

# Discern

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# Proclaim

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# Participate<sub>in</sub>

*God's redemptive mission in the world*

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## Introduction to the Conversation Starters

### Overview: Congregations have lost their way

Research I done in recent years shows that congregations have lost their way largely because they have lost contact with the God who calls them into mission. The basis of this project is that this loss of purpose can be counteracted through conversation about growing change from within, understanding the context of the community and congregation, working out of a vision based on God's call rather than focusing on what used to be, and rediscovering a sense of being sent into the world as God's people in mission. Helping congregations rediscover their God-given calling is critical.

My research indicates that the development of mission statements (or the more recent language of 'purpose statements') is sometimes placed too early in the journey toward renewal. Pushing a congregation to clarify its purpose without first learning anew how to seek and listen for God's will makes writing a mission statement little more than a frustrating exercise in semantics. Purpose will come to those congregations that earnestly open themselves to God's will. The conversation starters described here are a means to re-engage congregations—especially congregational leaders—in the vocabulary of faith and mission, so that we can rediscover what God is calling us to be and do.

***What cannot be named is unknown;  
what is unknown controls us.***

Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*<sup>1</sup>

### Approach: Conversion comes through conversation

My work in renewal centers around this definition: *Renewal is an ongoing conversion of the church through which we rediscover the ability to discern, proclaim, and participate in God's redemptive mission in the world.* The approach of these conversation starters is that *conversion* can and will come through *conversation*. In fact, it has become evident that the most important thing congregational leaders can do at this point in time is to open ourselves and our congregations to 'holy conversation' about our context, call and gifts. Without such conversation, the church is more likely to repeat the failures of the past than it is to find a renewed sense of purpose.

The conversation starters are clustered around the three verbs used in the above definition: Discern, Proclaim, and Participate. The conversation starters are not intended to be used in any particular order; in fact, the point is *not* to get through all the conversations, but to pursue those conversations that are most pertinent to each congregation at any given point in time, and to dwell in any given conversation long enough for awareness and understanding to arise.

To request one or more of the conversation starters (see pp.3–4), contact Dwight (use the Contact page on TheScattering.com). He will send a pdf of the conversation starter(s) you request.

## What others are saying

I am not the only ones to take note of the importance of 'holy conversations' in order to move confidently into the future. Take a look at what other authors have said:

For people in our congregations, the world is spinning. So much is happening but they have little space to process their experience and give it meaning. They come to worship with many questions and feelings that never seem to get addressed. People sense something is wrong with the state of Christian life but don't know how to express that feeling. They don't know how to articulate what lies beneath the diffuse anxiety and can't put words to the confusion. In response, leaders often make the mistake of assuming that they should address such feelings with some new strategy, plan, or program.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Until people can put their feelings into words and be heard, they are held captive by unarticulated anxiety. Leaders must create a listening space to allow people to become aware of what is happening within and among them. Such awareness requires cultivating an environment in which people discover the language for talking about what they are experiencing.

Roxburgh and Romanuk, *The Missional Leader*<sup>2</sup>

[The story of Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness] leads us to the same conclusions as do the new sciences. To be a leader in a situation of deep change is to hold the people in the chaos or the wilderness long enough for transformation to take place. To be a leader in a situation of deep change

***Had they made the trip in forty weeks or forty months, the people of Israel would have arrived in the promised land unchanged. They would still have been a slave people.***

Gilbert Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation*<sup>3</sup>

to fix something. It is to help people confront their pain, disappointments, and anxieties without diminishing them but also without being overwhelmed by them. It is to help people dream dreams of alternate possibilities that provide direction and energy. It is to help people escape the boxes of their assumptions and learned behavior so that deep change is not subverted by old rules. And, perhaps most importantly, it is to help hold people in the wilderness of their experience, the chaos of not knowing what comes next until it comes.

does not require the ability to produce an answer. It requires the patience and the courage to hold people without an answer close to the pain and possibility that can transform. ...

The role of the leader is to pay attention long enough and not to run off

Gilbert Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation*<sup>4</sup>

## Goals

Those who engage in these conversations will:

1. Create a safe environment within which to discuss the current state of the church and alternatives to which God might be calling them.
2. Re-engage ancient practices of the church, including prayer, study of scripture, discernment and community.
3. Be able to identify the most critical tasks that will lead toward ongoing conversion and renewed participation in God's mission in the world.
4. Find a clearer vision of God's unique call to them and to their congregation.

## Methodology

Each conversation starter follows this structure:

- Reading scripture related to the particular topic of conversation.
- Reading a brief description of ‘the problem’ presented by the topic.
- Discussing questions related to how ‘the problem’ might be applicable to the congregation’s particular setting, supported by prayer and other sacred practices.
- Reading a brief description of an alternative way of looking at the topic.
- Reading scripture related to the alternate vision.
- Discussing questions related to how the vision might be applicable to the congregation’s ministry, supported again by prayer and other sacred practices.

In addition, each conversation starter will include supplemental quotes from scripture and from contemporary authors that amplify the topic; a list of resources for extended reading is also provided. Both of these could be used by leaders to take the conversation deeper.

## Topics

### *In the Discern cluster*

**Depending on God:** Addressing one critical cause of our loss of purpose, this conversation explores the possibility of integrating prayer and the scripture into the life of the congregation, beginning with the leadership group.

**Seeking the mind of Christ:** Rather than depending on business and legislative models for congregational leadership (which often tells us little more than what the majority thinks), this conversation explores the use of discernment to discover the will of God.

**God’s unique call to us:** A common assumption of modern Christians is that God calls us to green pastures beside still waters. This conversation explores the possibility that those factors that adversely affect our congregations might be God’s call to follow in new and unexpected directions.

**Behold, I am doing a new thing:** Members often ask, “What happened to the church I once knew and loved?” This conversation opens the possibility that the demise of Christendom is God’s ‘new thing’ in our day, calling the church to mission.

**Using our gifts:** A ‘maintenance’ mentality can lead us to look for people to fill slots; this conversation raises up the use of spiritual gifts as an alternative means of energizing both the members’ and the congregation’s ministry.

**Dying to the old:** North Americans are blessed with the gift of being able to do whatever we set our minds to; in the church this attitude can inadvertently leave God out of the picture. This conversation explores the possibility of dying to the old ways of being and doing so that we can rise to the new life God is calling forth.

### *In the Proclaim cluster*

**Forming faith:** In recent decades, leaders in the church took their cue from the strengths of the American education system; in so doing we emphasized teaching information rather than forming faith in followers. This conversation looks at the need to relearn how to be a community that forms faith that calls us to a distinct way of life.

**Becoming a community that embodies God's love:** The primacy of the individual is a given in our society, even in our congregations. This conversation explores the biblical understanding of 'the household of God,' and how *interdependence*, shared responsibility, mutual accountability and common interest could reshape our congregation and our mission.

**Rediscovering Christian practices:** Congregations today are often similar to those described among the seven churches in Revelation, from model communities to lukewarm followers. This conversation looks at the potential of Christian practices to increase a congregation's vitality.

**I, too, am a minister:** When people talk about 'ministry,' too often they say, "That's the pastor's job." This conversation explores what Ephesians means when it says that pastors are called "to equip the saints for the work of ministry."

**Speaking the faith:** One side-effect of emphasizing 'teaching information' over 'forming faith' is that we have not equipped our members to speak the faith to one another or to the people in our daily lives. This conversation looks at what it might mean to create an environment where speaking the faith is an ordinary and not an extraordinary phenomenon in our congregations.

**Worship that shapes and sends:** The worship wars of recent years reveal the uncomfortable truth that worship often centers on us—what we like, don't like, or get out of it. This conversation looks at worship that changes us and sends us into the world in mission.

### *In the Participate cluster*

**Taking the dismissal seriously:** The end of the liturgy, the dismissal, is so short that we often overlook its extraordinary meaning. This conversation opens the possibility that 'ministry' is not limited to what happens in the church; indeed, what happens in the church is important only insofar as how it helps members live out their faith in the world.

**Living into the future:** Researchers tell us that only 4% of the population is visionary, that is, capable of seeing what is not. That helps explain why so many people long for what used to be. This conversation explores possibilities for living into the future, as expressed by God's purpose for us, rather than longing to recapture the past.

**Beyond the comfort and satisfaction of members:** The assumption that the customer is always right has invaded the church, sometimes causing us to determine our ministry based on what people will like or support. This conversation looks at how God's call to mission can renew our purpose and give our members new meaning and hope.

**Empowered for mission:** Many congregational leaders continue to lead with methods that were appropriate for former times, which can inadvertently support the way things have always been. This conversation encourages leaders to look at what they are doing, how they are doing it, and whether they are empowering the congregation for ministry in the world.

**You will be my witnesses:** Many mainline Christians look at evangelism as something they wouldn't subject their dog to, much less a friend. This conversation looks at the myths we hold up in place of evangelism, and offers some healthier (and biblically based) alternatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, 87.

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 1998), 98.

<sup>4</sup> Rendle, 99.