

Process Guide on

Study of Future Possibilities For a Local Church

New England Conference
of the United Methodist Church
2004-2008

Office of Congregational Development

New England Conference of the United Methodist Church

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What this guide is for:

If you are reading this process guide with any level of interest, then it shouldn't come as a big surprise that there might be some questions about the future viability of your local United Methodist church. This guide is meant to help inform and shape your involvement in a larger conversation about the possible future of your church. It relies extensively on the processes outlined in *The Discipline of the United Methodist Church* as well as some resources, rules and guidelines that are specific to The New England Conference, of which your church is a part. Paragraph numbers throughout this document refer to the 2004 *Discipline*.

Please note that at no point does this guide supercede or impose direction upon your District Superintendent and their guidance of this process. Your District Superintendent is your primary resource for this process, and she or he is the primary decision-making authority on these matters. District Superintendents have been appointed to a special ministry of helping churches in times of transition, and they can provide excellent and informed assistance.

Some assumptions:

- We are people guided first and solely by God's direction on our personal and congregational lives. We don't seek our own gain, power or needs, but rather seek God's will.
- The mission of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This mission is at the heart of our biblical faith (Matthew 28:19-20) and United Methodist identity (§120).
- Local churches are the primary agency through which God's eternal mission is enacted; however they are temporal institutions that are born, live and die with the passing of time. Churches have tremendous potential to serve their communities and world, and we must work to find ways of releasing this God-given potential.
- United Methodists are a connected people, with investment and interest in the ministries of our individual churches shared by all of the churches of our Conference. Important decisions, such as those on the future viability of a local church, are never made in isolation but in cooperation with other United Methodist churches, leaders, and those appointed to special ministries of connecting and supervising our work together.
- Sometimes we will disagree about what we think is the right decision, but we will never disagree about God's imperative to love and care for one another. Every person is beloved of God and no one will be treated with disdain, disrespect or dishonor at any point in our relationships. Those who cross this line forfeit their opportunity to fully participate in the decisions of our Christian community.
- Not all of the decisions that we make will fully represent God's will for our own lives or for our churches. This includes decisions of local church leaders, pastors, District Superintendents, Conference Staff and Bishops. We all need the forgiveness of God and one another for intentional and unintentional missteps. Because God has loved us, despite our mistakes, we can work together in a Christian community of mutual forgiveness toward God's future.

Who's who:

Because we are a connectional church, there are many people interested in the future viability of your church. Some of the people who may be involved in this decision include:

- **Charge Conference** – the meeting of the leaders and/or members of your congregation to make decisions for the whole of your church
- **Pastor in Charge** – the pastor appointed with responsibility for caring for and administering the life of your church
- **District Superintendent** – a pastor appointed to a special ministry of overseeing and connecting the ministries of local churches in a region
- **District Board on Church Location and Building** – a regional committee charged with the responsibility of caring for church properties and locations
- **District Committee on Congregational Development** (where formed) – a regional committee charged with helping churches begin, grow and thrive
- **Conference Local Church Transformation Team** – a conference-wide team responsible for helping existing churches develop transformational ministries
- **Conference Committee on Congregational Development** – a conference-wide committee that assists new and existing local churches
- **Conference Director of Congregational Development** – a conference staff member who works to help churches begin, grow and thrive
- **Conference Board of Trustees** – a conference-wide board with responsibility for all properties of the conference, including all properties held in trust by local congregations such as church buildings, parsonages and endowments
- **Annual Conference Meeting** – annual gathering of clergy and lay members who make decisions for all of the United Methodist churches in an area
- **Cabinet** – regular meeting of all District Superintendents and Bishop
- **Bishop** – a pastor elected and appointed to the work of overseeing the ministries of United Methodist clergy, laity and congregations in a conference area

What troubles church:

Questions about the future viability of local churches usually arise out of an awareness that the church might be in some kind of trouble. Some of the common indicators of trouble might be:

- Significant and prolonged loss of participation, attendance and membership
- Decline in number and quality of ministries to congregation and community
- Decline in support of regional, national and international missions
- Decline in willingness and enthusiasm of church leadership
- Continued pattern of conflict and strife with leaders, pastor or congregation
- Loss of spiritual focus, energy and direction
- Disconnection with God's mission and purpose for the church

- Progressive movement from full-time, to half-time, to less than half-time support of pastoral appointment
- Continued decline in number of people financially supporting church
- Continued and prolonged pattern of non-payment of church's part of mission shares, health insurance or building insurance
- Significant financial crisis, such as the inability to repay debt or salaries
- Significant facilities crisis, such as building decay or destruction
- Significant leadership crisis, such as frequent and repeated pastoral changes
- Significant community crisis, such as radical cultural change or natural disaster

Whether you identify with any of these common troubles or not, you probably have a sense that your church is not doing everything that it can to live out God's call to serve your community. This assessment process is about taking a realistic look at the troubles, researching the options, marshalling some support systems, and calling on God for help. The outcome of this process is an informed discernment of God's will for your church.

Initiating the process:

The process of assessing the potential and future viability of a local church can be initiated by the congregation itself or at the discretion of the District Superintendent. In either case, the process begins with the District Superintendent calling an orientation meeting in the local church. The District Superintendent or their designee will inform and orient the church to the viability process and seek their input on involvement in the local church assessment task force. This meeting may or may not necessarily be an official Charge Conference meeting, and no other business will be on its agenda. This process guide may be presented and given to participants at this initial meeting.

Great care will be taken to make sure to include everyone present in discussion of the church's past, present and potential future. Sensitivity will be exercised by everyone participating to the church's history, culture, fears, feelings of loss and grief, and other feelings. Everyone will invest the time and respect to hear each other and their stories as they share together about the ministries of their church.

This meeting will conclude with the agreement of at least one layperson from the congregation to serve on the local church assessment task force and a reasonable date set for the reception of the task force's report to the congregation.

The work of the task force:

The District Superintendent shall appoint a task force to research and assess the future viability of a local church. This local church assessment task force shall include an equal number of lay and clergy and include persons from the congregation being studied (as directed in ¶213). This task force will be given a time-line for their work and a specific length of service. Care will be taken to include lay and clergy leaders familiar with the congregation and region, and if possible should include representatives from the District Board of Church Location and Building, District Committee on Congregational Development, and the Conference Congregational Development Committee. The District Superintendent shall convene and lead this task force or shall appoint a leader. In either

case, the District Superintendent shall provide significant input and guidance throughout the task force's research and reporting.

The task force will do an extensive study of the past, present and potential ministry of the local church. The study will include, but not be limited to:

- a) unique missional opportunities and needs of the community;
- b) present ministries of the congregation;
- c) number of leaders and style of leadership;
- d) growth potential of the surrounding community;
- e) fiscal and facilities needs;
- f) distance from other United Methodist churches;
- g) number and size of churches of other denominations in the community;
- h) other items that may impact the church's ability to fulfill the mission of the Church.

The task force will also assess the spiritual health of the congregational and its commitment to engage in the mission of the Church. This study will be surrounded in prayer and continually seek God's guidance for the future ministry of the local church.

After completing its study, the task force will produce a report and a series of recommendations as to how best to fulfill the local church's call to ministry and to optimize the stewardship of the ministry resources available. The recommendations shall explore options for serving the community with nurture, outreach, and witness ministries as an organized church or cooperative parish ministries or ecumenical shared ministries; or give special attention to redevelopment, relocation, or discontinuance. This report will include:

- a) location(s) of ministry site(s)
- b) purpose of ministry
- c) methods and timeline of ministry development
- d) descriptions and plans for securing necessary resources in leadership, finances, training, facility, or Spirit
- e) benchmarks for evaluation of effectiveness of ministry
- f) evaluation process, including feedback to District Congregational Development Committee, District Board of Church Location and Building, and District Superintendent

This report may include suggestions for funding from different committees or agencies of the United Methodist church, but being mentioned in the report will not construe the approval of these committees or agencies to spend these resources. The report will take into account the various funding and grant request timelines and procedures. If the report includes recommendation about the church property, the Conference Board of Trustees will be consulted before the report is finalized. This report may also describe a set of gifts and skills desired in clergy leadership, which may be taken under advisement by the Bishop and Cabinet. The District Superintendent must review and approve the final draft of the report and recommendations.

Reporting and decision-making:

The report and recommendations of the local church assessment task force will be published and presented to the congregation for consideration and discernment. Those

invited to the presentation shall include: the members of the congregation, the pastor(s), the District Superintendent, and members of the District Board of Church Location and Building. Invitations may be extended to members of the District Committee on Congregational Development, Conference Director of Congregational Development, and other United Methodist clergy and lay leaders in the area or involved in related ministries. This meeting shall be for information and presentation, but it may be immediately followed by a meeting of the Charge Conference of the local church to act on the report and recommendations.

Upon receiving the task force's report, the members of the local church shall consider the recommendations and adopt a response to them. This response may include adopting all or some of the recommendations. Great care should be taken by the congregation to sincerely and honestly seek God's will for them and their church. Partial, or even full, adoption of the recommendations may not preclude a District Superintendent recommending discontinuing a local church (§2548.2); however, full adoption and vigorous implementation of revitalization recommendations will be an excellent sign of congregational health and commitment.

The District Superintendent shall report the results of the study and the congregation's response to the District Committee on Church Location and Building, the District Committee on Congregational Development, and the Cabinet for approval of the Bishop and majority of District Superintendents, with recommendations for the allocation of conference staff, resourcing, financial support, or other resources needed to undergird the congregation's efforts to reach its recommended potential. Any committees or agencies mentioned in the report shall also receive a copy of the report with strong encouragement from the Cabinet to give priority to any grant or resource requests that they may receive the local church. Such annual conference support shall be committed no longer than three years (§213).

Deciding to discontinue a local church:

One possible recommendation of the local church assessment task force may be to discontinue a local church. This is a decision of last resort, and priority should be given to revitalized ministries, cooperative ministries, merged ministries or other creative solutions. However, sometimes discontinuance is the most reasonable and responsible option for stewardship of the gifts, resources and people of a local congregation.

This decision can be taken by the Charge Conference of a local church at an appropriately called meeting or it can be taken by the Annual Conference with the consent of the Bishop, a majority of the District Superintendents, and the District Board of Church Location and Building. Churches may determine how to direct the disposition of their resources, or they can allow the Annual Conference to decide on how best to use those resources to support ministry development in their area or city. That said the local church and the Conference must use proceeds from the discontinuance of churches in urban centers with more than 50,000 in population for new and/or existing ministries within that urban center (§2548.7).

Pertinent Sections of *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004*

¶ 201. Definition of a Local Church

The local church provides the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. It is a community of true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.

¶ 202. The Function of the Local Church

The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world. It is primarily at the level of the local church that the church encounters the world. The local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society. The function of the local church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is to help people to accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and to live their daily lives in light of their relationship with God. Therefore, the local church is to minister to persons in the community where the church is located, to provide appropriate training and nurture to all, to cooperate in ministry with other local churches, to defend God's creation and live as an ecologically responsible community, and to participate in the worldwide mission of the church, as minimal expectations of an authentic church.

¶ 203. Relation to the Wider Church

The local church is a connective society of persons who have been baptized, have professed their faith in Christ, and have assumed the vows of membership in The United Methodist Church. They gather in fellowship to hear the Word of God, receive the sacraments, praise and worship the triune God, and carry forward the work that Christ has committed to his church. Such a society of believers, being within The United Methodist Church and subject to its Discipline, is also an inherent part of the church universal, which is composed of all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and which in the Apostles' Creed we declare to be the holy catholic church.

¶ 204. Care of Members

Each local church shall have a definite evangelistic, nurture, and witness responsibility for its members and the surrounding area and a missional outreach responsibility to the local and global community. It shall be responsible for ministering to all its members, wherever they live, and for persons who choose it as their church.

¶ 213. A Process for Assessment of Local Church Potential

In static, declining, or changing population areas, local churches may take the opportunity to study their congregation's potential. Upon the request of the congregation the district superintendent shall appoint a study task force to do an extensive study of the past, present, and potential ministry of that local church. Alternatively, the district superintendent may appoint such a task force when the future viability of the congregation is in question or whenever he/she deems it necessary for other reasons. The task force shall be composed of an equal number of lay and clergypersons and shall include persons from that congregation.

1. This study shall include, but not be limited to: a) unique missional opportunities and needs of the community; b) present ministries of the congregation; c) number of leaders and style of leadership; d) growth potential of the surrounding community; e) fiscal and facilities needs; f) distance from other United Methodist churches; g) number and size of churches of other denominations in the community; h) other items that may impact the church's ability to fulfill the mission of the Church as stated in Chapter One, Section I.

2. The findings shall be published and presented to the congregation with recommendations as to how best to fulfill the local church's call to ministry and to optimize the stewardship of the ministry resources available. The recommendations shall explore options for serving the community with nurture, outreach, and witness ministries as an organized church (¶¶ 201-204) or cooperative parish ministries (¶ 206) or ecumenical shared ministries (¶ 207); or give special attention to redevelopment, relocation, or discontinuance. Those invited to the presentation shall include: the members of the congregation, the pastor(s), the district superintendent, and members of the district board of church location and building (¶ 2518).

3. a) The members of the local church shall consider the recommendations and adopt a response to them. The district superintendent shall report the results of the study and the congregation's response to the cabinet, with recommendations for the allocation of conference staff, resourcing, financial support, or other resources needed to undergird the congregation's efforts to reach its recommended potential. Such annual conference support shall be committed no longer than three years. b) In urban churches where the reported average worship attendance for the previous two conference years is below 25 or is unknown, the District Superintendent may convene a special session of the conference to take action concerning the ministry recommendations. In addition to the local church charge conference membership, the members of the District Board of Church Location and Building will be present with voice only.

¶ 2541. Disposition and Mortgage of Church Building or Parsonage

Real property acquired by a conveyance subject to the trust clause may be sold in conformity with the provisions of the Discipline of The United Methodist Church when its use as a church building or parsonage, as the case may be, has been, or is intended to be, terminated; and when such real estate is sold or mortgaged in accordance with the provisions of the Discipline of The United Methodist Church, the written acknowledged consent of the proper district superintendent representing The United Methodist Church to the action taken shall constitute a release and discharge of the real property so sold and conveyed from the trust clause or clauses; or in the event of the execution of a mortgage, such consent of the district superintendent shall constitute a formal recognition of the priority of such mortgage lien and the subordination of the foregoing trust provisions thereof; and no bona fide purchaser or mortgagee relying upon the foregoing record shall be charged with any responsibility with respect to the disposition by such local church of the proceeds of any such sale or mortgage; but the board of trustees receiving such proceeds shall manage, control, disburse, and expend the same in conformity to the order and direction of the charge conference or church local conference, subject to the provisions of the Discipline of The United Methodist Church with respect thereto.

¶ 2542. Restriction on Proceeds of Mortgage or Sale

1. No real property on which a church building or parsonage is located shall be mortgaged to provide for the current (or budget) expense of a local church, nor shall the principal proceeds of a sale of any such property be so used. This provision shall apply alike to unincorporated and incorporated local churches.

2. A local church, whether or not incorporated, on complying with the provisions of the Discipline may mortgage its unencumbered real property as security for a loan to be made to a conference board of global ministries or a city or district missionary society; provided that the proceeds of such loan shall be used only for aiding in the construction of a new church.

3. Exception to this restriction may be granted in specifically designated instances to allow use of equity and/or accumulated assets from the sale of property to provide for congregational redevelopment efforts including program and staff. Such exception may be granted by the annual conference, the bishop, and the cabinet upon request of the local church in consultation with congregation development staff where applicable. A clear and detailed three-to-five-year redevelopment plan that projects a self-supporting ministry must accompany the request.

¶ 2548. Discontinuation or Abandonment of Local Church Property

1. Prior to a recommendation by a district superintendent to discontinue the use of church property as a local church pursuant to ¶ 2548.2 hereof, or before any action by the annual conference trustees with regard to the assumption of any local church property considered to be abandoned pursuant to ¶ 2548.3, the district superintendent should obtain and consider an opinion of legal counsel as to the existence of any reversion, possibility of reverter, right of reacquisition, or similar restrictions to the benefit of any party.

2. Discontinuation—*a)* Prior to a recommendation of the district superintendent, in consultation with the appropriate agency assigned the responsibility of the conference parish and community development strategy, that a local church be discontinued, the district superintendent shall guide the congregation in an assessment of its potential as outlined in ¶ 213. A recommendation of discontinuance shall include recommendations as to the future use of the property and where the membership (¶ 229) and the title to all the real and personal, tangible and intangible property of the local church shall be transferred. On such recommendation that a local church no longer serves the purpose for which it was organized and incorporated (¶¶ 201-204), with the consent of the presiding bishop and of a majority of the district superintendents and the district board of church location and building of the district in which the action is contemplated, the annual conference may declare any local church within its bounds discontinued.

b) If a church has been discontinued by the annual conference without direction concerning the disposition of property, the real and personal, tangible and intangible property shall be disposed of as if it were abandoned local church property (¶ 2548.3).

c) If the annual conference declares any local church discontinued, the failure to complete any of the prior steps will not invalidate such discontinuance.

3. Abandonment—When a local church property is no longer used, kept, or maintained by its membership as a place of divine worship, the property shall be considered abandoned, and when a local church no longer serves the purpose for which it was organized and incorporated (¶¶ 201-204), with the consent of the presiding bishop, a majority of the district superintendents, and of the district board of church location and building, the annual conference trustees may assume control of the real and personal, tangible and intangible property. If circumstances make immediate action necessary, the conference trustees, should give first option to the other denominations represented in the Commission on Pan-Methodist Cooperation and Union. The conference trustees may proceed to sell or lease said property, retain the proceeds in an interest-bearing account, and recommend the disposition of the proceeds in keeping with annual conference policy. It shall be the duty of the annual conference trustees to remove, insofar as reasonably possible, all Christian and church insignia and symbols from such property. In the event of loss, damage to, or destruction of such local church property, the trustees of the annual conference are authorized to collect and receipt for any insurance payable on account thereof as the duly and legally authorized representative of such local church.¹⁰

4. All the deeds, records, and other official and legal papers, including the contents of the cornerstone, of a church that is so declared to be abandoned or otherwise discontinued shall be collected by the district superintendent in whose district said church was located and shall be deposited for permanent safekeeping with the commission on archives and history of the annual conference.

5. All gifts held in trust, assets of any endowment funds, and assets of any foundation of the church, shall be reviewed as part of the discontinuance or abandonment. All such assets shall pass as directed by the annual conference, or, if there is no such direction, to the trustees of the annual conference, unless otherwise directed by operation of law.

6. Any gift, legacy, devise, annuity, or other benefit to a pastoral charge or local church that accrues or becomes available after said charge or church has been discontinued or abandoned shall become the property of the trustees of the annual conference within whose jurisdiction the said discontinued or abandoned church was located or shall pass as directed by vote of the annual conference.

7. When properties from the discontinuation of a congregation or abandonment are sold in urban centers with more than 50,000 population, the proceeds of sale must be used for new and/or existing ministries within that urban center.

Resolution 225 – Designation of the Net Assets of Closed and Abandoned Churches

New England Conference of the United Methodist Church 2004

(Paragraph numbers are from *2000 Book of Discipline*)

Whereas “The local church provides the most significant area through which disciple-making occurs” (§201), and

Whereas “The local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out under the structures of society” (§202), and

Whereas “...the local church is to minister to person in the community where the church is located, to provide appropriate training and nurture to all, to cooperate in ministry with other local churches, to defend God’s creation and live as an ecologically responsible community, and to participate in the worldwide mission of the church...” (§202), and

Whereas “The purpose of the annual conference is to make disciples of Jesus Christ by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church all to the glory of God (§601), and

Whereas from 1994 to 2003 there were 37 church closing and 6.8% reduction in church attendance in the New England Annual Conference, and

Whereas population demographics within the boundaries of the New England Annual Conference indicate these church closures are contrary to the opportunity for proclaiming the Word of God, and

Whereas there is an urgency and a need to support the transformation of existing United Methodist congregations and development of emerging United Methodist congregations, including those relating to providing ministry for ethnic groups within the border of the New England Annual Conference, and

Whereas it is the responsibility of the District Superintendent, in consultation with the appropriate agency assigned responsibility for the conference parish and community development strategy to “include recommendations as the future use of the property...” of discontinued congregations (§2548.2), and

Whereas it is the responsibility of the Annual Conference to establish policy for the disposition of assets from church closings where direction for disposition has not been provided (§2548), and

Whereas it is the responsibility of the District Board of Church Location and Building (§2519.2) and the Conference Congregational Development Committee (§630.5e) to develop strategies for development of new and established congregations,

Therefore,

Be it resolved that congregations that are being discontinued shall be asked for input for the disposition of their property and assets by the District Superintendent and the Conference Congregational Development Committee and its related subcommittees, and

Be it further resolved that the New England Annual Conference has a responsibility to reinvest the assets of closed and abandoned local churches, that have not provided direction for disposition of legally unencumbered property, back into the United Methodist congregations near the one from which they were derived for purpose of ministering to, and making disciples of, the people in the local or regional area, and

Be it further resolved that the Conference Board of Trustees of the New England Annual Conference shall receive and invest all net proceeds not gross proceeds from closed churches that do not have direction for disposition, and

Be it further resolved that the Cabinet, Conference Congregational Development Committee, Trustees, District Congregational Development Committees (where formed), and District Boards of Church Locations and Buildings shall develop and implement a strategic plan which provides for the use of these funds for strengthening and transforming existing United Methodist congregations within the local or regional area of the New England Annual Conference from which they were derived, and

Be it further resolved that priority shall be given to focusing transformation efforts into the local areas where churches have been closed.

