

Season of Partnership

Stages of a Shared Ministry Decision

Congregations throughout the Pacific Southwest District are actively discussing shared or merged ministry. These conversations may focus on everything from a shared pastor to a joint outreach venture or from a multi-site ministry to a full merger. The following stages are a guideline for ministry leaders or congregation members who facilitate such discussions. These stages are not “steps,” as each includes multiple pursuits and may overlap with one other. The goal is not congregational viability but missional opportunity. We desire healthy ministries who seek to discover and delight in the work God is doing among them. *(Rm 12:2-5; Phil 1:9-10)*



Stage 1

Propose the concept of shared or merged ministry between multiple congregations. [The suggestion may come from congregation, circuit, or District.] Invite leaders from respective congregations to gather for an initial meeting. Secure a third-party facilitator from the circuit or District to guide the discussion. Assuming there is continued interest, communicate the possibility of a joint ministry to congregational members.

Pursue

- Conversations about God’s possible work in and through the partnering congregations
- Relationship development and trust among leaders
- Honest discussions about ministry realities, challenges, and assumptions
- Prayer for the Holy Spirit’s wisdom and guidance

Avoid

- Specific proposals or commitments from the participating congregations
- Using “us vs. them” language or allowing one congregation to dominate
- Focusing discussions around viability or survival

Remember

- Exploration of partnership does not guarantee implementation of a proposal
- Identify a point person from each congregation if you decide to pursue the next stage



Stage 2

Gather congregation members for multiple joint worship and fellowship events. Facilitate meaningful connections among the participants. Invite specific people to share stories of ministry in their geographic area, historic connections between the congregations, and hope for continued witness to their community.

Pursue

- Influencers who promote discovery and advocate for new ministry ventures
- Recognition of God’s work in and through each congregation over the years
- Opportunities for informal conversations and ongoing connections among members
- Discussions across generational lines

Avoid

- Focus on a particular expression of shared ministry or members’ personal agendas
- Dismissing initial fears or concerns that get expressed
- Rushing relationship development

Remember

- People support what they help shape
- Shared meals and informal gatherings are just as significant as formal meetings
- Resistance decreases as relationships increase



Facilitate a joint weeks-long study (and/or weekend retreat) around the mission of God. Ensure key leaders or representatives from each congregation discuss how God may be at work rather than what they desire to accomplish. The books of Acts, Philippians, or Philemon are meaningful studies. Other books like *Better Together*, *The Great De-Churching*, or *How the Light Breaks Through* may also be impactful. Conduct honest assessments of each congregation, especially its openness to change for the sake of mission.

Pursue

- Bible/book study for spiritual formation
- Definition of a healthy congregation and identification of community needs
- Honest conversations about health, resources, limitations of each congregation (consider survey)
- Ongoing prayer for missional hearts and divine guidance

Avoid

- Emphases on saving a congregation, retaining a property, etc.
- Nostalgia-driven decision making or attempts to return to what used to be
- Protecting traditions and systems at the expense of mission

Remember

- Leaders need to address their own grief, fears, and assumptions
- Some partnerships may not proceed but other opportunities could emerge



Brainstorm multiple options for shared or merged ministry. Define boundaries, non-negotiables, and areas of concern for each congregation. Share financial details among the group, including property values, restricted funds, annual income amounts/sources, and debt. Identify members or groups who may be resistant to certain proposals or will advocate for a particular agenda. Select one option to present to the congregations.

Pursue

- Consideration of multiple options from a missional perspective
- Transparency and honesty when describing the willingness and resources of each congregation
- Clarity about role each congregation and campus and congregations would have
- Selection of one option with specific goals and outcomes

Avoid

- Any assumptions (discuss it all)
- Minimizing resistance (consider the concerns or objections raised by each option)
- Emotionally manipulative communication or rumoring

Remember

- Consider all legal, constitutional, and synodical implications
- Pray for the Holy Spirit to prepare hearts for the presentation of this option



Offer a specific proposal for shared or merged ministry. Include details about governance, finances, personnel, and implementation. Host open forums at all participating congregations which offer opportunity for feedback and adjustment to the proposal. Provide individual pastoral or other counsel to those struggling with the impending change. Schedule votes at each congregation. Plan a joint celebration if and when approved.

Pursue

- Numerous opportunities for formal and informal communication
- Genuinely listening and understanding, then responding to concerns
- Identification of traditions and practices that will be honored or retained
- Clarity about sacrifices that need to be made

Avoid

- Minimizing grief or dismissing the impact of the proposed changes
- Expressions of triumphalism or winning
- Assuming approval ends the work

Remember

- Change fatigue is real; some may disengage before objecting
- Continue intentional relationship building after the decision
- Publish the decision as well as an implementation plan