

Local Church Initiative

Handbook



**Originally Compiled by
The Peace & Justice Task Force
of Albany Presbytery**

**Currently overseen by the
Council of Albany Presbytery**

The Local Church Initiative

Introduction	2
Outcomes	2
Surveying Your Congregation	3
Three by Five Surveys.....	3
Ten-Minute Telephone Interviews.....	3
Wall of Wonder	4
In-Home Meetings	5
Conducting a Mail Survey	5
Surveying Your Immediate Neighborhood	6
Door-to-Door Canvass.....	7
Interviewing Community Leaders	8
Applying for a Grant	8
Funding	8
Sample Covenant	8
For Additional Information	9
Website Resources for Church Statistics and Reporting	9

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide you with information about the step-by- step process for congregations who are ready to engage your local neighborhoods with the tangible application of the gospel to the issues of peace and justice with which your neighbors struggle.

The former Peace and Justice Task Force created an outline of the process, to enable you to see how to prepare for, implement and follow-up on your own local church initiative. We have taken many of the materials supplied by the PCUSA Research Services and compiled “do-it-yourself” research tools for finding out about your congregation’s strengths and interests, as well as your local community’s needs.

We have designed a process for applying for a Local Church Initiative grant and for networking with other congregations or secular agencies in order to meet your objectives and garner support for your project.

We have created a covenant which we invite your Session to consider. Signing this covenant, and entering into a partnership with the Presbytery Council, is the first step into a process designed to give you the tools, support and resources you need to make a tangible difference in your local community.

We encourage you to examine this process, pray about your participation and then join us in this Local Church Initiative.

Outcomes

- ✓ Anticipating that this will greatly enhance the mission, outreach and vitality of our congregation
- ✓ Forging ongoing partnerships between congregations for planning and action
- ✓ Effecting change in policy and/or action in local communities and regional areas
- ✓ Demonstrating the peace and justice of Jesus Christ to our neighbors in tangible and powerful ways

Surveying Your Congregation

There are several ways to gather and interpret information. Below, Council has offered a variety of ways to survey your congregation. Choose one or more methods which suit your congregation best:

- Three by Five Surveys
- Ten-Minute Telephone Interviews
- Wall of Wonder
- In-Home Meetings
- Conducting a Mail Survey

THREE BY FIVE SURVEYS

Use for: Gathering short answers to specific questions.

Time needed: 5 to 15 minutes to gather responses; 30 minutes or more to process responses.

Items needed: 3 x 5 cards, pens or pencils.

How to use: Pass out index cards—one per person—during worship services, a session meeting, or any congregational event, even a church supper. Ask one short, direct, focused question and have people write their answer on their card. (Keep it anonymous—No names on the cards!) Distribute and collect the cards at the same meeting or event. Don't let people take them home to fill out later, because you'll get very few back and this may result in a skewed or biased sample that will affect the accuracy of your results.

Sample Questions

1. What are your three favorite hymns?
2. What are the three greatest strengths of this church?
3. What would you like to hear a sermon about?
4. What about the church or its members gives you the greatest joy or satisfaction?
5. What are the three greatest weaknesses of this church?
6. What are the three greatest concerns you have about this church?
7. What are the three greatest challenges facing this church?
8. List two community events in which you would like this congregation to participate.
9. What are the three things you hold most sacred?
10. List a need that someone in our local community might have for which our church could help.

How to process: Examine each card and put similar answers together in a group. You could cut the cards apart so that each distinct response is on a separate section of card. Then put all similar answers in a pile or in an envelope. Develop a list with the answers and each time the same response is written, put a check by that response. Your final report should include the number of times participants gave a particular response and a general description of the themes revealed in the responses.

Adapted from: C. Jeff Woods, *User Friendly Evaluation: Improving the Work of Pastors, Programs and Laity*. Bethesda, Maryland: The Alban Institute, 1995.

TEN-MINUTE PHONE INTERVIEWS

Use for: Gathering specific information from specific individuals in the congregation.

Time needed: 10 to 15 minutes per individual interview; one to two hours to process responses.

Items needed: Specific questions to be asked, volunteers to conduct interviews, a list of names and phone numbers of individuals to be interviewed.

How to use: The 10-minute interview method involves doing short interviews with members of your congregation, either by phone or in person. The pastor, task force members or session members can make a list of individuals to interview. The number of people to be interviewed depends on the topic and the size of the congregation. The selected individuals should be as diverse as possible—include men and women, old and young, new members and long-term members, people who live nearby and those who drive some distance, etc. Develop a list of several short questions that address the issues you're interested in. Divide the names of the selected individuals so that each volunteer handles a few interviews.

Tips for interviews: The interview should be relaxed, informal and seem more like a conversation among friends. Your introduction should be brief. Here's an example: *"Hi! This is John Witherspoon from First Presbyterian Church and I'm on the Planning Committee. I'd like to talk with you for just a few minutes today about the church and ask you a few questions. Is that okay? Your comments and answers will remain anonymous."* The interviewer should record the individual's answers, but not write the individual's name or phone number with the answers—respect individual confidentiality. Be sure to thank the church member for his/her time at the end of your interview.

Sample Questions:

What about the church or its members gives you the greatest joy or satisfaction?

What are the three things you hold most sacred?

What is a weakness of this church?

What is the greatest concern you have about this church?

What is the greatest challenge facing this church?

List two community events in which you would like this congregation to participate.

List a need that someone in our local community might have for which our church could help.

How to process: After the interviews have been completed, gather all the responses and look for common themes. For example, if your questions asked about the types of educational interests in your congregation, look for responses that fall into categories such as children's ministry, adult Bible study or studies that deal with day-to-day life. Write your report giving the general themes that you found in answers to your questions and report helpful suggestions. Do not use names or other personal identifying material when preparing your final report.

Adapted from: Herb Miller, author, parish consultant, and former editor of *Net Results*, 3805 94th, Place, Lubbock, TX 79412

WALL OF WONDER

Use for: Affirming congregational identity and a sense of the congregation's continuity and history Gathering collective memories about the church and helping members celebrate who they are

Time needed: One or more hours. (Be generous—people like to keep going!)

Items needed: Butcher paper (about 20 feet long), markers of different colors, masking tape, a volunteer to record events and lead discussion

How to use: Hang the butcher paper on a smooth wall. Draw a horizontal line from one end of the paper to the other, about half way down from the top of the paper. The line represents the years in the church's life. Label the line at the far left with the year the church was organized. Label the line at the far right with the current year. Mark off years on the line. For example, every yard could represent 10 years. If the church is very old, you may wish to have the first 100 years or so represented by a single foot of wall space, with more space to the right dedicated to more recent years. The space above the line will be used to represent people or events *internal* to the church. The space below the line will represent people or events *external* to the church. For example, something like WWII or the closing of a local plant would appear below the line, but the start of a new pastor's call would be above the line. It also helps to use one color marker for people or events internal to the church and a different color marker for people or events external to the church.

Items to mark on the Wall of Wonder: Explain the purpose for the project. Ask each person to come up to put their name or initials on the line that represents the year they became a part of the congregation. Or have a volunteer do all the markings. Ask the people to share memories of the congregation as you work through the decades of time. Mark times when pastors arrived and departed and when important projects within the congregation took place. Below the horizontal line note things happening outside the congregation that had an impact on the church (e.g., war, plant closings, new neighbors, etc.)

How to process: After the exercise is completed (or you run out of time!), ask people to make some initial observations about what they have produced. You may hear comments like: *"I didn't realize we had so many pastors in the early years."* *"I didn't realize Pastor Smith [who was not well liked] got so much done!"* *"I didn't realize that the tough years for our church were also tough years for the community."* Newer members will gain a greater appreciation for the pioneers of the church and the legacy they left behind. Older members will gain a sense of how the church succeeded in meeting challenges in the past and will be encouraged that new challenges can also be met. Continuities in congregational priorities and identity will be discovered.

Adapted from: *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), edited by N. T. Ammerman, J. W. Carroll, C. S. Dudley, and W. McKinney.

IN-HOME MEETINGS

Use for: Gathering information about members' perceptions of, interest in, and goals for the congregation; letting members know they are being listened to; getting to know each other better.

Time needed: Time for socializing and discussion with each visit.

Items needed: Volunteers who are willing to host meetings, 8 to 10 members per host, a session member to attend each meeting (optional), guidelines for the meeting, and a set of three to five questions.

How to use: In-home meetings can be held over Sunday brunch or supper, or in the evening (with coffee and cookies offered). The specific time chosen for the meeting depends both on the social traditions in your area and the preferences of each host. It's best to let each host decide on his or her own schedule.

Each host should issue personal invitations to members on his or her list by using written invitations or a warm telephone invitation. When inviting members to in-home meetings, describe them as a time to get together to talk about the state of the congregation. It is **not** a time to complain, but rather a time for members to think about themselves and their relationships with the congregation. Follow-up the invitations with a postcard reminder about a week before the meeting. Usually, only about 60% of those invited will be able to attend. Session members can be assigned to the meetings, though it is not necessary. If they attend, they can help the host summarize what was heard. If not, the host will need to be able to report on the findings.

Guidelines and questions for the meetings: The meetings should be informal and unstructured, and plenty of time should be allowed for socializing before the discussion begins. Hosts should make it clear to the participants that the findings from these meetings will be shared, with whom they will be shared, and the goals for this exercise. To spark discussion, the host might ask a few basic questions.

Why are you a member of this congregation?
What do you see as the most positive aspect of the congregation?
Who are our immediate neighbors in the area around the church?
How might we reach out to them?

How to process: All hosts and participating session members should gather after all in-home meetings have been held to discuss what they heard. Although each host will have heard different things, common themes will emerge. The results can be used for setting goals for the congregation, for development of future projects, and for support for existing ventures. If desired, a summary of the in-home meetings can be distributed to the entire congregation. Keep it positive, and leave out complaints that are not productive.

CONDUCTING A MAIL SURVEY

Use for: Finding out who your worshipers are and what they value, considering new missions or programs, renewing or re-evaluating your strategic plan, to deal with change when your congregation is growing or declining, to get ready to call a new pastor, or to help a new pastor learn more about the congregation.

Time needed: Time intensive—several hours during a 6 to 8 week period.

Items needed: Survey instrument, mailing list of all members and other attendees, cover letters, reminder cards, postage-paid reply envelopes, person to coordinate the survey and serve as contact for any questions, volunteers to stuff envelopes and open returned envelopes, data entry service, data analysis service.

How to use: If an in-worship survey doesn't fit your needs, a mail survey might be an option. These resources also address the need to send follow-up reminders to non-respondents.

e Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches, Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method by Don Dillman and A Church Planning Questionnaire: Manual and Discoveries from 100 Churches, by Grayson L. Tucker, Jr.

Surveying Your Immediate Neighborhood

There are two distinct pieces to this step: one is going to your neighbors, who live in the immediate vicinity of the church building. The other is going to specific community leaders. Council will give you a clear, step-by-step process to follow, and will support and coach you, if needed.

- Door-to-Door Canvass
- Interviewing Community Leaders

DOOR-TO-DOOR CANVAS

Use for: Learning more about the needs of your community and identifying what your church can do to help, helping members feel more comfortable about doing something that is new and sometimes difficult.

Time needed: About 15 minutes per interview; one to two hours to process responses in a group setting.

Items needed: 3 x 5 cards, brochures about the congregation (optional), three to five questions to ask neighborhood residents, volunteers to canvas 20 to 30 homes each and neighborhood maps.

How to use: Make a list of three or four questions that the interviewers will ask people in the community around the church. Base the questions on what it is the congregation wants to learn about the community. Some sample questions may be:

What do you see as a main issue or need that concerns you in our community?

What can our church do to address these issues or concerns?

Is there anything you would be interested in working on?

What role, if any, do you think churches can play in helping enhance the quality of life in this community?

What exciting things are happening in the community?

Decide how many residents you should interview. This depends on the size of your community or the neighborhood where you want to minister, the size of your interviewing team, and the thickness of the soles of your shoes! At least 20 are needed to begin to identify themes in people's responses. Of course, more is better.

You may want to go around the neighborhood a week or two ahead of time, and hand out leaflets letting your neighbors know that you will be visiting on a particular date, and making the reason for your visit known. (It's not about soliciting funds or evangelizing). You may also want to get help with introductions to your neighbors...going through local leadership, local agencies, and other networks to get invitations to talk with specific families or individuals.

On the day of the door-to-door survey, church members can go alone or in pairs (if it makes them more comfortable) as they make door-to-door contacts. It is wise to prepare the interviewers for a high refusal rate: 9 out of 10 residents may not want to talk or answer questions. It is not uncommon to reach only 3% of those you attempt to contact.

Interviewers should carry 3 x 5 cards, rather than forms or papers that they will have to shuffle. It is easier for them and less threatening to the people they talk with. Only brief notes should be made at each home as residents answer questions. Later you can record some additional details about each conversation. Sometimes congregations using the door-to-door method leave a calling card with the church's name and address, but this is optional. Interviewers can also just give information about the church orally. Here is a sample introduction for interviewers:

"Hello. I'm John Witherspoon from First Presbyterian Church at the corner of 10th and Main [or across from the Courthouse on the square—just a general description of the church's location]. We are trying to get to know our neighbors and learn more about the community."

After the introduction, the interviewer can ask the questions that have been previously decided upon. Your congregation may have already identified several ministry areas that members are interested in exploring (e.g., child care center, Meals on Wheels). In addition to some of the questions above, you could prepare a card that lists some of the programs, activities, or services your congregation is considering. Hand the card to the neighborhood resident and say:

"Here is a list of services our congregation is thinking about offering in our community. Is there anything on the list you or your family might be interested in using or participating in?"

It would be very helpful to follow up afterward with a note of thanks, and a brief summary of what you learned, and what specific initiatives you may be pursuing.

How to process: After the interviews are completed, the interviewers look over the cards and compile the results by putting the same answers together in a group. A list could be made with the answers and each time a similar response is written, put a check by that response. Your final report should include the number of times a particular response was heard and a general description of the themes revealed in the responses. The interviewers can create a report or present the responses to the sponsoring group (such as the planning committee, etc.).

Adapted from: *Phil Tom, Pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis, IN, and co-author of Handbook for Urban Church Ministries. Covenant Bookstore, 3200 West Foster Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60625, 1996.*

INTERVIEWING COMMUNITY LEADERS

- Use for:** Gathering information about the community; listening to and understanding what people are thinking and feeling about their community and their responsibilities in it; finding opportunities for community service.
- Time needed:** 30-60 minutes per interview; One hour or more to process and share responses.
- Items needed:** Six or more community leaders and their phone numbers, volunteers to conduct the interviews, questions to be asked at interview, 3 x 5 cards on which to take notes during the interview.

How to use: Select a variety of people to visit in both the immediate area and the larger community. You want to know how they are involved in the life of the community and what they think about it. Here are some suggestions of people your committee might interview. You will think of others. Some of them may be members of your own congregation:

Teachers	Community organization leaders	School administrators
Judges	University professors	Lawyers
Bankers	Chamber of Commerce staff	Sheriff /police
Mayor	Doctors and health care leaders	Labor leaders
Youth leaders	Rural/urban development officers	Highway department
TV and radio execs	Clergy/church leaders	Business owners
Newspaper staff	Directors of social service agencies	Farm organization leaders

The planning committee should develop general guidelines about the questions to be asked, but each interviewer should develop specific questions appropriate to the person being interviewed and the position she/he holds. Assign volunteers to do the interviews singly or in pairs. The committee is to be concerned with why statements are made and what they reveal about the person and the community. They will try to get the "feel" of things from the perspective of the person being interviewed.

The Visit: Listen well. Be sensitive to what is being said. Rephrase questions to flesh out the topic, but do not be confrontational during the interview. Try for specific answers. Take short notes during the interview or right after the interview is done. Some of the leaders interviewed may be suspicious of the motives for the interview. It is important, in making an appointment and in opening the conversation, that the interviewer is able to give a clear reason for the interview:

*"I am Mr. Smith from First Presbyterian Church. In our church we believe that it is our responsibility to know how our community functions and what problems and opportunities it faces. We would like to visit with you for about half an hour to find out **your** concerns about the community, what you see as the strengths of the community, and how the work you do fits in the community."*

Five topics are usually helpful in conducting such interviews:

Interview topic #1: The nature and content of the work the interviewee does

A comfortable way to start the interview is by asking the individual to tell what he/she does and how it influences the community. Ask about the objectives the person is working toward and what s/he regards as the major contribution of that office or organization. You might push this line of questioning by asking how this person or group is dealing with a particular need or issue about which you are already aware. For example:

"As I said on the phone, our church is trying to get a better grasp of what goes on in important places in our community. We think we have a responsibility to know our community better. I would like to begin by asking you what the main responsibilities of this office are and what your part is in it."

Interview topic #2: The problems he/she faces in doing the work

Inquire about the present problems being faced by asking questions such as: *"What are the most serious problems which you have to face or that those who work here face? What keeps you from accomplishing what you are working for?"*

Interview topic #3: The help that is needed and from whom it is needed

Question suggestions are: *"Do you have any suggestions about how concerned church people can help? From what other resources is help needed? Are volunteers needed? Additional direct services? Better citizen understanding of issues?"*

Interview topic #4: The major issues facing the local community

Try to learn the interviewee's major concerns and insights about the community.

Interview topic #5: Strengths and opportunities available in the community

Ask what the interviewee sees as the community's greatest strengths. Inquire about projects that are in place and working well, so the congregation will be aware of what is already being done in the community.

How to process: After a week or two of interviewing, come together as a full committee for reports and interpretation of what you have heard. Hear reports of all interviews conducted and the specific responses to questions that were asked. Look for common and conflicting themes. Record summaries on a chalkboard, whiteboard or flip chart so that everyone can see the results. Discuss the interviews and remember to keep adequate records of what you learned. When the planning committee begins formulating its concerns, it can look back on the data and use it in a meaningful way.

Choosing Your Local Initiative

When you have done your surveys, it's time to reflect upon what you've learned and seek discernment about what initiative you are being called to take. These questions will form the heart of your process of discernment:

- 1. Is it possible to discover God's creating, governing and redeeming hand in what we have learned?**
 - What people are being reconciled?
 - What provisions are being made for our daily lives?
 - What creative solutions to human suffering are being tried?
- 2. In what ways are we as a church being called to some prophetic action?**
 - Where are there wrongs about which we need to speak?
 - Where did we discover conflicts or tensions that raise issues for us?
 - Where is something right which we need to support?
 - Where is there inadequacy or poorly functioning part of our community about which we ought to speak?
- 3. What have we discovered so far to be the crucial and most pressing needs in our community, and what should be done about them?**

Applying for a Grant

The Council will award grants to congregations who have successfully surveyed their local communities, identified initiatives and applied for financial support. We will give you a simple grant application to fill out. We also encourage you to continue to seek and identify additional financial resources and resource personnel for local projects, so that the initial \$15,000 provided by Albany Presbytery may not be the only source of funding.

Funding

- Under the auspices of Council, there is approximately \$10,000 to offer as grants to congregations who successfully identify and are ready to act upon their own local initiatives
- Other sources of funding may also be available, in partnership with congregations

(Council cannot guarantee that every program will be funded but will make an effort to award grants as fairly and responsibly as possible.)

Sample Covenant Between Your Session and the Council

The Session of the _____ Presbyterian Church, by action at their stated meeting of _____, vote to enter into a covenant with the Council of Albany Presbytery. The Session accepts the invitation to participate in the Local Church Initiative and promises to:

- select a specific leadership team of three to five people to implement this process.
- give the leadership team the support and resources needed to undertake this initiative.
- pray for and encourage the leadership team.
- communicate with the entire congregation on a regular basis as to the progress of the initiative.

The Council of Albany Presbytery pledges our full support to the Session and congregation of the _____ Presbyterian Church, and promises to:

- find a partner who will work with the leadership team as they undergo each step of the process, providing resources, coaching and support.
- pray for and encourage the leadership team.
- communicate with the entire Presbytery on a regular basis as to the general progress of the initiative among all the churches who choose to participate.

Clerk of Session

Council Moderator

For additional information about these strategies or about other services available to congregations, contact:

Research Services of PCUSA
<http://www.pcusa.org/search/congregations/>

Websites for Congregations

<http://www.pcusa.org>

Official website of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

<http://uscongregations.org/aboutus.htm>

The U.S. U.S. Congregations is a religious research group staffed by religious researchers and sociologists who are conducting the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. It is housed in the offices of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Louisville, Kentucky.

<http://www.electronicchurch.org/>

The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches— Published annually by the National Council of Churches in the USA, it information and statistics on religion in North America.

<http://hrr.hartsem.edu>

Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford Seminary - Research - Communication - Education - Consultation - Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research has a thirty-five year record of rigorous, policy-relevant research, anticipation of emerging issues and commitment to the creative dissemination of learning. This record has earned the Institute an international reputation as an important bridge between the scholarly community and the practice of faith.

<http://www.alban.org>

The Alban Institute— If you want to move the world, move a congregation. The Alban Institute was founded in 1974 as a major resource for American congregations facing the challenges of a changing society. The Alban Institute is an independent center of learning and leadership development with a focus on congregations. Located in greater Washington, D.C., Alban is a not-for-profit, membership organization that develops and shares knowledge through consulting, publishing, research, and education programs. Alban stands at the forefront of knowledge and experience regarding congregational vitality and positive trends across denominations and faith traditions. Our work is helping shape the strong congregations of tomorrow.

<http://www.netresults.org>

Resources and ideas for church vitality and leadership - *Net Results* is North America's most experienced church growth and evangelism magazine. Written by real church leaders in real churches ... practitioners, not academics ... who provide practical, hands-on, relevant ideas you can really use in your church context.

<http://www.adherents.com/index.html>

Adherents.com is a growing collection of congregational statistics for over 4,200 religions, churches, denominations, religious bodies, faith groups, tribes, cultures, movements, ultimate concerns, etc. The religions of the world are enumerated here. Basically, researchers can use this site to answer such questions as "How many Lutherans live in Wisconsin?", "What are the major religions of India?", or "What percentage of the world is Muslim?" We present data from both primary research sources such as government census reports, statistical sampling surveys and organizational reporting, as well as citations from secondary literature which mention adherent statistics.

<http://www.congregationalresources.org/about-crg>

The CRG (Congregational Resource Guide) is a project of the Alban Institute, and fully funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. as a free gift to America's Congregations. The abundance of resources available for congregations and their leaders can be overwhelming. The CRG is constantly sifting and mining these materials for those that demonstrate a high likelihood for usefulness in congregational life. With the assistance of our affiliate organization, the Indianapolis Center for Congregations in Indiana, the staff of the Alban Institute, and our board of advisors, we strive to point leaders to those materials that can assist them in aiding their congregation's efforts to become healthy bodies of worship and agents of transformation in the communities they exist.

<http://www.library.yale.edu/div/electext.htm>

The Yale University Divinity School Library - Research Guide for Christianity - A comprehensive listing and selection of Internet websites, as well as searchable full-texts available on CD-ROM.