

creating cultures of

purpose, generosity

courage

The value in being
clear about who we are,
generous in all we do,
& bold in how we do it



www.tmf-fdn.org
800.933.5502



Great conversation changes things. Great questions help.

- At TMF, we're in the business of hosting conversations that make a difference. Real change only happens in a church when there has been healthy conversation.
- Great conversations require great questions. They reveal surprising trends and patterns. They help us learn from our past without worshiping it. They show us what our community is really like. They unlock the soul of the congregation and point us to the God who comforts and calls us.
- We've seen the miracles that can happen when a great question cracks things open. We think it can happen in your church, and we'd love to help.

How we can help

- At TMF, we have a group of men and women called Area Representatives whose job is to get to know you, listen as you describe what's going on in your church, and to ask how we can help.
- We can help in at least three ways. We can walk you through this resource, telling stories of times when a group of leaders were courageous and asked hard questions. We can do a one-day workshop called Holy Excavations, in which a group of 20-30 wrestle a set of questions in the hope of 'unearthing' new insight about their church's future. We can lead that or teach you to lead it. Or we can walk alongside your church in the 6-9 month strategic discernment process called Holy Conversations, a really deep dive into what difference God is calling your congregation to make in the coming season of the church's life.
- **You can reach TMF at [1-800-933-5502](tel:1-800-933-5502).** Ask to speak with your Area Rep.





What's at stake in asking these questions?

- For example, in asking “Who is our ministry for?”, one leader said, “That’s an easy question. It’s for us. It’s to help us grow in our faith.” Another then said, “I don’t find this question easy at all. It seems to me that our ministry is with those outside the church.” What followed was a deep conversation about where God was calling the church to focus its energy and resources. The leaders realized they were bringing different assumptions to the table. The truth wasn’t in one or the other. It became their work to ask, “God, where are you calling us to focus NOW?”
- In asking, “Do we know the difference we are making?”, a leader said, “We took a meal to the local school teachers,” and another one said, “What happened? Do we have a deeper relationship?”



The really big questions

- The three most important questions that leaders of a congregation can ask are:
 - **Who are we, now?**
 - **Who is our neighbor, now?**
 - **What is God asking of us?**



Why those questions?

- We ask the question “**Who are we, now?**” to make certain we are honest about trends in membership, finance and disciple making; observant about the gifts, graces and quirks of the people; and informed but not controlled by the church’s history. **Now** is the key word.
- We ask the question “**Who is our neighbor, now?**” not just to describe the people who live near us, but to ask, “God, to whom are you sending us?” Both are important. We need to know as much as we can about the people of our community, but we need God’s guidance to discern where the gifts and graces of our congregation intersect the most clearly with the needs of those we call neighbor.
- We ask the question “**What Is God asking of us?**” so that our work is not just some good idea we had, but the mission to which God is distinctively appointing our congregation.



purpose questions

THE VALUE IN BEING CLEAR ABOUT WHO WE ARE



Do we ever ‘go up to the balcony’?

- Imagine that we are standing in the very middle of our church’s office complex, or in the gathering space outside the sanctuary right after worship. In spaces like this, things are coming at us thick and fast.
- There are multiple claims on the leaders of the church, clergy and lay. Many who approach their leaders are looking for a decision in the moment. Most of those decisions are meant to solve problems or glitches; to make things more efficient or transparent. But this is not a place for the leaders of the church to look at the bigger picture. It can’t happen. It can’t happen in monthly committee meetings either, since they are largely held to solve problems (as important as that may be). It’s necessary to ‘go up to the balcony’ to get the widest possible view.
- We mustn’t allow the **urgent** to keep us from the **important**.

How attentive are we to how much time we spend in balcony space? In reactive space?

- If we're going to be clear about who we are, generous in all we do, and bold in doing it, we need real time and space. We need to get away from the every day rush and the constant distraction. We need to remove ourselves from that reactive space, and to go up into the balcony, because we see more from the balcony. We get a wider view of the church's life.
- We focus not on the scuffs in the floor, but on the whole life of the congregation, and what is happening in it. Most church leaders are not attentive to how much of their decision making is done in reactive space. That means that many church leaders fall into the trap of feeling that solving problems = doing ministry. Some pastors shy away from balcony time (like a multi-day retreat) because they are averse to dealing with the voices in the congregation who say, "We have to get things DONE."





What ultimately motivates our ministry?

Who is our ministry for? To whom is God sending us?

- Once we get into balcony space, there are some crucial questions to ask. The first question to ask is about our AIM. Is the focus of our ministry more on the growth and maturation of those who are already here, or is it more on those we are hoping and intending to reach?
- We hear Jesus say to the Apostles in Acts 1:8, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus is saying that some will witness to those close at hand. Others are sent farther away. Some are sent to people like themselves. Others are sent to people who are very different from themselves. Modern apostles are also being sent.
- The work of church leaders is to discern to whom the congregation is being sent. Discerning where and to whom we are being sent is the best and hardest work that church leaders ever do.



Purpose or Preference

To which side is your congregation leaning?

- What we see on TV screens and mobile devices is largely meant to deliver the message, “You need _____ in order to be happy (successful, attractive).” It is meant to persuade us to want things, and to feel that our choice of those things makes us smart, happy or attractive. The more we hear those messages, the more we bring them to church with us. It causes us to say, “I want the music I want because I deserve it.” “You can’t sit in that pew because it’s mine.” “You can’t hold worship later because it would mess up the plan I have for my day.” This is the culture of self-appointed preference.
- Because we are so prone to adopt this stance, our congregations can fill up with people who all want what they want because they want it. This consumer orientation is sometimes addressed by trying to make everyone happy (which won’t work), or by making certain that the loudest, or maddest, or wealthiest are happy (which won’t work either). So it’s important for leaders to do the hard work of assessing the extent to which the congregation is currently acting out of the culture of self-appointed preference.
- The alternative is the culture of God-appointed mission, in which leaders do the equally hard work of asking, “God, what is the difference you are calling this congregation to make in this community and the world?”

Naming Our Current Reality

What is this congregation's challenge?

- It's not unusual for congregations to remember back to a golden age (real or imagined) when everything was vital and growing. But in order to be the church we are called to be in the present day, we have to know what's really true about our current situation. Who in our community do we presently have the courage and capacity to serve? What are our people good at? What values undergird our work? What memories are we clinging to? Is there evidence that we have the courage to do a ministry any different or more bold than the one we are now doing?
- When we ask a leadership group to name the **challenge** they are facing, it's about getting at questions like these. But it's more than that, because the word **challenge** has a double meaning. It can mean what we have to get through. But it can also signify the destination we most fervently want to reach.
- The typical leadership group is better at naming the **roadblocks** to the summit, so in asking this question, we have to urge our people to spend plenty of time naming the **summit**.





Activities | Outcomes

Do we know the difference we are making, or do we simply hope we're making a difference?

- If someone asks us, "What does your church do?", we usually answer by saying something like, "We have worship and Sunday School, youth and children's activities, small groups, mission projects and fellowship events."
- While that statement answers the question, "What activities happen in your building?", it does not answer the question, "What difference is your ministry making in the lives of the members and in the community?"
- **Activities** are essential. They create the platform for transformation. But having activities without naming outcomes is like embarking on a trip without a map or a destination.

Do We Both Count and Measure?

- It is a joy to be able to report that hundreds of children attended the Music and Arts Week or Vacation Bible School, or to announce that there was a year-end budget surplus. There's something important in **counting**, because it helps us determine where we stand in relation to other moments in the life of the church.
- But it's just as essential to accept the discipline of **measuring** how far we have come and what difference we are making. It is wonderful that hundreds of children came, but it's essential to ask, "How do we want those children to be different as a result of attending? What do we hope they will learn? What do we want them to be like 10 years from now?" Adopting the discipline of measuring can make all of our planning much more focused and compelling.

Are We Planning or Discerning?

- It's one thing to build a new Children's Wing for the church. It's another thing to ask **why** we're building it, why we're building it **now**, and what difference we hope it will make in the lives of children and their families.
- There's nothing quite as awesome as seeing the minds of architects and engineers and construction workers working together on the millions of moving pieces that go into building something. Planning is an indispensable skill both in constructing a building and in growing a congregation. When it's well done, things are smoother, more transparent, and more efficient.
- But planning must be preceded by discernment. Since the church's work is to do God's will in the world, we have to stop long enough to ask God for guidance and direction rather than pretending that we need no help from God. Discernment is hard but wonderful work.

Is What We Need More of Now Improvement or Innovation?

- If a church is known throughout the community for the depth and substance of its modern worship, and it is growing in size and in its transforming effect on people's lives, there is every reason to find out why it is so deep, and to look for ways to make it even deeper. There is every reason to **improve**; to do better what you already do well.
- But if another church's worship attendance is in steady decline and people cannot find a reason to invite their friends to join them, then improvement isn't enough. Putting a new coat of paint on the twelve coats that are already there will not make the wall more attractive. What is called for in this instance is **innovation**. That doesn't mean glitz. It isn't about having a new sound board. It's about learning what we need to learn about why our current worship is not reaching people, and what might be possible if we were to think in a whole new direction.
- We must never choose improvement or innovation to the exclusion of the other. Both are essential. We do have to decide which way we have to lean at this particular moment in the life of the church.





generosity questions

THE VALUE IN BEING GENEROUS IN ALL WE DO

What is the grip of money on this congregation?

- We approach a street corner at which a man stands with a sign which says, "Homeless and hungry." A friend appeals to us about a cause that is central in her life. We're in worship and the plate is just about to come by. What's similar in these three instances and hundreds more is that we feel the grip which money has on our lives. Rather than the decision being easy and natural, we often feel a knot in our soul, if not in our body.
- As leaders of the church, if we are in the habit of giving God what's left over only after we attend to other money matters in our lives, we cannot build a culture of generosity in our church. When we look to the teachings of Jesus, we hear him say that our possessions have a death grip on us, and so we must let them go and see what a difference it makes. Zacchaeus took him up on it and proved just how wonderful freedom can be (Luke 19: 1-10).



When we are honest about our congregational DNA, do we lean more toward "There is plenty" or "There isn't enough"?

- If you were sent into a church as a reporter to discover the congregation's attitude about money, what would you need in order to write your story? Good quotes, right? If a congregation is eager to create a culture of generosity, it's essential that the leaders know those 'quotes,' i.e., what the people actually say when they talk about money. It might be "We always struggle at the end of the year," or "We don't talk about money here at all," or "When something is needed, we always find the money."
- It's so important to do the excavating necessary to find those nuggets of testimony. If it's the job of a great leader to give people a better story than the one out of which they are currently living, then we have to determine what the **actual** story is. If it's a story of abundance, we rejoice and undergird that story with all our energy. If it's a story of scarcity, we carefully begin to tell the better story; the one in which we are freed from the grip of money on our lives and therefore live a life of constant gratitude.

Do our financial leaders see themselves more as bill payers or as disciple makers?

- Every volunteer in the life of the church is a gift from God, but sometimes we are not good stewards of the gifts God gives us. When we recruit people to serve on finance committees or generosity teams, we too often squander the opportunity to invite people into the work of creating a deeper, richer culture of generosity.
- If we do not specifically invite people into the joy of underwriting the disciple-making ministry of the church, we allow people to default to the role of bill payers. We must describe this work as finding a way to say YES to underwriting ministry dreams rather than playing the role of gate keeper.

Do we focus more on the need of the institution to receive or on the need of the giver to give?

- There is nothing more indicative of a struggling church than hearing someone say, “We really need you to give so we can make sure the salaries are paid.” What we communicate if we talk that way is desperation or weariness. The message is, “The ship will sink if you don’t help bail it out.”
- What a beautiful gift it is to give people the chance to be generous. It’s our work to make that possible. Our hope lies in the day in which every church has a huge notebook overflowing with testimonies of people whose lives were changed because someone else cared enough to encourage their generosity.





courage questions

THE URGENCY OF BEING BOLD



What is our stance toward those outside the church?

- A courageous congregation knows the difference between being interested and being interesting.
- “We need to get more young people to come to our church. If they would come here they’d see how friendly and interesting we are.” Old habits are hard to break, and the mainline church in America still insists that they have to come to us because they need what we have (or they should want what we want).
- There is no denying that there are important things that can happen in the church building with the people who are there. It would be wrong to squander such a physical asset and act as though the current membership has nothing to offer. But remaining sequestered in our buildings will not help us meet people who are hungry to make a difference in the community. We’re only interesting to those in our community if we’re deeply purposeful.
- “Tell me what it’s like to be you.” “I’m interested in what you’re doing.” “Tell me the story of how you got into this.” Those are the kind of statements made by people who have a deep confidence that God is at work everywhere. To discover the evidences of God’s work, you have to do some holy investigation. That must take us outside the church.

Back then, right now, or up ahead: *What is our orientation to time?*

- A courageous congregation knows that its focus can be past, present or future, and spends time asking, “Where are we now?”
- They may speak longingly of a golden age when the sanctuary was full, the youth group was big and money wasn’t a problem.
- They may be singularly focused in the present, attending to the current possibilities and problems.
- They may be dreamers, hoping for a future that takes them places they have never been.
- It’s important that leaders are listening deeply for this orientation to time in case one of the three is so out of balance that it threatens the health of the congregation

To what extent are we seeking a lasting relationship with those we serve?

- A courageous congregation wrestles with its motives.
- If we collect winter coats or shoes for the children of the local elementary school, take them to the school, and drop them off, we’ve done a charitable **transaction**. We can count how many we brought and take that report back to the congregation.
- If we commit to getting to know the children who will sleep under the blankets (and their families), we are seeking a relationship. It takes more time and more vulnerability to seek a **relationship**.
- It’s essential that a congregation face the question, “Do we do this because we have pity, or do we do this because we want something to change **for** the child and **in** us?”





What is not an option for us as a congregation?

- A courageous congregation has to establish its bedrock; the values out of which it will operate, the ways it will behave toward the community, and the things it will support.
- One of the most effective ways to assess a congregation's values is to ask that they say what is not an option for them, i.e., what must never happen. For example, If they say that it's not an option to sell, swap, or relocate their physical plant, their value is investing in the neighborhood, getting to know the people who live there, and taking an interest in their hurts and hopes, their skills and wisdom.

What is the biblical story our congregation is now inhabiting?

- A courageous congregation also places itself within their family album, the Bible. This means asking, "If the Bible is a mirror, where do we see our reflection? What story are we now inhabiting?"
- The story can be confessional. "We've been casting our net on the same side of the boat for too many years" (John 21). It can be aspirational. "We want to 'mount up with wings like eagles'" (Isaiah 40). It can be descriptive. "We have too many Marthas and not enough Marys" (Luke 10).
- It helps a congregation see that they are not alone, that their forebears struggled with similar things and found God in similar ways. It can be deeply motivational, because the congregation needs to discern how to 'get the net on the other side of the boat'.



What is the sin this congregation needs to confess?

- A courageous congregation tells the truth about itself.
- Every congregation has a public witness (what it tells the world about itself) and a private witness (what is whispered around the halls about what's really true, what the secrets are, who has the power, etc.).
- It is often true that there is a presenting sin encased in that private witness. It could be that apathy has overtaken the congregation. Or the people think more highly of themselves than they should. Or they never told the truth about an embezzlement from which it took years to regain financial stability.
- Naming these sins releases anxiety and fosters positive energy.

How and where is God calling US to make disciples for the transformation of the world?

- Denominations or associations of churches often have mission statements that, while broadly descriptive, are more or less axiomatic. They sound positive and necessary, but you can't see them.
- It's the job of courageous leaders to take those global, aspirational mission statements and make them radically local. If we are to make disciples for the transformation of the world, how is that going to happen in this community, with these people, at this moment in time?



How to use this resource

- Discussing and digesting each question in this resource requires time and patience. When we were developing it, one of the wisest of our staff colleagues said, “It’s too much to do all at the same time.” He was absolutely right. This isn’t a resource to take on a day long retreat expecting to ask and answer each question.
- What we suggest is that you read through the whole resource and ask, “Which of these questions is the one our congregation most needs to ask right now?” You might determine that one of the questions about generosity is the one that might unlock something important. Six months from now, it might be a question about purpose or courage.
- Start with your key leaders but then find ways to involve others in conversation. Help leaders do some cross-training. For example, don’t simply give the generosity questions to the finance committee or your generosity team.

A debt of gratitude

- In recent years, we have been blessed at TMF by having the wisdom and guidance of Dr. Gil Rendle, who has been pastor, scholar and teacher to us all. His presence and writings have challenged us all to go both deep and wide as we walk alongside the congregations we serve. The book he co-wrote with Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*, and his book *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*, are the backbone of this resource. We are grateful.

Our road map

- Purpose
- Generosity
- Courage



