

A Guide for Discussion

You may of course read the books in this series on your own, but because they focus on the transformation of the Episcopal Church in the twenty-first century the books are especially useful as a basis for discussion and reflection within a congregation or community. The questions below are intended to generate fruitful discussion about the congregations with which members of the group are familiar.

Each group will identify its own needs and will be shaped by the interests of the participants and their comfort in sharing personal life stories. Discussion leaders will wish to focus on particular areas that address the concerns and goals of the group, using the questions and themes provided here simply as suggestions for a place to start the conversation.

chapter one

Shall We Gather at the River?

In this chapter James Lemler explores the theology of baptism and how it has shaped the mission of the church. He notes that “baptismal theology is a theology of transformation and mission, emphasizing both the change that occurs in the life of individual believers and the meaning of mission for the church” (p. 9).

- ♦ In what ways has baptism—your own or others—been part of your formation and sense of ministry?
- ♦ How is a theology of baptism expressed and lived in your congregation?
- ♦ Name several ways you seek to live out the Baptismal Covenant in your congregation and community.



In exploring a renewed theology of mission Lemler quotes the hopeful vision of Darrell Guder (pp. 16–17). He goes on to describe several efforts made at the diocesan and national levels that reflect an emerging theology of mission in the church today.

- ♦ What do you make of Guder’s optimism? Have you seen reasons to share his hope for the future of the local and national church?
- ♦ What do you think of the various national efforts Lemler describes, such as “A Clear Vision,” the 2020 Vision, and the mission priorities set forth by General Convention? Which aspects of these approaches to mission are most important to you? What is missing?
- ♦ If you were developing a list of mission priorities for your congregation, what would you include?

chapter two

Whitewater Conditions

Lemler opens this chapter with a discussion of the gospel as transformation. He then explores Parker Palmer's ten points that can help congregations move "away from the shadows that paralyze them to new light, new trust, and new love" (p. 39).

- ♦ Reread the five "shadows" and reflect on the ways they may have hindered transformation and growth in your congregation.
- ♦ Reread the five "lights" and reflect on some of the ways they may have encouraged transformation and growth in your congregation.



Lemler then turns to the "whitewater conditions" churches find themselves in today, looking at fifteen dimensions of the changing environment (pp. 43–50).

- ♦ Review these conditions for change and select several that you believe are the most pressing for your congregation. Why are they significant at this time?
- ♦ How do the particular "whitewater conditions" you have identified affect the mission of your congregation?



Finally, Lemler examines the results of two important surveys on congregational life (pp. 51–61).

- ♦ What do you make of these results? Do they reflect your congregation's experience?
- ♦ Which results were surprising to you? Which are the most challenging for your congregation?

chapter three

The Vital Congregation

In this chapter Lemler considers five characteristics of a healthy congregation: clarifying mission; spiritual transformation; context and congregational dynamics; learning; and evangelism and welcome.

- ♦ Divide into five small groups or pairs, and assign one characteristic to each group. (If necessary, groups can take on more than one characteristic.) The person in each small group who agrees to be the scribe needs to be given writing materials.
- ♦ Spend at least 20 minutes in small groups, discussing how each characteristic is a strength or a challenge in your congregation. Focus especially on the “questions for your congregation” provided within each section, with the scribe making summary notes of the responses.
- ♦ Reconvene the entire study group, and ask each small group or pair to share its findings. If possible, gather these findings on newsprint or other media for all to see.
- ♦ After each group has shared its findings, spend time reflecting on the picture of your congregation that has emerged.

NOTE:

- ♦ If you are reading this book on your own, simply choose the characteristics that you believe are the most challenging for your congregation and reflect on the questions within those sections.

chapter four

Communities of Transformation

In this chapter Lemler continues his consideration of the characteristics of a healthy congregation, this time focusing on worship and preaching; leadership development; dealing with conflict; a hopeful climate and flexibility toward change; a caring community; compassionate service; and stewardship.

- ♦ Divide into seven small groups or pairs, and assign one characteristic to each group. (If necessary, groups can take on more than one characteristic.) The person in each small group who agrees to be the scribe needs to be given writing materials.
- ♦ Spend at least 20 minutes in small groups, discussing how each characteristic is a strength or a challenge in your congregation. Focus especially on the “questions for your congregation” provided within each section, with the scribe making summary notes of the responses.
- ♦ Reconvene the entire study group, and ask each small group or pair to share its findings. If possible, gather these findings on newsprint or other media for all to see.
- ♦ After each group has shared its findings, spend time reflecting on the picture of your congregation that has emerged.

NOTE:

- ♦ If you are reading this book on your own, simply choose the characteristics that you believe are the most challenging for your congregation and reflect on the questions within those sections.

chapter five

Practicing Transformation

Here Lemler focuses on specific practices that allow the experience of transformation “to become embodied in individuals and communities of faith” (p. 127).

- ♦ Using the practices given here as a model, develop a list of practices that are significant aspects of your congregational life. Divide into small groups or pairs, with each choosing one practice to discuss.
- ♦ In the small groups, using the stories on pages 131–144 as models, write the “story” of how your congregation came to see the practice you chose as important to its life and mission, and how it is expressed and encouraged today.
- ♦ Reconvene in the entire group and share your stories. What themes do you hear emerging?



Lemler concludes with a consideration of the leadership and concrete actions needed to implement change.

- ♦ Does your congregation and particularly its leaders see change as an urgent matter? Why or why not?
- ♦ Review John Kotter’s “stages in the progress of intentional leadership for and in the midst of change” identified on pages 159–160. Which ones are the most challenging for your congregation?
- ♦ How would you respond to Lemler’s final question: “Will you and your fellow leaders engage in a prayerful, planned, and intentional process of change and transformation for your congregation?” (p. 165). What is hindering you from getting started?