfamiliar.

We lift before You the leaders of Your Church,
those You have called to guide, to serve, and to shepherd
in seasons of transformation and uncertainty.
Give us courage to face change not with fear,
but with hope grounded in Your steadfast love.

Inspire us with wisdom that comes from Your Spirit,
so we may discern Your movement in this moment.
Where there is resistance, sow peace.
Where there is division, plant unity.
Where there is weariness, grant rest and renewal.

Open our hearts to the partners you have placed around us —
to see others not as rivals, but as companions in your Gospel-work.
Teach us all that Your mission is bigger than any one of us,
and that together, in the power of Your mercy,
we can bear witness to Your goodness in the world.

May we lead with humility,
listen with compassion,
and dream with holy imagination.
And may every step we take
be rooted in love for You and our neighbors. Amen.

Gentle My Desperation by Ted Loder (from *Guerillas of Grace*)

Come, Lord Jesus,
touch me
with love, life-giving as light,
to quiet my anger a little & gentle my desperation
to soften my fears some & soothe the knots of my cynicism,
to wipe away the tears from my eyes & ease the pains in my body & soul,
to reconcile me to myself & then to the people around me & then nation to nation,
that none shall learn war any more,
but turn to feed the hungry, house the homeless & care compassionately for the
least of our brothers & sisters.
Reshape me in your wholeness to be a healing person, Lord.

Come, Lord Jesus,
expand me
by your power, life-generating as the sea,
to accept & use my power,
to do something I believe in & be something more of who I am to be & can be,
to inspire me to dream & move,
sweat & sing,
fail & laugh,
cuss & create,

to link my passion with courage,
my hope with discipline,
my love with persistence,
to enable me to learn from difficulties,
grow in adversities,
gain wisdom from defeats,
perspective from disappointments,
gracefulness from crises,
& find joy in simply living it all fully.
Release me through your power to be a powerful person, Lord.

Come, Lord Jesus,
startle me
with your presence, life-sustaining as air,
to open my heart to praise you,
to open my mind to attend you,
to open my spirit to worship you,
to open me to live my life as authentically & boldly as you lived yours.

Come, Lord Jesus,
be with me in my longing;
come, stay with me in my needing;
come, go with me in my doing;
come, struggle with me in my searching;
come, rejoice with me in my loving.

Devotion for Church Leaders - Proverbs 3:5-6

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

— Proverbs 3:5–6

Reflection:

When we gather to discern the future, it's tempting to believe that the answers will come through our best strategies, our sharpest ideas, or the strength of our experience. But Scripture reminds us that the way forward is not found in our own understanding—it is found in trusting God. Discernment is not only about asking "What should we do?" but more deeply asking "Who is leading us?" and "Where is God already at work ahead of us?"

God calls us first to a posture of trust, humility, and prayer. When we let go of our need to control the outcomes and instead listen for the Spirit's leading, we find that the path becomes clearer—not all at once, but step by

step. Discernment is not about rushing toward decisions, but about faithfully waiting, courageously asking, and humbly following.

Prayer:

Gracious and guiding God,

We offer you our hopes, our fears, our plans, and our uncertainties. Teach us to trust you more than we trust ourselves. Open our ears to your voice, our eyes to your presence, and our hearts to your leading. May we walk not by sight alone, but by faith. Make our path straight, Lord, as we seek to serve you faithfully.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. Where have you seen God make a path clear for you or your church in the past?
2. What fears or assumptions might we need to lay down in order to truly trust God's leading?
3. What practices (prayer, listening, scripture, conversation) help you stay open to the Spirit's guidance during times of discernment?
4. Is there anything we feel God might already be doing among us that we need to pay closer attention to?

Devotion for Church Leaders - Jeremiah 6:16

"Thus says the Lord: Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."

- Jeremiah 6:16

Reflection:

There are moments in leadership - and in the life of every church - when we find ourselves standing at a crossroads. The temptation in these moments is to rush ahead, to choose the newest road, to choose the path that is familiar and comfortable, or to fear that standing still means falling behind. But God's word invites us into a different posture: pause, look, ask.

We are called to seek the ancient paths - the tried and true ways of God's faithfulness. We are invited to pause at our crossroads and remember how God has led His people through wilderness and exile, through uncertainty and new beginnings. Discernment is not about making the fastest decision; it's about looking for and seeking the faithful way that God has laid for us. When we take time to pause, to listen, to look, to pray, to

search, and to honor the wisdom of the saints who have walked before us, we find rest even in the midst of our decision-making. God does not call us to anxious striving but to faithfully walking.

Prayer:

Lord of ancient paths and new roads,
You have been faithful in every generation. As we stand at the crossroads, help us not to rush, but to pause, look, and ask. Show us the good way, and give us the courage to walk in it. Let our decisions be rooted in your truth and our hearts find rest in your promises.
Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. Where have you seen God make a path clear for you or your church in the past?
2. What “ancient paths” (faith practices, truths, stories, traditions) might God be calling us to remember and reclaim?
3. What does “walking in the good way” look like for you and your church in this season?
4. How can we create space to pause, listen, and ask for God’s guidance before we decide how to move forward?

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- Educational Resources
 - Workshops and training for collaborative ministry skills (e.g., leadership, conflict resolution).
 - Continuing education programs and scholarships
 - Contacts for coaching or consultation
 - Financial Support
 - Pay structures and increases for multi-congregational clergy.
 - Administrative Tools
 - Templates for shared budgets, schedules, and ministry plans.
 - Accessing synod/middle assembly resources for HR and legal support.

Appendices

- Further Reading (books, articles, websites)
 - Andersen, Erika, “Change is Hard. Here’s How to Make It Less Painful”, Harvard Business Review, April 7, 2022
 - Bratton, William and Zachary Tumin, *Collaborate or Perish: Reaching Across Boundaries in a Networked World*
 - Fowler, Susan, *Why Motivating People Doesn’t Work... And What Does*
 - Haley Barton, Ruth, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*
 - Haley Barton, Ruth, *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*
 - Sanders, Brian, *Five Keys To Cross-Organizational Collaboration*
 - Snow, Luther, *The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts*
 -
 - more
- Sample Documents (e.g., contracts, financial agreements).
 - [Contract for Transition Minister in ELCA](#)

Contacts

To offer an edit, add a story of your own, offer the addition of a resource you’ve found useful, or just give your feedback, please email Greg Town at gnbtown@gmail.com

This handbook will be continually edited and added to, in order to build on and deepen our shared learning in the collaborative work to which we’re all called to enter. Peace!

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- Rev. Greg Town
- Rev. Jenn Legg
- Rev. Paige Convis
- Rev. Rebecca Town

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- Jerusalem Reformed
- Clarksville Reformed
- Unionville Reformed
- Onesquethaw Reformed
- Berne Reformed

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- Blooming Grove Reformed
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- Knox Reformed and Thompsons Lake Reformed
- Knox/Thompson's Lake Reformed, Berne Reformed, and Helderberg Lutheran
- Brookville Reformed (on Long Island)
- Cary Reformed (North Carolina)
- Turning Point Churches - Fort Miller Reformed, Bacon Hill Reformed, Old Saratoga Reformed
- FOCUS Churches - Albany, NY - including Delmar Reformed and First Reformed Albany
- Bethany Reformed Albany and New Covenant Presbyterian
- Helderberg Reformed and Altamont Reformed
- Hudson Reformed Church (warming center)

- Fonda Reformed and Johnstown Reformed
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- Blooming Grove and Diaper Ministry
- Blooming Grove and Muitskill Food Pantry