



Seasons of Ministry: What Time Is It?

Overview

“Seasons” have become a popular descriptor for various stages of life in which we experience transition, growth, or discovery. There is a Biblical basis for this expression: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter *under heaven*: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance...” *Ecclesiastes 3:1-4*

We experience these seasons not only in life, but in ministry. The visible church of God, even the congregations in which we serve, are *under heaven*. It’s an indication that each serves for a time to prepare people for eternity. The churches about which we read throughout the New Testament no longer exist as they once did. God worked through Word and Sacrament at each to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify His people in that season. While congregations may not remain, the invisible church of God – His people throughout all time – remains forever.

Our emphasis, however, has too often been on “our congregation” rather than His Church. That’s understandable because He works through these congregations with the gospel message of Jesus Christ. It can also become idolatrous when our hope and comfort is found in them over Him. Though blessings from God, everything from spouses to children and congregations to schools may become gods when our trust is misplaced. Even time and seasons have become gods as we use them to control others or insist on our own way.

Like all of creation, time was a blessing from God, given to mark and remember His work among us: “God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” *Genesis 1:31* If these times of creation, and now of ministry, are intended to help us see and celebrate God’s work, we must wonder about the season in which we find ourselves and ask:

What time is it?

“A Time to Join” (Merging with a Partner Ministry)

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| Questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is God accomplishing His mission in our current circumstances? • What different ministry experience might God be guiding to consider? • What are the advantages/disadvantages of a merger with another Lutheran (LCMS) congregation? • Are we willing change for the sake of the mission? |
| Considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective with a “joining” church and a “lead” church of different sizes and cultures (as opposed to two similarly sized congregations) • Often involves a new pastor and a new strategic approach (and potentially a new name and property) when merging two smaller congregations • Might result in either single- or multi-site ministry • Always begins with prayer and conversation |
| Examples | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christ, Costa Mesa and Faith, Huntington Beach • Holy Cross and Peace, San Diego (now Hope, Linda Vista) |
| Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Better Together</u> by Jim Tomberlin & Warren Bird • <u>The Great DeChurching</u> by Jim Davis & Michael Graham • <u>Multi-Site Church Revolution</u> by Warren Bird |
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“A Time to Share” (Facilitating a Multi-Congregation Partnership)

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| Questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What prevents us from calling a pastor or other staff?• What nearby Lutheran churches are having a similar experience?• How could a shared pastor or staff allow us to be more effective in ministry?• Are we willing to make sacrifices in sharing a pastor? |
| Considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enables congregations to retain their unique identity• Requires closer partnership with other Lutheran ministries• Fosters opportunities for shared mission in the community• Means having a shepherd whose time and focus may be divided |
| Examples | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Christ the Cornerstone, Mira Mesa• Mt. Olive, Poway |
| Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Two Churches, One Pastor: An Old Model for the Present and Future Church” by Matthew van Maastricht (Faithward article)• “Multi-Congregation Parishes” by Stacey Egger (Lutheran Witness article) |
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“A Time to Renew” (Revitalizing an Existing Ministry)

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| Questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are opportunities for witness and ministry in our neighborhood?• Are there limitations we may be tempted to place on revitalization?• What new ministry or expression might God be guiding us to pursue?• Should we consider “re-planting” our congregation with a new vision, culture, name, etc.? |
| Considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Means new leadership, as well as new ministry vision• Includes partnership with the District and/or strategic planning partners (LCEF Ministry Solutions, LiNC, Church Unique, Auxano, etc.)• Requires emphasis on God’s kingdom and the local community, more than the historic patterns of the congregation |
| Example | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peace, Tustin• Holy Cross, Scottsdale |
| Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Holy Conversations</u> by Gil Rendle & Alice Mann• <u>Small Church Essentials</u> by Karl Vaters• <u>Anatomy of a Revived Church</u> by Thom Rainer |
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“A Time to Build” (Redeveloping a Church Property)

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| Questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How might God use this property differently for the sake of the Gospel?• Are there aspects of our current facility which are not being used or stewarded effectively?• Which are the most significant needs in our community (e.g. housing, schools, etc.)?• What new opportunities for ministry might there be on a redeveloped site? |
| Considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires multiple acres in more valuable property areas• Involves relinquishing a portion of the land for development on which a church might capitalize for mission• Usually includes rebuilding, not just remodeling, a sanctuary and/or other ministry spaces• Takes multiple years to plan and execute |
| Examples | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Redeemer, Las Vegas• Our Savior, Westchester |
| Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Closing Costs by Dominic Dutra• LCEF Real Estate Solutions (lcef.org) |
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“A Time to Grieve” (Closing a Congregation)

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| Questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there circumstances causing you to believe your congregation may be at the end of its ministry season?• Who or What hinders you from making the decision to close?• What are you grieving most about the church’s closure?• How is God revealing hope in the midst of grief?• What might be the most impactful legacy of the congregation’s resources for Lutheran Gospel ministry? |
| Considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Celebration of God’s work through that congregation is essential and usually includes a special worship service• Grief care should be provided for pastor and people, as well as help to identify new church homes• Guidance for closure will be given by the PSD, including sample closing worship, ecclesiastical paperwork, legal referrals, title transfer, property assessment, archival donations, etc.• Assets are ordinarily transferred to the PSD, per the congregation’s constitution, and a portion will be stewarded for ministry in that community |
| Examples | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• St. John’s, Long Beach• St. Paul’s, Norwalk |
| Resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <u>Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations</u> by Beth Ann Gaede, Editor• <u>Legacy Churches</u> by Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond |
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Frequently Asked Questions



❖ What can we do to save our church?

Though a frequent question, it may not be the most helpful. Christ's mission is not to save congregations, but His Church. Local congregations are an essential setting for Word and Sacrament ministry yet exist for a defined time in a particular place. The questions you may want to ask include: "What are the unique needs of people in our community?", "How could the gospel be better expressed in our context?", and "What might God desire to accomplish through us and our congregation for the sake of His kingdom?"

You may be tempted to believe that a few improvements to your current ministry will restore its recent success or its often-remembered glory days. Please know that you can't go back, but you can move forward with every assurance that Jesus, who overcomes the world, goes ahead of us. The glory is His and the Lord's Day is yet to come.

❖ Why shouldn't we just sell our land and survive on the proceeds?

Again, because the mission is broader than your congregation. Jesus has not yet returned and that means more will come to repentance. *2 Peter 3:9* God may work through the revitalization of your congregation or utilize its resources in another way as people are brought to faith. The value of land and location is such that we often prefer to retain, rather than attempt to restore, an LCMS presence in most communities.

❖ When should we consider merging, revitalizing, or even disbanding?

Asking this question means you should consider it now. Many congregations wait until the retirement of a pastor or the reduction of its income to consider next steps in ministry. Pray now and actively discuss how God may be prompting something new in your congregation. The District is here to help guide those conversations.

If you believe that disbanding may be an option, please contact the District at 949-854-3232. We will provide care and guidance throughout that process.

❖ What resources does the District offer?

The District has resources and referrals for reconciliation, professional skill development, and organizational planning. It also offers mentoring for pastors and church workers, training for lay leaders, grants for new mission projects, consultation for next steps in ministry, partnership in identifying and calling church workers, connections for redeveloping congregational property, and much more. The District is not, however, able to provide funding to subsidize congregations for survival.

❖ Who takes the initial step?

God has already taken that step by revealing Himself through the Word and placing these concerns on your heart. You can respond by initiating conversation among yourselves, reaching out other Lutheran congregations, and contacting the District. Remember, you don't need the District's permission to reach out to partner congregations or to pursue any of the above options, but we do ask for your communication about what may be happening. We are also ready and willing to guide, advise, pray, and walk with you.

Review

This resource includes more than a few questions. From *When?* to *What?* and *How?* to *Who?*, these inquiries encourage meaningful consideration of God's work in your midst. There is a question, however, that gets the better of many churches: *Why?*

Our inboxes and social media are replete with articles and surveys offering explanations for the decline of congregations and the shortage of church workers. Nearly 75% of LCMS congregations now worship less than 100 people on any given Sunday, and more than 45% have fewer than 50 worshippers, which may prompt us to continue asking: Why are churches declining? Why is one congregation more "successful" than another? Why can't we find just a few more people to keep the church open? Those *Why?* queries become traps, focusing on our efforts and burdening us with the expectation to save congregations and somehow achieve God's mission. So often the answer to *Why?* is that we are sinful people living in a sinful world.

Jesus' disciples once asked a *Why?* question disguised as a *Who?*: "Who sinned, this man of his parents, that he was born blind?" *John 9:2* They believed learning the reason for his blindness (aka the *Why?*) would affirm their behavior or enable them to prevent such difficulties. Jesus' response changed the question: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in his life." *John 9:3* He prompted them to ask *What?*: What is God redeeming in this circumstance? What good will God bring out of an experience that seems so bad? The move from *Why?* to *What?* is often the move from Law to Gospel. It's the move seen in the cross of Christ as the *Why?* points directly to our shortcomings, but the *What?* reveals His redemption.

That redemption emphasis is essential in our shared ministry. The culture is different than it was in years past, but the work of God continues. He is merging, revitalizing, building, and even redeeming congregations from the remnants of closure for the sake of His Church. Gather with your brothers and sisters at the congregation to remember what God has done and to ask: "What will He do in this next season?"