



NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

A FIELD GUIDE SERIES FOR CONGREGATIONS AND PASTORS

WRITING *the* MINISTRY DISCERNMENT PROFILE



A FIELD GUIDE

GIVING VOICE TO
IDENTITY, VOCATION,
AND HOPE



HELPING PASTORS AND CONGREGATIONS
DISCERN THE WAY FORWARD—TOGETHER

Writing the Ministry Discernment Profile Field Guide

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Giving Voice to Identity, Vocation, and Hope

A Field Guide in the *Navigating Pastoral Transitions Series*

About This Field Guide

Eventually, discernment must find its way into words.

Your congregation has already done important work.

You have prepared for transition.

You have ended one season of ministry as faithfully as possible.

You have remembered the stories that formed you.

You have listened to one another and to the community around you.

You have begun noticing patterns.

Gifts.

Challenges.

Possibilities.

Questions.

Signs of the Holy Spirit's activity.

Now comes the work of describing what you have discovered.

For congregations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), much of that description takes shape in the **Ministry Discernment Profile**, or MDP. Other denominations use different forms and processes, but the challenge is much the same.

How do you put into words who you are?

How do you describe your community truthfully?

How do you name what you are beginning to understand about God's call?

How do you describe the ministry ahead without pretending you already know exactly what it will become?

And how do you help a pastor who reads your profile discern whether their gifts and vocation might belong within your story?

Those are not primarily questions about completing a form.

They are questions of discernment.

This Field Guide is therefore not a set of instructions for filling in boxes. Forms change. Denominational requirements change. Online systems change.

The deeper work endures.

This Guide is about the work beneath the form.

It is about gathering what you have learned, recognizing what matters, finding language that is truthful and particular, and creating a profile that sounds like a living congregation—not an advertisement assembled from familiar church phrases.

Part One—The Field Guide—explores that discernment and writing process.

Part Two—The Field Manual—provides practical resources for doing the work: writing exercises, section-by-section planning tools, weak and strong response examples, editing checklists, word-count strategies, review questions, and other resources that help a committee move from discernment to finished prose.

Your denomination or presbytery remains the authority for current procedural requirements. Use its current instructions, forms, approval processes, and policies.

This Guide has a different purpose.

It asks:

How do we tell the truth about who we are in a way that helps another person discern whether God may be calling us into ministry together?

That is the work before us.

Introduction

More Than a Form

By the time a congregation reaches the Ministry Discernment Profile, its people may be tired.

There have been meetings.

Conversations.

Prayers.

Goodbyes.

Stories.

Surveys.

Neighborhood walks.

Listening sessions.

Reports.

Perhaps conflict.

Certainly uncertainty.

Then someone hands the committee a form.

It is understandable that someone says:

“Let’s get this filled out so we can start looking for a pastor.”

But that misunderstands what this moment offers.

The Ministry Discernment Profile is not an interruption of discernment.

It is discernment becoming language.

Everything that came before has been preparing you to speak.

From Remembering to Listening to Language

Remembering helped you ask:

Who are we?

You listened to stories.

You rediscovered values.

You recognized gifts.

You acknowledged painful history.

You remembered seasons when the congregation adapted, took risks, imagined, and experienced God's faithfulness.

Then *Listening* turned your attention toward the present.

Where are we?

What is happening among us?

What is happening around us?

What has changed?

What are our neighbors experiencing?

Where is pain?

Where is abundance?

What gifts are already present in the community?

Where might Christ already be at work?

Now those two streams flow toward one another.

Identity and place.

Who God has formed you to be.

Where God has placed you.

Where those two streams meet, vocation begins to surface.

The MDP gives you an opportunity to find words for what you are beginning to recognize.

Writing Is Discernment

Writing exposes fuzzy thinking.

A committee may spend twenty minutes agreeing that the congregation is "mission-oriented."

Then someone asks:

"What exactly do we mean by that?"

With that question, the conversation changes.

Which mission?

Why does it matter?

What have we actually done?

Who participates?

What have we learned?

How has mission shaped the congregation?

What does it reveal about us?

To find the words, you must first find the meaning.

That is why writing itself can become a spiritual practice.

You are not simply reporting conclusions already reached.

Sometimes you discover what you believe only as you struggle to say it clearly.

Not an Advertisement

A Ministry Discernment Profile naturally has an audience.

You want pastors to read it.

You hope strong candidates will become interested.

That creates temptation.

Make the church sound attractive.

Emphasize strengths.

Soften problems.

Choose language that sounds exciting.

But the purpose of the profile is not to attract the largest possible number of candidates.

It is to help the **right conversation begin**.

Attracting a pastor to a congregation that does not actually exist is not a successful outcome.

Nor is a congregation falling in love with a pastor because both parties carefully avoided difficult truths until after the call.

Mutual discernment requires truth.

The best MDP does not say:

Look how wonderful we are.

It says:

This is who we are. This is what we are learning. This is where we struggle. This is what gives us hope. This is where we sense God may be leading. Come discern with us whether your vocation and ours belong together.

That is more than a form.

It is an invitation.

Chapter One

Before You Write

Gather What You Have Already Learned

The worst place to begin a Ministry Discernment Profile is a blank screen.

Fortunately, you do not have to.

You have already gathered much of what you need.

The challenge is that your discoveries may be scattered.

Notes from congregational conversations.

Stories from *Remembering*.

Observations from neighborhood walks.

Demographic information.

Comments from community leaders.

Session discussions.

Prayerful reflections.

Lists of gifts.

Concerns people raised.

Questions that kept returning.

Before anyone begins drafting paragraphs, gather the material.

Bring it together where everyone can see it.

What Did Remembering Teach Us?

Return to the stories.

Which ones kept appearing?

What values became visible through them?

When was the congregation especially alive?

What gifts have endured even after particular programs ended?

What difficult experiences shaped you?

What have you learned about conflict, change, leadership, hospitality, mission, generosity, worship, formation, or community?

Where did you recognize God's faithfulness?

Do not carry the historical information forward by itself.

Bring the **meaning** forward.

You are not merely writing a congregational history.

You are asking what the history has taught you about the people you have become.

What Did Listening Teach Us?

Now gather what you heard.

What are people within the congregation experiencing now?

Whose voices challenged the dominant story?

What did you notice outside the building?

What did neighbors tell you?

What demographic changes surprised you?

What strengths did you discover in the community?

Where did you hear pain?

Who is already doing work you admire?

What patterns appeared in several different places?

What questions emerged?

What seems to be changing?

Again, do not gather information simply because it is available.

Ask what it means.

Put the Two Stories Beside Each Other

Now something begins to emerge.

Perhaps *Remembering* revealed that your congregation has a long history of forming people through deep relationships.

Listening revealed widespread loneliness in the community.

Put those beside each other.

Perhaps you discovered a historic commitment to education.

Then teachers told you that many children need stable adult relationships more than another program.

Put those beside each other.

Perhaps the congregation has strong gifts in hospitality.

Community conversations revealed that people have few places where generations naturally mix.

Put those beside each other.

Do not jump immediately to a ministry plan.

Attend to the convergence.

The outline of vocation may be appearing.

If You Cannot Answer, Don't Invent

Sometimes the MDP exposes unfinished discernment.

The committee reaches a question about the congregation's future and realizes:

"We don't really know."

That is useful information.

Do not conceal uncertainty beneath polished prose.

Perhaps you need another conversation.

Perhaps you need to return to something heard during Listening.

Perhaps the congregation genuinely does not yet know.

You can say that too.

A congregation capable of saying,

“We are still discerning this,”

may be more trustworthy than one claiming certainty it does not possess.

The MDP should be the **fruit of discernment**, not a substitute for it.

Chapter Two

Tell the Truth About Who You Are

Identity Before Image

Most congregations can describe themselves in six words.

Welcoming.

Friendly.

Faithful.

Mission-minded.

Caring.

Christ-centered.

The problem is that thousands of other congregations use exactly the same words.

The words may be entirely sincere.

They simply do not tell us very much.

Show Us What You Mean

Suppose you write:

“We are a welcoming congregation.”

A pastor who reads that has learned almost nothing about you.

What does welcoming mean here?

Who has experienced it?

What do you do?

How does it shape congregational life?

What happens when someone unfamiliar enters worship?

What stories reveal hospitality?

And perhaps the more difficult question:

Who has not always experienced you as welcoming?

Now the language is beginning to reveal something.

The difference is between **claiming an identity** and **revealing one**.

Claim, Evidence, Meaning

A useful discipline is:

Claim → Evidence → Meaning

Begin with what you believe about yourselves.

Then ask what evidence supports it.

Finally ask what that evidence reveals.

For example:

Claim: Relationships matter deeply to us.

Evidence: When we remembered our Christian education ministry, people talked less about curricula and programs than about teachers and mentors who maintained relationships with young people for years.

Meaning: We have come to understand that one of our deepest gifts is formation through relationship.

Now the reader knows something about you.

Or:

Claim: We care about the community.

That is vague.

But:

“Our congregation has repeatedly responded when people in the community noticed needs before we did. Several of our strongest ministries began through partnerships rather than programs we created ourselves. We are learning that listening and collaboration are important parts of our vocation.”

That language reveals character.

Particularity Is Your Friend

Do not worry that being particular will make the congregation less attractive.

Particularity is what allows a congregation to become recognizable on the page.

You do not need every pastor to think:

“This sounds like a wonderful church.”

You need some pastors to think:

“I understand these people. Something about this sounds like a community in which my gifts might belong.”

That is a much better outcome.

Let the Congregation Sound Like Itself

Every congregation has a voice.

Some are formal.

Some conversational.

Some deeply theological.

Some practical.

Some playful.

Some rooted in tradition.

Some restless with tradition.

Some speak easily about Jesus.

Others speak more naturally about service, community, justice, worship, or grace.

Do not manufacture a voice because you think pastors will like it.

Let the profile sound like the people whose shared life it describes.

Identity comes before image.

Chapter Three

Describe the Church You Actually Have

Gifts, Challenges, and Contradictions

Truthful congregations are more compelling than perfect ones.

They are also safer places to enter.

Every congregation has strengths.

Every congregation has limitations.

Every congregation contains contradictions.

The MDP should allow some of that complexity to appear.

Strengths Have Shadows

Perhaps you are close-knit.

That can mean people care for one another beautifully.

It can also mean newcomers find established circles difficult to enter.

Perhaps you value tradition.

That can provide deep roots, rich worship, and intergenerational continuity.

It can also make adaptation difficult.

Perhaps your congregation is highly educated.

That may produce thoughtful engagement with Scripture and theology.

It may also mean people are more comfortable discussing faith than expressing it personally.

Perhaps you are independent and capable.

That can produce strong lay leadership.

It can also make receiving help difficult.

These are not indictments.

They are part of the ordinary complexity of human communities.

Mature congregations can recognize both gift and shadow.

Tell Candidates What They Deserve to Know

Imagine a pastor arriving and discovering six months later that the congregation has been deeply divided over worship for fifteen years.

Would that have mattered during discernment?

Probably.

Imagine discovering that staff relationships have been strained.

Or that the congregation has avoided discussing an important theological difference.

Or that leadership is concentrated among a small number of families.

Or that the church has experienced substantial decline but has never really grieved it.
These realities do not automatically make a congregation unhealthy or a call undesirable.
Hiding them, however, does.

A useful principle is:

Do not ask a pastor to discover during the first year what you could have told them before the first interview.

Trust begins before the call.

Honesty Is Not Confessional Dumping

This does not mean the MDP should contain every conflict in congregational history.

It is not therapy.

It is not a grievance file.

It is not the place to settle scores with previous pastors or leaders.

Ask instead:

What reality would a prospective pastor reasonably need to understand in order to discern this call faithfully?

Then tell that truth with proportion and grace.

For example:

“We are a congregation with strong relationships and long memories. A difficult conflict several years ago damaged trust among some members. Much healing has occurred, but we recognize that learning healthier ways to disagree remains part of our work.”

That tells the truth without making the old conflict the congregation’s identity.

Authenticity Creates Better Matches

You are not trying to persuade every candidate to continue.

Some pastors may read an honest description and decide:

“That isn’t where my gifts belong.”

Good.

Discernment has worked.

Another may read the same description and think:

“I know that kind of ministry. I might have something to offer there.”

Also good.

The purpose is not maximum appeal.

It is mutual recognition.

Chapter Four

Describe Your Place

The Community God Has Given You to Love

Many church profiles describe their communities as though they were written by a real estate agent.

Excellent schools.

Convenient shopping.

Beautiful parks.

Easy access to recreation.

A wonderful place to raise a family.

Those things may be true.

They may even be useful to a pastor considering relocation.

But they do not tell us much about ministry.

The deeper question is:

What is this place asking of a congregation that wants to love it faithfully?

Let Listening Shape the Description

Return to what you learned.

What has changed in the community?

Who is arriving?

Who is leaving?

Where do people gather?

What pressures do families experience?

What is happening in schools?

Where is housing changing?

What divides people?

Where are relationships strong?

What gives people hope?

Where is loneliness?

Where is creativity?

Who is already building community?

What did you hear that you did not know before you began listening?

This is the community a prospective pastor needs to encounter in your profile.

Numbers Need Stories

Demographics can help.

But numbers alone rarely yield understanding.

Suppose the median age has fallen significantly.

That matters.

But what did you learn by talking with younger residents?

Suppose the community has become more ethnically diverse.

That matters.

But does the congregation have relationships across that diversity?

Suppose poverty has increased.

That matters.

But who is experiencing it, and what are community organizations already doing?

Use data to illuminate reality.

Do not let it replace relationships.

Don't Describe the Community as a Market

Churches can slip easily into marketing language.

There are 5,000 young families within three miles.

There is a growing population of retirees.

Thousands of unchurched people live nearby.

People are not target demographics.

They are neighbors.

The question is not:

Which population represents the best opportunity for congregational growth?

It is:

Who has God given us to love?

That theological shift changes the tone of the entire profile.

Help the Candidate Imagine Ministry Here

When a pastor finishes reading your community description, they should have questions.

They should find themselves wondering about people.

Relationships.

Possibilities.

They should be able to imagine walking the streets, meeting community leaders, talking with teachers, visiting local organizations, learning the place.

You are not simply describing where the pastor might live.

You are describing the place you may be called to serve together.

Chapter Five

Name the Vocation Emerging

Where Identity and Place Meet

This may be the hardest part of the work.

It may also be the most important.

You have remembered who you are.

You have listened to where you are.

Now ask:

Where do these stories touch?

There, something like vocation may be emerging.

Vocation Is Not a Program

Suppose the congregation has a deep gift for hospitality.

Listening reveals significant loneliness in the community.

The answer is not automatically:

“We should start a loneliness program.”

Stay with the deeper question.

Perhaps the emerging vocation involves **creating belonging**.

That could take many forms over time.

Suppose your history reveals a gift for forming young people through relationships.

Teachers describe children and teenagers who need trustworthy adults.

Perhaps the vocation is not:

“Restart youth group.”

Perhaps it is:

Become a community that accompanies young people.

Programs may eventually give vocation visible form.

They are not vocation itself.

Recognize Before You Respond

The rhythm in *Living God’s Call Together* is useful here:

Reflect. Listen. Recognize. Respond.

You have reflected.

You have listened.

Now spend time recognizing.

What keeps appearing?

Where do your gifts and your community's life intersect?

What seems to generate energy?

Which possibilities keep returning?

What relationships have begun naturally?

Where are people already joining God's work?

Only then ask how you might respond.

Be Careful with Certainty

Church language can become confident with remarkable speed.

"God is calling us to..."

Sometimes that is exactly the conviction a congregation has reached.

Sometimes it isn't.

There is nothing unfaithful about saying:

"We are beginning to recognize..."

or:

"Our listening has led us to wonder..."

or:

"We sense that God may be inviting us..."

Humility does not weaken discernment.

It is strengthened by it.

A pastor who reads that language is invited into the discernment, not informed that every important conclusion has already been reached.

The MDP as Testimony

At its best, this part of the profile says:

This is what we have noticed.

This is what we have learned.

This is what we believe matters.

This is where we see our gifts.

This is where we see our neighbors' gifts.

This is what keeps stirring our imagination.

This is where we think Christ may be inviting us next.

That is not strategic planning.

It is testimony.

Chapter Six

Describe the Ministry Ahead

From Programs to Purpose

Once a congregation begins recognizing vocation, it can speak more intelligently about ministry.

Here another common mistake appears.

The congregation begins listing everything the next pastor must do.

Preach.

Teach.

Visit.

Manage staff.

Attend meetings.

Recruit members.

Lead youth.

Grow the church.

Raise money.

Develop programs.

Provide pastoral care.

Be active in the community.

The list becomes a job description for an imaginary person who has limitless energy and no need for sleep.

Step back.

What Ministry Matters Most?

Ask:

Given what we have discerned, what ministry will matter most in the next season?

Perhaps:

Deepening spiritual formation.

Building stronger relationships with the community.

Developing lay leadership.

Healing after conflict.

Strengthening intergenerational relationships.

Becoming more engaged with neighbors.

Learning to live faithfully with theological difference.

Developing partnerships.

Recovering missionary imagination.

These name the purposes of ministry.

Tasks will follow.

The Congregation Has a Call Too

This is essential.

The MDP should describe the **congregation's call before it describes the pastor's job.**

If the congregation says:

"We believe God is calling us to develop deeper relationships with our neighborhood,"

the next sentence cannot quietly become:

"Therefore, we need a pastor to go develop those relationships."

No.

We are called.

The pastor may equip.

Connect.

Teach.

Encourage.

Accompany.

Challenge.

Model.

But the ministry belongs to the Body of Christ.

A pastoral transition becomes unhealthy when a congregation discerns a vocation and then hires someone else to carry it.

Name Shared Ministry

Ask:

What will members do?

What will officers do?

What will staff do?

What gifts already exist?

What needs development?

What role would pastoral leadership play?

This produces a different kind of profile.

Instead of:

"We need a pastor who can revitalize our church."

perhaps:

"We recognize that becoming a more vital congregation will require deeper spiritual formation, stronger lay leadership, and more sustained relationships with our community. We seek a pastor who can help equip and accompany us in that work."

Now there is a partnership worthy of discernment.

Chapter Seven

What Kind of Partner Does This Ministry Need?

Gifts Before Wish Lists

Only now are you ready to talk seriously about the pastor.

Notice how late this comes.

That is intentional.

If you begin the MDP by imagining an ideal pastor, you will probably create a wish list.

If you begin with vocation and ministry, you can ask a much better question:

What pastoral gifts would complement the gifts already present among us and help us live more faithfully into the ministry we have described?

Vocation → Ministry → Gifts

Keep that sequence.

If your emerging vocation requires stronger community relationships, perhaps gifts in relational leadership and community engagement matter.

If the congregation needs deeper theological formation, teaching may be especially important.

If the congregation is recovering from conflict, emotional maturity and skill in facilitating difficult conversations may matter greatly.

If strong lay leadership already exists, perhaps you need a pastor who genuinely enjoys collaborative ministry rather than one who needs to control everything.

The gifts you seek should emerge from the ministry itself.

Essential or Merely Desirable?

Committees often want everything.

Excellent preacher.

Gifted teacher.

Strong administrator.

Warm pastoral caregiver.

Visionary leader.

Community organizer.

Skilled fundraiser.

Youth magnet.

Conflict mediator.

Strategic thinker.

Collaborative manager.

Technologically sophisticated.

Available at all times.

Pause.

Which gifts are actually essential for the ministry you have described?

Which would be valuable but are not central?

Which gifts already exist among staff and members?

Which responsibilities can be shared?

Which expectations are unrealistic?

A search grows clearer when a congregation knows what it most needs—not everything it might enjoy.

Complementarity

The pastor does not need to reproduce the congregation's gifts.

Sometimes the most fruitful partnership grows from complementarity.

A congregation strong in care may need someone who helps it look outward.

A congregation full of ideas may need someone who helps it focus.

A congregation with strong administrative systems may not need administration to be the pastor's greatest gift.

Ask:

What gifts do we already possess?

Then:

What pastoral gifts might help those gifts become more faithful and fruitful?

Now you are describing partnership.

Chapter Eight

Write for a Pastor Who Is Discerning Too

Make the Profile an Invitation

It is easy to forget that someone will actually read this.

A pastor may be sitting at the kitchen table late at night.

Perhaps they have read ten profiles already.

Perhaps they are uncertain whether they should leave their present call.

Perhaps their spouse or other family members are wondering what a move would mean.

Perhaps they have experienced disappointment in another search.

Perhaps they are not sure they are ready to move at all.

And then they open your profile.

What do you want them to encounter?

Not marketing.

A congregation.

The Candidate Is Asking Questions Too

As they read, pastors are quietly wondering:

Can I imagine serving these people?

Do I understand what matters to them?

Are they self-aware?

Do they know their community?

Are they telling me the truth?

What would ministry there actually involve?

Do my gifts fit what they need?

Would they value the gifts I bring?

Could we trust one another?

Is there enough here to make me curious?

Your writing should help those questions emerge.

Particularity Makes People Pause

Compare:

“We seek a dynamic pastor who will help us grow spiritually and numerically.”

with:

“Our congregation has learned that some of our strongest ministries have grown from relationships rather than programs. As our community changes, we want to become better listeners and more faithful partners with our

neighbors. We seek a pastor who enjoys helping people notice where God is already at work and equipping them to join in.”

The second version will not appeal to everyone.

Excellent.

But it may stir a deep interest in someone.

Leave Room for the Candidate

Do not write the future so completely that there is no room for another person’s gifts or imagination.

You are not hiring someone to execute a finished plan.

You are inviting someone into shared discernment.

Say enough to reveal a direction.

Leave enough openness for a partnership to take shape.

The best profile creates a response:

I want to talk with these people.

That is enough.

Chapter Nine

Writing Well Matters

Give Important Discernment Good Language

A congregation can practice excellent discernment and bury it beneath lifeless prose.

Long sentences.

Committee language.

Church jargon.

Abstract nouns.

Repeated claims.

Words no one uses in conversation.

Paragraphs written by six people and edited by none.

This matters.

There is nothing spiritually superior about bad writing.

Use a Writer

If your congregation has someone who writes well, use that gift.

If necessary, find someone who can help.

A skilled writer does not replace congregational discernment.

The writer serves it.

The congregation provides the truth.

The writer helps that truth become clear.

That may require one person drafting from the committee's work rather than asking seven people to write seven sections independently.

A document should sound like one congregation, not seven committee members.

Prefer Concrete Language

Avoid:

"We seek to facilitate transformational opportunities for intergenerational engagement."

Try:

"We want children, teenagers, adults, and older members to know one another well enough to share faith and life."

Avoid:

"Our congregation prioritizes missional outreach."

Try:

“Several of our strongest ministries began when members listened to community partners and joined work already underway.”

Concrete language gives the reader something to see.

Cut the Clichés

Welcoming.

Vibrant.

Dynamic.

Faithful.

Family-oriented.

Mission-minded.

Spirit-filled.

These words are not forbidden.

They are simply weak without evidence.

Whenever you encounter one, ask:

What would show this rather than merely claim it?

Respect the Reader

Word limits can be frustrating.

They can also improve writing.

Do not spend precious space saying the same thing three times.

Do not include history simply because it happened.

Do not explain every program.

Choose what reveals identity, vocation, place, and hope.

Good editing asks:

What does the reader need in order to understand us?

Everything else is negotiable.

Chapter Ten

Let the Congregation Recognize Itself

Review Before You Publish

Eventually a draft exists.

The committee has read it so many times that no one can truly see it anymore.

Now ask a different question:

Does the congregation recognize itself here?

Not:

Does everyone like every sentence?

That is impossible.

Ask whether the profile feels recognizably true.

Bring It Back

Share the important themes appropriately with the congregation.

Ask:

Does this sound like us?

What feels especially true?

What seems overstated?

What important reality is missing?

Does this describe only who we used to be, or who we are now?

Does it acknowledge where we are changing?

Do you recognize the vocation being described?

Does this ministry belong to all of us?

Listen carefully.

Then let the writing team do its work.

Do not turn the final document into a congregational line-editing session.

Ask an Outsider

Find someone who does not know the congregation well.

Let them read the profile.

Then don't ask:

"Did you like it?"

Ask:

What do you think these people care about?

What do you think this congregation is good at?

What seems difficult for them?

What do you think is happening in their community?

What do you think they believe God is calling them toward?

What kind of pastor do you imagine flourishing there?

Their answers are valuable.

They reveal what your writing actually communicates—not merely what you intended it to communicate.

One Last Honesty Check

Before finalizing, ask:

Have we exaggerated?

Have we hidden anything important?

Have we used aspirational language as though it describes present reality?

Have we blamed anyone?

Have we described challenges fairly?

Have we confused our preferences with God's call?

Have we created an impossible pastor?

Have we left room for another person's gifts?

Have we told enough truth for mutual discernment to begin?

If so, you are getting close.

Chapter Eleven

Release the Profile

Let Discernment Continue

There comes a moment when the editing must stop.

One more person can always suggest another word.

One more meeting can always produce another revision.

Eventually, the profile must pass from your hands.

Complete the practical work.

Check factual accuracy.

Confirm current denominational requirements.

Verify compensation and position information.

Check contact information.

Proofread.

Obtain required approvals.

Make sure the final version is actually the final version.

Then stop.

Pray Before You Send It

This document represents months of work.

More than that, it carries years of congregational life.

Stories.

Losses.

Faithfulness.

Failures.

Relationships.

Worship.

Service.

Questions.

Hope.

You have tried to give all of that a faithful voice.

So pray.

Not:

“God, send us the perfect pastor.”

Perhaps:

“God, receive what we have learned about ourselves. Correct what we still misunderstand. Give us wisdom as we encounter those who read these words. And give them wisdom as they discern whether their story and ours might belong together.”

Then release it.

The Work Changes Now

Until this point, much of the discernment has been congregational.

Who are we?

Where are we?

What is God doing?

What ministry seems to be emerging?

What pastoral gifts might complement that ministry?

Now another person enters the discernment.

A pastor reads.

They wonder.

They pray.

They recognize something—or they do not.

Their vocation enters into conversation with yours.

The question changes.

It is no longer simply:

Who are we called to be?

It becomes:

Might God be calling us to become partners in this ministry?

That question cannot be answered by a profile.

The profile can only open the conversation.

Epilogue

Now Someone Else Begins to Read

Somewhere, someone opens your Ministry Discernment Profile.

You probably do not know who.

Perhaps the pastor lives thirty miles away.

Perhaps a thousand miles away.

Perhaps they have been actively searching for months.

Perhaps they were not certain they were ready to search at all.

Perhaps their present ministry is going well, but a quiet restlessness has been growing.

Perhaps they have recently heard “no” from another congregation.

Perhaps they have said “no” themselves.

Perhaps they are simply wondering what God might be doing next.

Then they encounter your congregation.

Not the whole congregation, of course.

No document can contain that.

Still, they encounter something.

A story.

A place.

A people.

A history.

Some wounds.

Some gifts.

Some questions.

Some hope.

And, if you have done this work well, they encounter something more important than a polished description.

They encounter truth.

You Are Not Trying to Convince Them

That may be difficult to remember.

You have worked hard.

You want good candidates.

You want the process to move.

But the purpose of the MDP is not to make a pastor want your church.

The purpose is to help a pastor discern whether your church may be part of their call.

Those are different things.

Someone may read your profile and think:

“These are good people, but this is not my call.”

Bless them.

The profile has served its purpose.

Someone else may stop halfway through a paragraph.

They may read it again.

They may call a spouse into the room.

They may think about a conversation they had months ago.

They may remember something they have been praying about.

And they may wonder:

Could this be the place?

You cannot manufacture that moment.

You can only make room for it.

Two Vocations Begin to Meet

The congregation has been discerning vocation.

The pastor has been discerning vocation too.

Now two stories begin to move toward one another.

The congregation asks:

Could this person's gifts, theology, character, experience, and sense of call belong within the ministry God is forming among us?

The pastor asks:

Could the person God has formed me to be belong within the life and vocation of these people?

Neither is hiring the other.

Neither is auditioning for the other.

Both are listening for recognition.

That is why the next movement is not recruitment.

It is mutual discernment.

Soon there will be Pastoral Discernment Profiles to read.

First conversations.

Questions.

Stories.

Silences.

Interviews.

Disappointments.

References.

Visits.

Prayer.

And perhaps, in time, recognition.

But do not rush there yet.

For now, receive what has already happened.

You have moved from:

Who are we?

to:

Where are we?

to:

What might God be calling us toward?

And finally:

How do we give faithful language to what we have discovered?

You have found your voice.

Now someone else begins to listen.

And somewhere in the meeting of those stories, you will begin to ask together:

Is God calling us into ministry with one another?

That is the work of the next Field Guide:

Calling New Leadership

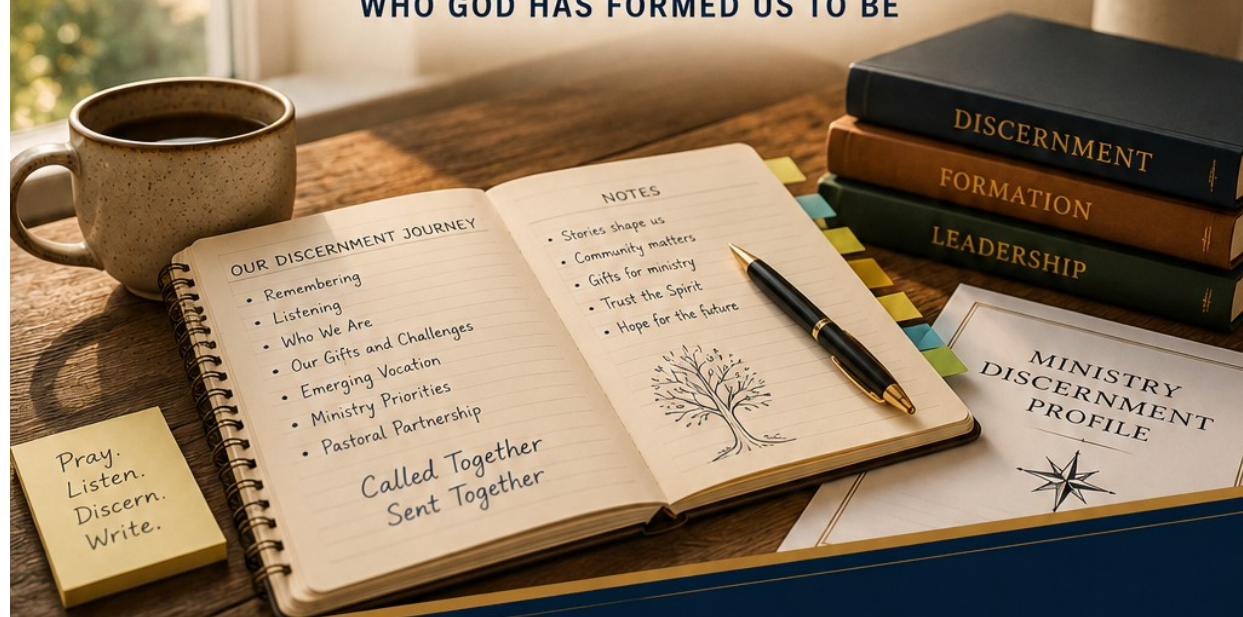
Now the search begins.

But discernment never stopped.



WRITING THE MINISTRY DISCERNMENT PROFILE FIELD MANUAL

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR DISCOVERING
WHO WE ARE AND
WHO GOD HAS FORMED US TO BE



FIELD MANUAL

THE COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE FOR
EVERY STEP OF THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY



CLOSE WITH GRACE

Guide good endings that
honor the past and
bless the future.



CARE FOR PEOPLE

Walk together through
grief, change, and
new beginnings.



LAUNCH WITH HOPE

Release the ministry into
God's future with vision
and courage.

◆ A RESOURCE OF THE NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS SERIES ◆

Writing the Ministry Discernment Profile Field Manual

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Introduction

From Discernment to Language

By the time a congregation is ready to write its Ministry Discernment Profile, much of the deepest work should already have happened.

You have remembered.

You have listened.

You have told stories about the congregation that formed you. You have looked beneath familiar programs for the values they carried. You have named gifts and limitations. You have paid attention to your community, listened to neighbors and partners, and begun noticing where the congregation's gifts meet the life of the place around it.

You may even have begun to recognize something about the ministry to which God is calling you next.

Now all of that listening must become language.

That sounds like the easy part.

It isn't.

The Ministry Discernment Profile asks a congregation to gather months of conversation, prayer, memory, discovery, disagreement, and emerging conviction—and carry them through the narrow doorway of a remarkably small space.

That is why this Field Manual begins with an important conviction:

The MDP does not interrupt discernment. It is discernment taking the form of language.

Writing requires choices.

What matters most?

What have we actually learned?

What belongs in the profile?

What can be left out?

What do we know?

What do we only suspect?

What do we hope for?

What kind of ministry is beginning to emerge?

What kind of pastoral partner might help us live into it?

And perhaps most difficult:

How do we tell the truth about ourselves in language another person can understand?

That is the work of this Field Manual.

You Are Not Starting with a Blank Page

One of the surest ways to lose the work is to gather a committee around a table, project the form on a screen, place the cursor in the first empty box, and ask:

“What should we say?”

The blank box immediately takes control of the room.

Someone suggests a sentence.

Someone changes a word.

Someone thinks the sentence sounds too negative.

Someone else wants to mention the choir.

Another person remembers something that should have been included three paragraphs ago.

Forty-five minutes later, the committee has produced seventy-eight words and is debating whether the congregation is welcoming, warm, or hospitable.

That is not discernment.

It is wordsmithing without a compass.

You have better material than that.

If the congregation has done the work of Remembering and Listening, you already possess stories, observations, discoveries, questions, patterns, and evidence. The task now is to gather that material and ask what it reveals.

The Field Guide describes the process this way:

Reflection asks:

Who have we been?

Listening asks:

Where are we now?

Discernment asks:

What is God revealing?

Writing asks:

How do we say it clearly?

That sequence matters.

This Manual will help you move through that final question without losing the work that made the answer possible.

What This Field Manual Will Help You Do

The resources that follow are designed to help a congregation move from accumulated discernment to clear, honest, compelling prose.

They will help you:

gather what you learned through Remembering and Listening;

identify the material that actually matters for the MDP;

distinguish evidence from assumption;

describe congregational identity with specificity;

name strengths without advertising;

name challenges without self-indictment;

describe your community as a place inhabited by people rather than as a collection of demographic statistics;

recognize an emerging vocation without pretending to know more than you know;
describe the ministry ahead without creating an impossible pastoral job description;
identify the gifts needed in a pastoral partner;
write with the candidate's discernment in mind;
work within restrictive word counts;
create one coherent voice from the work of many people;
test the finished profile for honesty, clarity, and recognizability;
prepare deeper resources for candidates who want to know more.

You will also find examples throughout this Manual.

Some are intentionally weak.

Some are better.

Some are strong.

The purpose is not to provide sentences for you to copy. A sentence that describes another congregation beautifully may describe yours terribly.

The examples are intended to help you recognize the difference between generic language and particular language, between assertion and evidence, between promotion and invitation.

The goal is not to sound impressive or interchangeable.

The goal is for a reader to encounter something recognizably yours.

The Congregation Provides the Truth

There is an important distinction between **discernment** and **writing**.

The congregation must do the discernment.

No writer, consultant, pastor, or search committee can manufacture a congregation's identity from attractive language.

The congregation must provide the substance:

the stories;

the evidence;

the lived values;

the discoveries from Listening;

the gifts;

the challenges;

the contradictions;

the emerging vocation;

the ministry priorities;

the questions that remain unresolved.

But the people who do that work do not necessarily have to be the people who write the final prose.

That distinction can save a committee enormous frustration.

A group may discern exceptionally well and write poorly.

Those are different skills.

Consider Using a Professional Writer or Editor

This document matters.

For many prospective pastors, the Ministry Discernment Profile will be the first doorway into your congregation's life.

Before they visit your community, walk through your building, worship with you, share a meal with your committee, or hear your stories in person, they may encounter you through a few pages of words.

Words carrying that much weight deserve care.

If strong writing is not a gift readily available within your congregation, consider hiring a professional writer or editor.

That is not an admission of failure.

Congregations routinely seek skilled help for work that matters.

You hire people who understand roofs when the roof needs replacing.

You seek legal counsel when legal expertise is required.

You employ musicians because music matters.

You use accountants because financial accuracy matters.

If this document will help introduce your congregation to the person who may become its next pastor, good writing matters too.

The Field Guide puts the relationship clearly:

The congregation provides the truth.

The writer helps the truth become clear.

A professional writer should not make the congregation sound more successful than it is.

The writer should not hide challenges.

The writer should not invent a vision the congregation has never discerned.

The writer should not turn the MDP into advertising copy.

Instead, a good writer listens carefully to what the congregation has discovered and helps give it form.

The writer may ask:

What do you mean by that?

Can you give me an example?

When have you seen that happen?

Is that who you are, or who you hope to become?

What would a candidate need to know in order to understand this?

Where is the story behind this statement?

Those are not merely writing questions.

They often deepen discernment.

Do Not Write the MDP by Committee

The committee should own the content.

It should not necessarily write every sentence.

One of the easiest ways to create an awkward MDP is to divide the form among committee members:

“You write the community section.”

“You take mission.”

“You write about the congregation.”

“You handle what we want in a pastor.”

Everyone goes home.

Two weeks later, the pieces return sounding as though they describe six different congregations.

The committee then attempts to edit them together.

The result often retains six voices while adding a seventh: **committee prose**.

There is a better approach.

Let the committee discern together.

Use this Manual to develop the substance together.

Then ask one skilled writer—or a very small writing team—to create the primary draft.

Bring that draft back to the committee and ask:

Is it true?

Is it fair?

Is something important missing?

Does this sound like us?

Does it reflect what we actually discerned?

Those are appropriate committee questions.

Whether a semicolon would work better than a comma probably is not.

The MDP Cannot Tell the Whole Story

There is another difficulty committees need to accept early.

You will not be able to fit everything into the Ministry Discernment Profile.

Nor should you try.

Think about how much work may already have been done.

A congregation may have created a historical timeline.

It may have gathered dozens of congregational stories.

It may have identified lived values.

It may have conducted a World Café.

It may have interviewed community leaders.

Members may have walked neighborhoods.

The congregation may have studied demographic changes.

It may have mapped community assets.

It may have identified important relationships and partnerships.

It may have reflected upon difficult parts of its history.

It may have developed a much richer understanding of its gifts, challenges, and emerging vocation than can possibly fit inside the denominational form.

That work is not wasted because it does not fit.

The MDP has a particular job.

It needs to tell enough of the story that a potential pastoral candidate can begin discerning:

Who are these people?

What matters to them?

Where are they?

What are they learning?

What ministry seems to be emerging?

What challenges are real?

What kind of partnership are they seeking?

And ultimately:

Could my vocation belong with theirs?

If the answer becomes:

“Perhaps. I want to know more,”

the MDP has done something important.

Give Candidates Somewhere to Go Deeper

The limited space of the MDP makes a second layer of communication particularly valuable.

Consider creating a dedicated **candidate resource page** on the congregation's website.

This does not have to be the public-facing material you use to introduce the church to visitors on Sunday morning. It can be a thoughtfully curated area specifically for people exploring a possible pastoral relationship with the congregation.

A candidate who wants to look more deeply might find:

a fuller account of the congregation's story;

important discoveries from Remembering;

a summary of what the congregation learned through Listening;
information about the surrounding community;
photographs that show congregational and community life;
community maps or selected demographic information;
important ministry partnerships;
a fuller description of the congregation's emerging sense of vocation;
selected worship services or bulletins;
newsletters;
annual reports;
appropriate financial and organizational information;
links to community organizations;
other material that helps the candidate understand the place and people behind the MDP.

This material should be **curated**, not dumped.

A candidate does not need six months of committee minutes, 140 completed worksheets, every demographic chart you studied, and photographs of three walls covered in sticky notes.

Ask instead:

What would help a serious candidate understand us more deeply?

That is what belongs there.

When a Candidate Website Is Not Practical

A dedicated web page is useful, but it is not essential.

The same material can be assembled into a well-organized candidate information packet and sent electronically to candidates who want to explore more deeply.

A PDF packet might contain:

a congregational narrative;
a community profile;
a summary of Remembering and Listening;
significant ministry partnerships;
selected photographs;
financial or organizational information appropriate to the stage of the search;
links to worship and other online resources;
additional material the committee believes will help deepen discernment.

The medium is secondary.

The principle matters:

The MDP opens the door; it does not have to contain the whole house.

This also helps the committee write a better MDP.

When every important discovery must be forced into the profile, the writing becomes crowded.

When the committee knows there is another place for deeper material, it can ask a more disciplined question:

What does a candidate need to know here in order to want the next conversation?

Three Places for Information

Throughout this Manual, you will be encouraged to sort material into three categories.

1. This Belongs in the MDP

Information essential to initial discernment.

If leaving it out would give candidates a materially misleading understanding of the congregation, it probably belongs here.

2. This Belongs in Deeper Candidate Resources

Important information that enriches understanding but cannot reasonably fit in the MDP.

Place it on the candidate resource page or in materials sent electronically.

3. This Belongs in Conversation

Some things require relationship and context.

A complicated staffing history may be better explained in conversation.

A sensitive congregational challenge may require nuance.

Questions about expectations may need dialogue rather than a paragraph.

Confidential information may not belong in either public resource.

Do not ask the MDP to do work that can only be done through human conversation.

Write for the Conversation That Comes Next

This Field Manual is not primarily about producing an excellent document.

It is about helping create an honest conversation.

A beautifully written MDP that creates a false impression of the congregation has failed.

A polished profile that attracts candidates to a ministry that does not actually exist has failed.

A profile that hides important challenges because the committee fears candidates will withdraw has failed.

A profile filled with ecclesiastical language that nobody outside the committee can understand has failed.

But an MDP can do something much more faithful.

It can say:

This is who we have discovered ourselves to be.

This is the place in which God has planted us.

These are gifts we carry.

These are challenges we face.

This is what we are beginning to recognize about the ministry ahead.

This is what we believe we can offer.

This is where we need partnership.

This is what we do not yet know.

Would you like to talk with us?

That is enough.

The Ministry Discernment Profile is not the conclusion of discernment.

It is an invitation for another person to step inside it.

How to Use This Field Manual

You do not need to complete every resource.

Some congregations will arrive at this stage with excellent summaries from Remembering and Listening. Others will need to recover material scattered among reports, worksheets, meeting notes, and conversations.

Some will have an accomplished writer in the congregation.

Others will need outside help.

Some will create a candidate website.

Others will prepare electronic materials.

Some sections of the MDP will come easily.

Others may reveal that the congregation has not yet discerned enough to write honestly.

Use the resources you need.

But preserve the sequence.

Gather before drafting.

Describe before promoting.

Use evidence before adjectives.

Name vocation before listing pastoral gifts.

Write before committee editing.

Test before publishing.

Invite rather than sell.

And throughout the process, return to one question:

Does this language faithfully represent what we have actually discerned?

The Work Ahead

This Field Manual will move through the same progression established in the Field Guide:

Before You Write

Gather what you have already learned.

Tell the Truth About Who You Are

Identity before image.

Describe the Church You Actually Have

Gifts, challenges, and contradictions.

Describe Your Place

The community God has given you to love.

Name the Vocation Emerging

Where identity and place meet.

Describe the Ministry Ahead

From programs to purpose.

What Kind of Partner Does This Ministry Need?

Gifts before wish lists.

Write for a Pastor Who Is Discerning Too

Make the profile an invitation.

Writing Well Matters

Give important discernment good language.

Let the Congregation Recognize Itself

Review before you publish.

Release the Profile**Let discernment continue.**

The work begins, however, before anyone writes a sentence.

Put the MDP form aside for a moment.

Gather the stories.

Gather the discoveries.

Gather the questions.

Gather what you learned about yourselves and the community God has given you to love.

There will be time for the blank boxes.

First, gather the truth you want them to contain.

That is the work of Chapter One:

Chapter One

Before You Write

Gather What You Have Already Learned

Chapter One Resources

Before You Write

Gather What You Have Already Learned

The cursor blinks in the first empty box.

The Ministry Discernment Profile is open on the screen.

Someone reads the first question.

Then someone says:

“So, what should we write?”

Close the document.

Not forever.

Just for now.

The blank boxes of the MDP are a poor place to begin discernment. They tempt a committee to manufacture answers instead of recognizing what the congregation has already learned.

If your congregation has worked through Preparing, Remembering, and Listening, you are not beginning with an empty page.

You are beginning with an abundance—more truth than the form can possibly hold.

You may have:

stories from the congregation's history;

a timeline of significant events and turning points;

lived values discovered through those stories;

memories of God's faithfulness;

wisdom from difficult seasons;

a map of gifts and capacities;

stories of imagination and adaptation;

a more faithful congregational narrative;

neighborhood observations;

conversations with community leaders and neighbors;

demographic information;

community assets;
pain points and pressures;
partnerships;
questions;
surprises;
and places where the congregation's gifts seem to intersect with the life of its community.
The Field Guide makes the sequence clear:

Reflection asks:

Who have we been?

Listening asks:

Where are we now?

Discernment asks:

What is God revealing?

Writing asks:

How do we say it clearly?

Writing begins by gathering what has already been discerned.

The purpose of Chapter One is therefore not to draft the MDP.

It is to create the **Writing Brief** from which the MDP can eventually be written.

For most congregations, **FM-1.1, FM-1.2, FM-1.3, FM-1.5, and FM-1.8** provide the core process.

FM-1.1

MDP Source Material Inventory

What Do We Already Have?

Purpose

This resource identifies the material already available before anyone begins writing.

The goal is not to collect every piece of paper produced during transition.

The goal is to locate the material that contains significant discernment.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Gather Before the Meeting

Ask several people to collect relevant material from earlier stages of the transition.

Do not depend on memory.

Bring the documents.

From Preparing

What did Preparing help us understand about the transition itself?

What commitments or practices did we establish?

What questions emerged?

From Remembering

Look especially for:

significant congregational stories;

historical timeline;

lived values;

Ebenezer stories of God's faithfulness;

wisdom from difficult chapters;

gifts the congregation carries;

evidence of adaptability and imagination;

the faithful congregational narrative;

the Remembering Discernment Summary.

From Listening

Gather:

congregational listening results;

neighborhood observations;

community walks;

conversations with neighbors;

interviews with community leaders;

demographic information;

community asset maps;

significant community relationships;

partnerships;

identified pain points;

hopes expressed by people in the community;

surprises;

unanswered questions.

Other Useful Sources

Consider:

recent annual reports;

worship bulletins;

newsletters;

financial information;

staffing information;

Session or governing-board priorities;

ministry descriptions;
 community studies;
 website material;
 photographs;
 recent congregational surveys;
 presbytery or denominational information relevant to the search.

Create the Inventory

Material	We Have It	Where Is It?	Likely Useful?
Remembering Summary	___	_____	___
Listening Summary	___	_____	___
Historical Timeline	___	_____	___
Lived Values	___	_____	___
Congregational Gift Map	___	_____	___
Faithful Narrative	___	_____	___
Community Observations	___	_____	___
Community Interviews	___	_____	___
Demographic Information	___	_____	___
Community Asset Map	___	_____	___
Ministry Partnerships	___	_____	___
Financial Information	___	_____	___
Staffing Information	___	_____	___
Other	___	_____	___

Now Ask

What material contains actual discernment?

What is merely background information?

What is outdated?

What is duplicated?

What requires clarification?

What are we missing?

Do Not Confuse Quantity with Readiness

A three-inch binder does not mean the congregation is ready to write.

Neither does a folder containing 400 digital files.

The question is:

Do we have enough interpreted material to describe faithfully who we are, where we are, and what we are beginning to recognize?

FM-1.2

Remembering Harvest

What Has Our Story Taught Us About Who We Are?

Purpose

The MDP does not need a condensed congregational history.

But it does need to be written by people who understand the congregation's story.

This resource distills the work of Remembering into material useful for writing.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Do Not Start from Scratch

Use the final work from the Remembering process.

If the congregation completed a Remembering Discernment Summary, begin there.

1. Stories That Formed Us

Which three to five stories or turning points are most important for understanding this congregation?

Story One

Why it matters:

Story Two

Why it matters:

Story Three

Why it matters:

2. Values We Have Actually Lived

Do not list aspirational values.

What values have enough evidence in the congregation's history that you can say:

“We know this matters to us because we have repeatedly acted upon it.”

Evidence: _____

Evidence: _____

Evidence: _____

Evidence: _____

Evidence: _____

3. Gifts Our History Has Placed in Our Hands

What gifts are present now?

Consider:

people;

skills;

relationships;

spiritual practices;

community knowledge;

institutional memory;

property;

financial resources;

reputation;

partnerships;

leadership capacity.

The gifts most relevant to our next season may be:

4. Wisdom We Have Earned

What have difficult periods taught us?

What mistakes do we not want to repeat?

What has conflict taught us about ourselves?

What losses have changed us?

5. Our Capacity to Imagine

What evidence from our history demonstrates that this congregation can adapt, experiment, learn, or change?

6. The Story We Carry Now

Complete:

We understand ourselves today as a congregation that...

The Writing Question

Now ask:

Which of these discoveries might a potential pastor need in order to understand us?

Mark those items.

Do not write the MDP yet.

FM-1.3

Listening Harvest

What Have We Learned About Where We Are?

Purpose

An MDP should describe more than a congregation.

It should describe a congregation **in a place**.

The Field Guide asks the theological question:

Who has God given us to love?

This worksheet gathers what the congregation has learned through Listening.

Time

60–75 minutes.

1. What Has Changed Around Us?

What significant changes have occurred in the community?

Consider:

population;

housing;

schools;

employment;

economics;

age;

culture;
transportation;
development;
institutions;
community organizations;
patterns of isolation or connection.

2. What Did We Notice?

What did neighborhood walks and direct observation reveal?

What surprised us?

3. What Did People Tell Us?

What did neighbors, community leaders, partners, business owners, educators, nonprofit leaders, public officials, or others tell us?

4. What Gives This Community Life?

Do not look only for needs.
Where do people gather?
What organizations are trusted?
What assets already exist?
Who is doing good work?
Where is creativity visible?
Where are relationships strong?

5. Where Is There Pain or Pressure?

What burdens did people describe?

6. What Hopes Did We Hear?

What do people care about?
What do they want for their children, neighborhoods, institutions, or community?

7. What Relationships Do We Already Have?

Who does the congregation actually know?

What partnerships already exist?

Where is trust already present?

8. What Did We Discover That Complicated Our Assumptions?

We thought...

We learned...

The Writing Question

Ask:

What does a candidate need to understand about this place in order to discern whether ministry here might belong to their calling?

FM-1.4

Identity and Place Side by Side

Seeing the Conversation Between Congregation and Community

Purpose

Congregations sometimes describe themselves and their communities as though they were unrelated subjects.

They are not.

Vocation begins to emerge where identity and place meet.

This exercise does not yet ask the committee to declare its vocation.

It simply places the evidence side by side.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Create Two Large Columns

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT OURSELVES

and

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT OUR PLACE

Begin transferring significant discoveries from FM-1.2 and FM-1.3.

For example:

About Us

Strong tradition of hospitality
Experienced retired educators
Large building unused during weekdays
Strong music tradition
History of ecumenical partnership

About Our Place

Many people report loneliness and isolation
Local schools need adult mentors
Few affordable community gathering spaces
Community arts opportunities are limited
Several nonprofits seek stronger volunteer networks

Do Not Connect Them Too Quickly

The temptation is immediate:

“We have retired teachers and the school needs mentors. We should start a tutoring program.”

Maybe.

But that is already a programmatic response.

For now, simply notice:

There may be something here worth exploring.

Ask

What do we notice when these two bodies of information are placed beside each other?

What surprises us?

Where do we see possible relationships?

Where are we tempted to jump prematurely to solutions?

Circle Areas of Possible Convergence

Do not label them “our new ministries.”

Label them:

Places deserving further discernment.

FM-1.5

Convergence Map

Where Identity and Place Begin to Meet

Purpose

This exercise moves one step beyond comparison.

It looks for patterns of convergence without prematurely declaring a new mission program.

The Field Guide describes vocation as something recognized where the congregation's identity and the life of its community begin to meet.

Time

60 minutes.

Create Three Columns

GIFTS WE CARRY

WHAT WE ARE HEARING AND SEEING

POSSIBLE SIGNIFICANCE

Example

Gift We Carry

Deep experience accompanying people through grief.

What We Are Hearing

Community leaders repeatedly describe loneliness, caregiving stress, and isolation among older adults.

Possible Significance

Our experience with accompaniment may have significance beyond our current congregational life.

Notice what the third column does **not** say:

Start a grief support program.

That decision has not yet been made.

Work Through Several Areas

Gift we carry:

What we are hearing and seeing:

Possible significance:

Repeat as needed.

Then Ask

Which convergences appear once?

Which appear repeatedly?

Which are supported by actual evidence?

Which are mostly our enthusiasm?

Which surprise us?

Which make us curious?

Which may matter for the MDP?

Mark the Strongest Convergences

Choose no more than five.

Complete

We are beginning to wonder whether God may be drawing our attention toward...

Do not strengthen the language unless the evidence warrants it.

“We are beginning to wonder” can be a faithful theological statement.

FM-1.6

Evidence, Interpretation, Question

Separating What We Know from What We Think It Means

Purpose

This may be one of the most important disciplines in writing an honest MDP.

Committees often move unconsciously from observation to interpretation to certainty.

For example:

Evidence:

Few young adults currently worship with us.

Interpretation:

Our ministry is not connecting with younger adults.

Assumption presented as fact:

Young adults are not interested in church.

Those are three different statements.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Use Three Columns

EVIDENCE

What did we actually observe, hear, count, or document?

INTERPRETATION

What do we think it may mean?

QUESTION

What remains uncertain?

Example**Evidence**

Several community leaders described social isolation among older adults.

Interpretation

Loneliness may be an important community concern.

Question

How do older adults themselves describe their experience, and what forms of connection already exist?

Another Example**Evidence**

The congregation has lost approximately half its membership over a long period.

Interpretation

Some ministries and structures may have been designed for a congregation larger than the one that exists today.

Question

What ministry is sustainable and faithful now?

Now Use Your Own Material**Evidence:****Interpretation:**

Question:

Repeat.

Watch for These Phrases

Everybody knows...

The community needs...

People want...

Young people think...

Families are looking for...

Nobody comes because...

Ask:

How do we know?

If you do not know, turn the statement into a question.

Writing Principle

Do not write an interpretation as though it were evidence.

That one discipline will improve the honesty of an MDP considerably.

FM-1.7

What We Still Don't Know

Refusing to Manufacture Answers

Purpose

Sometimes the inability to answer an MDP question reveals something useful:

The congregation has not finished discerning.

Do not solve that problem with attractive prose.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Ask

What important things about ourselves remain unclear?

What do we still not understand about our community?

Where do committee members interpret the evidence differently?

What questions emerged during Listening but remain unanswered?

What assumptions need testing?

Sort the Questions

For each question, decide:

We can investigate this now.

This needs more congregational discernment.

This needs more community listening.

This belongs in candidate conversation.

We may not need to answer this yet.

Particularly Important

Do not manufacture certainty about vocation.

There is a significant difference between:

“God is calling us to establish a comprehensive family ministry center.”

and:

“Our listening has repeatedly drawn our attention to the pressures facing families in our community, and we are beginning to explore how our gifts might become part of a faithful response.”

The second statement may be far more truthful.

Complete

Things we know:

Things we believe the evidence suggests:

Things we are still wondering:

Things we genuinely do not know:

A mature MDP can contain humility.

FM-1.8

The MDP Writing Brief

Creating the Source Document for the Writer

Purpose

This is the primary product of Chapter One.

Do not hand a writer twelve binders, forty-seven worksheets, three survey reports, and a flash drive labeled **TRANSITION STUFF** and say:

“Everything you need is in there.”

Create a Writing Brief.

The Writing Brief should normally be approximately **five to ten pages**. It distills the material the committee believes should shape the MDP.

This is not polished prose.

It is the source material from which polished prose can be written.

Part One — Who We Are

Formative Stories

What stories or turning points are essential to understanding us?

Lived Values

What values have evidence behind them?

Significant Gifts

What gifts are genuinely present now?

Significant Challenges

What realities should not be hidden?

Contradictions

Where do gift and shadow coexist?

Part Two — Where We Are

Important Community Realities

Significant Changes

Community Assets

Pain Points or Pressures

Existing Relationships and Partnerships

What Surprised Us

Part Three — What We Are Beginning to Recognize

Patterns Appearing Across Remembering and Listening

Places of Convergence

Emerging Vocational Questions

Things About Which We Have Growing Conviction

Things About Which We Are Still Wondering

Part Four — The Ministry Ahead

Do not write a pastoral job description yet.

Ask:

What ministry seems especially important in the congregation's next season?

What does the congregation believe it is being called to do?

What work belongs to the congregation rather than simply to the next pastor?

Part Five — The Partnership We May Need

What gifts might complement those already present in the congregation?

What kind of leadership could help this congregation respond faithfully?

What expectations need further examination?

Part Six — Important Truths a Candidate Should Know

If a candidate eventually became your pastor and said:

“I wish you had told me that during the search,”

what might they be talking about?

This does not mean every answer belongs in the public MDP.

It means the committee needs to know what truths must eventually be part of mutual discernment.

Part Seven — What Goes Where?

Create three headings.

MUST BE IN THE MDP

What is essential to initial discernment?

DEEPER CANDIDATE RESOURCES

What is important but cannot reasonably fit?

CANDIDATE CONVERSATION

What requires relationship, nuance, context, or appropriate confidentiality?

This sorting can begin now even though it will be developed more fully later in the Manual.

FM-1.9

Are We Ready to Write?

Chapter One Readiness Check

Before opening the MDP again, work through this checklist.

We Can Describe Who We Are

We can identify formative stories.

We can name lived values and provide evidence.

We can identify gifts available today.

We can acknowledge significant challenges.

We can describe ourselves without relying primarily on generic adjectives.

We Can Describe Where We Are

We have listened beyond the congregation.

We can describe significant changes in our community.

We know something about community assets.

We know something about community pain and pressure.

We can identify existing relationships and partnerships.

We can distinguish what people actually told us from what we assume about them.

We Are Beginning to Recognize Vocation

We can identify several places where congregational gifts and community realities appear to converge.

We can describe patterns that recur.

We can distinguish an emerging vocation from a program idea.

We are willing to say “**we do not know yet**” where appropriate.

We Understand the Writing Process

We know who will produce the primary draft.

We understand that the committee owns the discernment without needing to write every sentence.

We have considered whether a professional writer or editor would strengthen the work.

We have identified one person who can coordinate material with the writer.

We Understand the Limits of the MDP

We know the profile cannot contain everything.

We have begun identifying material for deeper candidate resources.

We understand that some information belongs in conversation rather than in a public document.

We Have a Writing Brief

Our Writing Brief gathers the most important discoveries.

It reflects the work of Remembering and Listening.

It identifies evidence rather than merely opinions.

It names unanswered questions.

It is manageable enough for a writer actually to use.

Final Question

Ask every committee member:

If we began writing today, would we be trying primarily to invent answers—or give language to things we have genuinely discerned?

If the answer is:

give language to what we have discerned,

you are ready.

If the answer is:

invent answers,

do not panic.

You have simply discovered where more work is needed.

That discovery is better made now than hidden beneath polished prose.

Chapter One Discernment Harvest

What We Are Bringing to the Page

Before leaving Chapter One, complete this together.

The Most Important Truths We Have Learned About Ourselves

The Most Important Things We Have Learned About Our Community

The Strongest Places of Convergence We See

The Questions We Are Still Carrying

The Things a Candidate Most Needs to Understand About Us

The Material That Cannot Fit in the MDP but Should Not Be Lost

Complete

The story we are preparing to tell is not the story of the congregation we wish we were. It is the story of...

A Prayer Before Writing

Leader

God who speaks
and God who listens,

before we search for words,
teach us again to listen.

People

Help us tell the truth.

Leader

We bring stories that have formed us,

People

Receive our gratitude.

Leader

We bring memories of faithfulness,

People

Keep us humble.

Leader

We bring gifts entrusted to us,

People

Help us recognize them without boasting.

Leader

We bring limitations and disappointments,

People

Help us name them without shame.

Leader

We bring what our neighbors have taught us,

People

Keep us from turning their voices into our assumptions.

Leader

We bring hopes for the ministry ahead,

People

Keep us from confusing our plans with your calling.

Leader

We bring questions we cannot yet answer,

People

Give us courage to leave some questions open.

Leader

When we are tempted to sound impressive,

People

Teach us to be truthful.

Leader

When we are tempted to hide what is difficult,

People

Teach us to trust the discernment of those who will read.

Leader

When we are tempted to say everything,

People

Give us wisdom to choose what matters.

Leader

When we struggle to find the right words,

People

Send us people with gifts for language.

Leader

And when these words eventually reach someone
we do not yet know—

someone praying about their own vocation,

someone wondering where you may be calling them next—

People

Let our words become an invitation to honest conversation.

All

Faithful God,
we have remembered.
We have listened.
We have wondered.
We have begun to recognize.

Now help us speak.

Give us words clear enough to be understood,
honest enough to be trusted,
particular enough to sound like us,
and humble enough to leave room for you.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

At the end of Chapter One, the committee should possess something more useful than a collection of transition materials.

It should have a **Writing Brief**.

That distinction matters.

The transition archive contains everything you did.

The Writing Brief contains what you learned.

Do not confuse the two.

The next task is to begin giving that learning language.

And the first writing challenge is one of the hardest.

Congregations routinely describe themselves with words such as:

welcoming

friendly

faithful

caring

mission-minded

generous

inclusive

traditional

family

Those words may be true.

But almost every congregation uses them.

The question is not merely:

What do we claim about ourselves?

It is:

What evidence makes the claim believable, and what does that evidence reveal about who we actually are?

That leads to Chapter Two:

Chapter Two

Tell the Truth About Who You Are

Identity Before Image

Chapter Two Resources

Tell the Truth About Who You Are

Identity Before Image

The committee has gathered its material. Now it must discover the living center within it.

Now comes the first real writing challenge:

Who are we?

Congregations usually have familiar answers ready.

We are welcoming.

We are caring.

We are faithful.

We are mission-minded.

We are a family.

We are inclusive.

We value children.

We care about our community.

We are committed to worship.

None of those statements is necessarily false.

The problem is that almost any congregation could say them.

A candidate reading twenty Ministry Discernment Profiles may encounter the word welcoming fifteen times. Repetition wears the word smooth until it communicates almost nothing.

The Field Guide offers a better discipline:

Claim → Evidence → Meaning.

If you claim:

“We are welcoming,”

ask:

What evidence makes that claim believable?

Then ask:

What does that evidence reveal about the particular congregation we have become?

That changes the writing.

Instead of:

We are a warm and welcoming congregation committed to serving our community.

you might eventually be able to write:

When a nearby motel began housing families displaced after a hurricane, members started bringing evening meals. Several of those relationships continued long after the emergency ended. Hospitality here often begins by noticing who is nearby and making room.

Now the reader has a scene to enter, not merely a claim to accept.

More importantly, the congregation has said something about itself that can be tested against its actual life.

The purpose of Chapter Two is not to make the congregation sound distinctive.

It is to **discover and describe its particularity**.

For most congregations, **FM-2.1, FM-2.2, FM-2.4, FM-2.6, and FM-2.8** provide the core process.

FM-2.1

Beyond the Adjective

What Do We Mean When We Say That?

Purpose

This exercise exposes the generic language congregations commonly use about themselves and asks for the evidence beneath it.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Begin with the Words You Use

Without discussion, ask each participant to write five words or short phrases completing:

We are a _____ congregation.

One phrase per card.

Possible responses might include:

welcoming;

friendly;

faithful;

caring;

generous;

mission-minded;

inclusive;

traditional;

family-oriented;

spiritual;

biblical;

progressive;

conservative;

active;

committed;

loving.

Post all the cards.

Group similar responses.

Notice

Which words appear repeatedly?

Which words could describe almost any congregation?

Which words are so broad that people may mean very different things by them?

Which words describe how we would **like** to be perceived?

Which words have actual evidence behind them?

Choose Five

Select five identity claims that seem especially important.

For each, ask:

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THIS?

If we say:

We are welcoming,

what does *welcoming* mean here?

WHAT HAVE WE DONE THAT DEMONSTRATES IT?

WHO MIGHT HAVE EXPERIENCED IT?

CAN WE TELL A STORY?

IS THERE EVIDENCE THAT COMPLICATES THE CLAIM?

That last question matters.

A congregation may be genuinely welcoming in some ways and difficult to enter in others.

The Empty-Adjective Test

Remove the adjective.

Can you describe the congregation without using it?

Instead of:

We are generous.

Describe what generosity looks like.

Instead of:

We are mission-minded.

Describe what the congregation actually does.

Instead of:

We are inclusive.

Describe who participates, how belonging is practiced, and what decisions demonstrate inclusion.

Complete

One word we frequently use about ourselves that needs more evidence is:

The evidence behind it is:

FM-2.2

Claim → Evidence → Meaning

Building Identity Statements That Can Be Trusted

Purpose

This is the core writing discipline of Chapter Two.

Every important identity claim should be tested through three movements.

CLAIM

What do we believe is true about ourselves?

EVIDENCE

What in our actual congregational life supports the claim?

MEANING

What does that evidence reveal about the congregation we have become?

Time

60–75 minutes.

Example One

Claim

We value lay leadership.

Evidence

Members regularly initiate ministries rather than waiting for staff direction. Several current community partnerships began because individual members noticed opportunities and invited the congregation to participate.

Meaning

This congregation tends to flourish when members are trusted to lead and pastoral leadership equips rather than controls.

Notice how much more useful the third statement is to a potential pastor.

Example Two

Claim

We care about mission.

Evidence

The congregation has maintained a food ministry for thirty years.

That is evidence.

But ask more.

Who started it?

Why?

How has it changed?

Who leads it now?

Does the congregation know the people it serves?

Is it a congregational ministry or the work of six committed volunteers?

Those questions may change the meaning.

Your Turn

Identity Claim One

Claim:

Evidence:

Meaning:

Identity Claim Two

Claim:

Evidence:

Meaning:

Identity Claim Three

Claim:

Evidence:

Meaning:

Repeat as needed.

Test the Evidence

Ask:

Is this something that actually happened?

Is it current enough to describe who we are now?

Does it involve enough of the congregation to justify the claim?

Is this one isolated example or part of a pattern?

Would someone outside the committee recognize the evidence?

Test the Meaning

Ask:

What does this tell a candidate about ministry here?

What might this reveal about our culture?

What might it reveal about the way we make decisions?

What kind of leadership might flourish here?

Remember

Evidence does not merely prove the claim.

Good evidence may **change** the claim.

That is discernment.

FM-2.3

Show Us What You Mean

Moving from Abstraction to Concrete Language

Purpose

Abstract language makes congregations sound alike.

Concrete language gives the reader something to imagine.

Time

45 minutes.

Rewrite the Abstraction

Begin with:

We are committed to community outreach.

Ask:

What does that actually mean?

Now:

We have a strong sense of fellowship.

What would someone see?

Now:

We value intergenerational ministry.

What happens that demonstrates this?

Now:

We are committed to social justice.

What decisions or practices make that claim true?

Use Concrete Questions

When you encounter an abstraction, ask:

Who?

What happened?

Where?

How often?

Who participated?

Who benefited?

What changed?

Why did it matter?

Practice

Abstract statement:

We are a caring congregation.

Concrete evidence:

What the evidence may mean:

Another

Abstract statement:

We have a heart for our community.

Concrete evidence:

What the evidence may mean:

A Writing Principle

If you can show it, you may not need to claim it.

A good story of hospitality may communicate *welcoming* more convincingly than using the word three times.

FM-2.4

Story as Evidence

Let a Small Story Carry a Large Truth

Purpose

The MDP does not have room for a congregational history.

It does have room for carefully chosen stories.

A brief story can reveal culture, values, relationships, theology, and character more efficiently than a paragraph of adjectives.

Time

60 minutes.

Return to Remembering

Choose several stories that reveal something important about who the congregation is today.

Not merely:

What is a wonderful story from our history?

Ask:

What story helps explain who we have become?

Story Selection Test

A useful MDP story should do more than make people nostalgic.

Ask:

Does this story reveal a lived value?

Does it help explain our culture?

Does it reveal how we respond to people?

Does it show something about faith?

Does it demonstrate a gift?

Does it help explain a current ministry?

Does it reveal adaptability?

Does it connect past formation with present identity?

Write the Story in 150 Words

Now cut it to 100.

Now cut it to 50.

Ask

What disappeared?

What remained?

What was the essential meaning?

The 50-Word Discipline

The point is not that every MDP story must contain exactly fifty words.

The exercise teaches compression.

You are learning to preserve:

event ♦ significance

while releasing unnecessary detail.

Complete

This story matters because it reveals that we...

If you cannot complete that sentence clearly, the story may be interesting but not useful for the MDP.

FM-2.5

Finding Our Particularity

What Is True of Us That Is Not True of Every Church?

Purpose

The goal is not to prove that the congregation is unique.

Every congregation shares much with other congregations.

But every congregation also has a particular combination of history, place, people, gifts, relationships, habits, wounds, theology, and hope.

This exercise searches for that particularity.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Ask

What would someone miss if they described us only by:

denomination?

size?

worship style?

location?

average age?

theological labels?

Complete

You cannot really understand this congregation unless you know...

Then

Something visitors often notice about us is...

Then

Something longtime members may no longer notice because it feels normal to us is...

Then

Something we do differently from many congregations we know is...

Then

A contradiction that is particularly characteristic of us is...

Perhaps:

We are deeply traditional in worship and remarkably experimental in mission.

We are a small congregation with unusually extensive community relationships.

We are theologically diverse but share strong commitments to particular forms of service.

We are an older congregation that has repeatedly launched new ministries.

The Stranger Test

Imagine someone attended for six months.

What would they know about this congregation that they could not have learned from the website?

Complete

One thing that makes our particular congregation interesting to understand is...

Not impressive.

Interesting.

That distinction helps.

FM-2.6

Finding the Congregation's Voice

What Should We Sound Like?

Purpose

An MDP should sound as though it came from the congregation it describes.

A warm, informal congregation should not suddenly sound like an institutional strategic plan.

A congregation with deep theological habits should not strip all theological language from its profile.

A congregation that laughs easily should not be afraid of warmth.

The question is not:

What writing style sounds most professional?

It is:

What voice allows us to be clear, mature, and recognizably ourselves?

Time

45–60 minutes.

Choose the Voice

Where does your congregation naturally fall?

Formal ←-----→ **Conversational**

Reserved ←-----→ **Warm**

Academic ←-----→ **Accessible**

Institutional ←-----→ **Relational**

Serious ←-----→ **Playful**

Explicitly theological ←-----→ **Implicitly theological**

There is no correct position.

Ask

How do our best preachers, teachers, newsletters, and congregational communications sound?

How do people actually talk about this church when they love it?

What language would feel artificial coming from us?

Create a Voice Statement

Complete:

The MDP should sound...

For example:

Warm, thoughtful, theologically grounded, candid, and conversational. Avoid corporate language and exaggerated enthusiasm.

Or:

Clear, direct, hopeful, and practical. Use theological language when it adds meaning, but avoid insider jargon.

Give This to the Writer

If you use a professional writer or editor, the voice statement belongs in the Writing Brief.

The writer's task is not to impose their voice.

It is to help the congregation's voice become clearer.

FM-2.7

Weak → Better → Strong

Learning to Recognize Particular Language

Purpose

Examples help committees recognize why some MDP language communicates and some does not.

These examples are not templates.

Do not copy them.

Study the movement.

Example One — Welcoming

Weak

We are a friendly and welcoming congregation where everyone is invited to experience God's love.

Better

Visitors frequently tell us they experience warmth here, and members place a high value on making newcomers feel at home.

Stronger

Hospitality here often begins before worship. Members notice unfamiliar faces, introduce themselves, and frequently invite newcomers into coffee-hour conversations rather than leaving them to navigate the room alone. We value that warmth, while recognizing that entering a congregation with many longstanding relationships can still be difficult.

Why It Is Stronger

It shows behavior.

It avoids claiming universal success.

It includes a mature recognition of the shadow side.

Example Two — Mission

Weak

Mission is at the heart of everything we do.

Better

Our congregation has a longstanding commitment to serving people in our community.

Stronger

Several of our most enduring ministries began when members noticed needs beyond the congregation and built relationships with people already responding. That history has taught us to understand mission less as a collection of church programs and more as joining work already underway in our community.

Why It Is Stronger

It tells the reader something about **how this congregation understands mission**, not merely that mission matters.

Example Three — Children

Weak

Children and youth are extremely important to us.

Better

We value the participation of children and young people in congregational life.

Stronger

We have fewer children than we once did, but those who are part of the congregation are known across generations and participate in worship and congregational life rather than belonging only to a separate children's program. We value those relationships and are still discerning what faithful ministry with younger people might look like in our changing community.

Why It Is Stronger

It distinguishes current reality from aspiration.

It tells the truth without making scarcity the whole story.

Example Four — Theology

Weak

We are a Bible-believing church committed to following Jesus Christ.

Better

Scripture is important in our worship, teaching, and discernment.

Stronger

Members do not always interpret Scripture in the same way, but we expect Scripture to be taken seriously. In worship, study, and Session discernment, biblical texts are engaged as part of the church's ongoing effort to recognize what faithful discipleship requires of us.

Why It Is Stronger

It describes **lived theology** rather than relying on a label that different readers may interpret differently.

Example Five — Diversity

Weak

We are a diverse and inclusive congregation.

Better

We welcome people from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives.

Stronger

Our congregation includes people who differ politically and theologically, and those differences are sometimes difficult. What has held us together is not agreement on every issue but a shared commitment to worship, relationship, and service. We continue learning what genuine belonging requires of us.

Why It Is Stronger

It resists promotional language.

It gives the reader a more credible picture of congregational life.

FM-2.8

Identity Drafting Worksheet

From Discovery to Prose

Purpose

Now begin drafting.

Not the entire MDP.

Draft the material that communicates congregational identity.

Step One — Choose Three to Five Identity Claims

Do not choose ten.

What most needs to be understood?

Claim One

Claim Two

Claim Three

Claim Four

Claim Five

Step Two — Add Evidence

For each claim, identify the strongest evidence.

Claim:

Evidence:

Step Three — Name the Meaning

This evidence reveals that we...

Step Four — Look for a Story

Is there a short story that could carry this meaning more efficiently?

Step Five — Draft

Write 75–125 words communicating this aspect of identity.

Step Six — Test It

Underline every adjective.

Can any be replaced with evidence?

Circle every generic church phrase.

Could it describe 1,000 other congregations?

Mark every claim beginning with:

We are...

Have you shown why it is true?

Step Seven — Ask the Hard Question

Is this who we actually are, or who we wish we were?

If it is aspiration, label it as aspiration.

Do not quietly turn hope into identity.

FM-2.9

Identity or Aspiration?

Keeping “We Are” and “We Hope” Honest

Purpose

Congregations sometimes describe desired identity as current reality.

This is understandable.

The committee knows what it values.

It knows what it wants to become.

But a candidate needs to know the difference.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Sort Each Statement

Use three categories:

THIS IS WHO WE ARE

There is substantial present evidence.

THIS IS WHO WE ARE BECOMING

Evidence exists, but the identity is emerging.

THIS IS WHO WE HOPE TO BECOME

This is aspiration.

Example

“We are deeply connected to our neighborhood.”

Do you know neighbors?

Do they know you?

Are there ongoing relationships?

If not, this may belong under:

“We hope to become more deeply connected to our neighborhood.”

That is not weaker.

It may be far more interesting to a candidate whose gifts align with that work.

Work Through Your Claims

Identity Statement	Are	Becoming	Hope
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Ask

Which aspirations have we accidentally been describing as accomplishments?

Which emerging identities deserve to be named as emerging?

Writing Language

Consider the difference:

We are...

We have begun...

We are learning...

We are becoming...

We hope...

We are seeking...

We are beginning to recognize...

Precision strengthens credibility.

FM-2.10

The Candidate Recognition Test

What Will a Reader Actually Learn About Us?

Purpose

Before moving on, read the emerging identity material from the perspective of someone who has never visited the congregation.

Give the Draft to a Reader

Ideally, use someone who knows churches but does not know this congregation particularly well.

Do not explain the draft before they read it.

Then ask:

After Reading This, What Do You Think These People Care About?

What Kind of Congregational Culture Do You Imagine?

What Evidence Led You to That Conclusion?

What Seems Particularly Important to Them?

What Sounds Generic?

What Claims Do You Wish They Had Supported with an Example?

What Would You Like to Ask Them?

What Kind of Pastor Might Enjoy Ministry with These People?

Compare

Did the reader hear what the committee intended to communicate?

If not, do not blame the reader.

Look at the writing.

Chapter Two Discernment Harvest

What We Want a Candidate to Understand About Who We Are

Our Most Important Identity Claims

The Strongest Evidence Behind Those Claims

Stories That Could Help Carry the Meaning

Words We Need to Stop Using Without Explanation

Things We Previously Described as Identity That Are Actually Aspirations

Particularities We Want the Writer to Preserve

The Voice We Want the MDP to Have

Complete

If a candidate remembers only one thing about who we are after reading the MDP, we hope they understand that...

A Prayer for Truthful Words

Leader

God who knows us more completely
than we know ourselves,
we are trying to tell our story.

People

Teach us to tell the truth.

Leader

When we reach too quickly for words
that make us sound good,

People

Call us back to what is real.

Leader

When we say we are welcoming,

People

**Show us the people we have welcomed.
And show us those for whom entering has been difficult.**

Leader

When we say we are generous,

People

Show us where generosity has taken flesh.

Leader

When we say we care about mission,

People

Show us the relationships that make the claim true.

Leader

When we say we value children, neighbors, justice, worship, learning, or service,

People

Ask us what our lives reveal.

Leader

Protect us from exaggeration.

People

We do not need to impress.

Leader

Protect us from false modesty.

People

We do not need to hide the gifts you have given.

Leader

Protect us from nostalgia.

People

We are not the congregation we once were.

Leader

Protect us from pretending aspiration is accomplishment.

People

Give us courage to say what we are still becoming.

Leader

And protect us from generic words
that conceal the particular people
you have formed us to be.

People

Give us language with flesh on it.

All

Faithful God,
help us recognize ourselves truthfully.

Give us gratitude for our gifts,
humility about our limitations,
honesty about our aspirations,
and words clear enough
for another person to meet us through them.

May the story we tell
be recognizable to those who know us
and trustworthy to those who do not.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

Chapter Two has asked:

Who are we?

But truthful identity includes more than the parts of ourselves we most enjoy describing.

Every gift has limits.

Every congregational culture has consequences.

A church with deep relationships may be difficult for newcomers to enter.

A congregation that values consensus may avoid necessary conflict.

A church proud of strong lay leadership may have trouble making room for pastoral leadership.

A congregation rooted in tradition may possess remarkable stability—and resist adaptation long after circumstances have changed.

The goal is not to diminish the gifts.

It is to describe the congregation maturely enough to hold **gift and shadow together**.

A candidate does not need a congregation without problems.

There isn't one.

A candidate needs enough truth to discern whether these are people with whom they can share ministry.

That brings us to Chapter Three:

Chapter Three

Describe the Church You Actually Have

Gifts, Challenges, and Contradictions

Chapter Three Resources

Describe the Church You Actually Have

Gifts, Challenges, and Contradictions

Sooner or later, a committee writing a Ministry Discernment Profile reaches the paragraph that makes everyone uneasy.

The congregation has gathered its story.

It has identified values and gifts.

It has begun writing about who it is.

Then someone asks:

“But how much should we say about what is difficult?”

That question matters.

A Ministry Discernment Profile is not a confession.

It is not a catalog of congregational failures.

It is not the place to retell every conflict, disclose confidential information, or rehearse grievances from the past.

Neither is it advertising with the shadows cropped away.

A congregation searching for a pastor is entering a relationship of mutual discernment. That relationship cannot begin faithfully if one party carefully manages the light and decides what the other is permitted to see.

The Field Guide states the issue clearly: healthy congregations can recognize both gift and shadow, and candidates deserve to know the realities that are important to their discernment.

Every congregation has gifts.

Every congregation has challenges.

And often they are connected.

A congregation with deep relationships may be wonderfully caring—and difficult for newcomers to enter.

A congregation with strong lay leadership may have remarkable ownership—and difficulty making room for pastoral leadership.

A congregation committed to consensus may listen carefully—and postpone decisions that need to be made.

A congregation deeply rooted in tradition may possess stability, memory, and theological depth—and resist adaptation.

The goal of this chapter is not to dim the congregation’s gifts.

It is to let the description become whole.

For most congregations, **FM-3.1, FM-3.3, FM-3.4, FM-3.6, and FM-3.9** provide the core process.

FM-3.1

Gift and Shadow

Seeing the Whole of What We Carry

Purpose

This exercise helps the congregation recognize that many strengths also create vulnerabilities.

The shadow does not cancel the gift.

The gift does not eliminate the shadow.

Mature self-understanding can hold both.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Begin with the Gifts

Return to the gifts identified through Remembering and Chapter Two.

Choose five to seven that seem especially important.

Write each on a separate sheet.

For example:

Strong relationships

Tradition

Lay leadership

Generosity

Independence

Theological diversity

Commitment to harmony

Long institutional memory

Ask About Each Gift

THE GIFT

What does this make possible?

How has it served us?

What stories demonstrate it?

THE SHADOW

When can this gift become limiting?

Who might experience it differently?

What happens when we rely on this gift too heavily?

Examples

Gift	Possible Shadow
Close relationships	Newcomers may find established circles difficult to enter
Strong traditions	Change can feel like loss of identity
Strong lay leadership	Pastoral leadership may be resisted or underused
Consensus	Necessary decisions may be delayed
Generosity	Boundaries can become unclear
Independence	Asking for help may be difficult
Theological diversity	Important differences may sometimes be avoided rather than engaged
Strong staff	Congregational members may defer too much ministry to professionals
Long history	Memory can become nostalgia
Commitment to harmony	Conflict may go underground

Important

These are examples, not diagnoses.

Do not assume that every gift automatically carries the shadow listed beside it.

Ask what is actually true of **your congregation**.

Complete

One gift whose shadow we need to understand more clearly is:

The gift is real because:

Its shadow appears when:

The Writing Question

Ask:

Would understanding this gift and its shadow help a candidate discern ministry with us?

If yes, mark it.

FM-3.2

Strengths Without Self-Promotion

Naming Gifts with Gratitude

Purpose

Some committees become so concerned about sounding promotional that they understate genuine strengths.

Truthfulness includes gifts.

Humility does not require pretending you have none.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Begin with a Strength

One thing this congregation does genuinely well is:

Ask for Evidence

How do we know?

Who experiences this strength?

When have we seen it?

Is it still true now?

Now Write It Three Ways

Promotional

Write the exaggerated version.

Perhaps:

Our congregation has an extraordinary commitment to mission and is known throughout the community for its exceptional outreach.

Timid

Now understate it.

Perhaps:

We participate in several community activities.

Truthful

Now write what the evidence supports.

Ask

Which version would you trust if you were a candidate?

Why?

Remember

A candidate needs to know what resources and strengths will be available in ministry.

Do not hide them.

Name them with evidence.

FM-3.3

Challenges Without Self-Indictment

Naming What Is Difficult Without Making It the Whole Story

Purpose

Congregations often move toward one of two extremes when describing challenges.

They hide them.

Or they become so self-critical that the description sounds hopeless.

Neither is useful.

This exercise practices truthful proportion.

Time

60 minutes.

Choose a Significant Challenge

Describe Only What Is Observable

What is happening?

Avoid interpretation initially.

For example:

Observation:

Average worship attendance has declined over the past decade.

is different from:

Interpretation:

People no longer care about church.

Add Context

How long has this been true?

What factors may contribute?

What has the congregation already tried?

Name the Impact

How does this challenge affect ministry?

Name the Response

How is the congregation engaging it?

Name What Remains Unresolved

Now Draft

Use this sequence:

Reality → Impact → Response → Open Question

Example

Instead of:

Our congregation is aging and declining, and we need a pastor who can attract young families.

Try:

Our congregation is smaller and older than it was a generation ago, and some ministries designed for a larger church are no longer sustainable in their previous form. We have begun asking what faithful ministry looks like with the people and gifts present now, while listening more carefully to the changing community around us.

The second does not hide the challenge.

It also does not turn the challenge into a simplistic pastoral assignment.

FM-3.4

What Does a Candidate Deserve to Know?

Practicing Mutual Discernment

Purpose

This is one of the most important exercises in the Field Manual.

The question is not simply:

What are we required to disclose?

Ask instead:

What would a candidate reasonably need to know in order to discern faithfully whether to enter ministry with us?

Time

60–75 minutes.

Imagine the Future

Imagine the pastor has been with the congregation for six months.

Something important becomes apparent.

The pastor says:

“I wish someone had told me this during the search.”

What might **this** be?

Ask participants to write responses privately.

Collect them.

Group similar responses.

Possible Areas

Without assuming any apply to your congregation, consider:

staff relationships;

financial realities;

congregational conflict;

leadership patterns;

decision-making culture;

unresolved grief;

history with previous pastors;

significant theological differences;

expectations of the pastor;

property concerns;

major demographic changes;

membership or attendance trends;
relationship with the denomination;
community reputation;
resistance to particular changes;
staffing transitions;
important unfinished work.

For Each Item Ask

Is it true?

Is it significant to ministry?

Would knowing it reasonably affect a candidate's discernment?

Does it belong in the MDP?

Does it belong in deeper candidate resources?

Does it belong in conversation?

Are there confidentiality concerns?

A Governing Principle

Not everything belongs in a public document.

But important information does not become less important merely because it is uncomfortable.

The task is to determine **where and when it should be shared faithfully**.

FM-3.5

Truth, Confidentiality, and Proportion

Deciding Where Difficult Information Belongs

Purpose

Some information is important but inappropriate for a public MDP.

This worksheet helps the committee distinguish honesty from indiscriminate disclosure.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Use Four Categories**PUBLIC AND IMPORTANT**

Appropriate for the MDP.

IMPORTANT BUT NEEDS MORE SPACE

Appropriate for candidate resources.

IMPORTANT BUT REQUIRES CONVERSATION

Needs context, relationship, or nuance.

CONFIDENTIAL

Should not be shared except through appropriate authorized processes, if at all.

Sort the Material

Information	MDP	Candidate Resources	Conversation	Confidential
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Ask of Every Difficult Item

Who owns this story?

Are we authorized to tell it?

Can it be described without identifying people unnecessarily?

Does the candidate need the event—or the wisdom we learned from it?

Would omitting it create a materially misleading picture?

Does it require dialogue?

Example

A congregation may have experienced a painful conflict ten years ago.

The candidate may not need names, accusations, meeting minutes, or competing versions of what happened.

But if that conflict continues to shape trust, decision-making, or attitudes toward pastoral leadership, some part of its legacy may matter.

Perhaps the important truth is:

A significant conflict in our recent history damaged trust and contributed to membership loss. Relationships have healed considerably, but the experience made us aware of our tendency to postpone difficult conversations. We are working to address disagreement earlier and more directly.

That communicates something useful without turning the MDP into a case file.

Remember

Tell enough truth for discernment.

Do not tell someone else's story simply because it is interesting.

FM-3.6

Present Reality or Aspiration?

Do Not Hire a Pastor for the Church You Pretend to Be

Purpose

Chapter Two distinguished identity from aspiration.

This exercise applies that discipline to the congregation's current condition.

Time

45 minutes.

Complete Two Columns

THIS IS TRUE NOW

and

WE WANT THIS TO BECOME TRUE

Consider

community engagement;

children and youth;

worship;

evangelism;

mission;

leadership development;

small groups;

theological education;

diversity;

hospitality;

stewardship;

conflict practices;

innovation;

technology;
intergenerational relationships.

Example

Claim:

“We have a strong ministry with young families.”

Ask:

How many families?

What happens?

Who leads it?

How often?

What evidence exists?

If the honest answer is:

We want to rebuild ministry with families,

say that.

Why This Matters

A pastor may be drawn toward a congregation because of a ministry the MDP appears to describe as thriving.

Arriving later to discover that the “thriving ministry” consists of an aspiration and an empty classroom damages trust immediately.

Aspirations can be attractive.

A candidate may think:

That is exactly the kind of ministry I would love to help develop.

But only if the congregation tells the truth about where it is beginning.

Useful Language

We are...

for current reality.

We have begun...

for early movement.

We are learning...

for developing practice.

We hope...

for aspiration.

We are seeking...

for intention.

We have not yet...

for unfinished work.

Complete

One aspiration we need to stop describing as current reality is:

A truthful way to describe it is:

FM-3.7

Contradiction Mapping

When More Than One Thing Is True

Purpose

Congregations are rarely consistent enough to fit neatly into a single description.

More than one thing can be true.

That is not necessarily hypocrisy.

It is often simply human community.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Complete the Sentence

We are a congregation that...

And we are also a congregation that...

Examples

We value change,

and

we become anxious when familiar practices change.

We want younger leadership,

and

we sometimes expect younger leaders to work within established patterns.

We value theological diversity,

and

we sometimes avoid conversations where differences become uncomfortable.

We are proud of lay leadership,

and

a relatively small group of people carries much of it.

We want to engage the community,

and

many of our strongest relationships remain within the congregation.

Do Not Resolve the Contradiction Too Quickly

Ask:

What does each side protect?

What history helps explain the tension?

How does it affect ministry?

What might a pastor need to understand about it?

Complete

One tension that a new pastor will probably encounter is:

We believe the most truthful way to describe it is:

Contradictions make the congregation more believable.

They also make it more human.

FM-3.8

Weak → Better → Strong

Writing About Challenges

Purpose

These examples demonstrate how honesty can become useful rather than damaging.

Example One — Decline

Weak

Like many churches, we have experienced some decline but remain optimistic about the future.

Better

Our membership and worship attendance have declined over the past several years.

Stronger

Our congregation is significantly smaller than it was a generation ago. That change has required us to reconsider ministries and structures built for a larger church. We are learning to measure vitality less by recovering former numbers and more by discerning what faithful ministry is possible with the gifts and relationships present now.

Why It Is Stronger

It names reality, impact, and emerging learning.

Example Two — Conflict

Weak

We have had some conflicts in the past, but those are now behind us.

Better

Like most congregations, we have experienced periods of disagreement.

Stronger

A period of significant conflict revealed our tendency to avoid difficult conversations until positions had hardened. Although relationships have substantially healed, the experience continues to shape us. We are learning to address disagreement earlier and to distinguish unity from uniformity.

Why It Is Stronger

It tells the candidate what the congregation learned.

Example Three — Change

Weak

Some of our older members can be resistant to change.

Better

Change can sometimes be difficult for our congregation.

Stronger

Many of our traditions carry deep meaning, and changes to familiar practices can initially create anxiety. Our history also contains repeated examples of adaptation when people understand why change matters and have meaningful opportunities to participate in it.

Why It Is Stronger

It avoids blaming a demographic group and holds gift and shadow together.

Example Four — Leadership

Weak

We need a strong pastor who can get people involved.

Better

A relatively small number of members currently carry many leadership responsibilities.

Stronger

We have capable lay leaders, but responsibility has become concentrated among a relatively small group. Some are tired, while others have not yet found meaningful ways to contribute. Developing broader participation will require work by both congregation and pastor rather than simply stronger pastoral recruitment.

Why It Is Stronger

It does not hand the entire problem to the next pastor.

Example Five — Finances

Weak

We are financially stable.

Better

We currently meet our operating obligations.

Stronger

We have adequate resources for current ministry and no immediate financial crisis, but our operating budget depends heavily on the generosity of an aging membership. We recognize that long-term sustainability will require thoughtful stewardship and decisions about how our resources support emerging ministry priorities.

Why It Is Stronger

It distinguishes current condition from long-term reality.

FM-3.9

Congregational Honesty Check

Would the People Who Know Us Recognize This?

Purpose

Before finalizing descriptions of strengths and challenges, test them against lived reality.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Review Each Major Statement

For every important claim, ask:

Is it true?

Yes / Mostly / Partly / No

Is it current?

Yes / Partly / No

Do we have evidence?

Yes / Some / No

Would longtime members recognize it?

Yes / Probably / Unsure

Would newer members recognize it?

Yes / Probably / Unsure

Might staff describe it differently?

Yes / No / We should ask

Might community partners describe it differently?

Yes / No / We should ask

Then Ask

What have we overstated?

What have we understated?

What have we avoided?

What have we described too harshly?

Where have we blamed individuals for systemic patterns?

Where have we turned aspiration into fact?

The Six-Month Test

Imagine the candidate accepts the call.

Six months later, they reread the MDP.

Would they say:

“Yes. This is the congregation they described.”

Or:

“Why didn't they tell me?”

Or:

“This isn't the church I thought I was coming to.”

You cannot prevent every surprise.

But you can avoid preventable deception.

FM-3.10

The “Why Didn't You Tell Me?” Conversation

Preparing for What Does Not Belong in the MDP

Purpose

Some important truths will not fit appropriately in the public profile.

That does not mean they should disappear.

This resource creates a record of matters that should be addressed later in candidate conversations.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Create the List

Important matter:

Why it matters to pastoral ministry:

Why it does not belong in the public MDP:

At what stage should it be discussed?

First conversation / Later interview / Interview weekend / Before final discernment

Who should explain it?

What context will the candidate need?

Repeat

Create a working list.

Do not rely on the committee remembering six months from now.

Add It to the Search Process

This list eventually belongs with the committee's interview preparation materials.

The goal is continuity:

What we discovered while writing should shape what we discuss while discerning.

FM-3.11

What Would We Want to Know?

Practicing Reciprocity

Purpose

Mutual discernment becomes easier when the committee reverses roles.

Imagine you are considering joining an organization where you may spend the next decade of your life.

What would you want to know?

Ask Individually

If I were considering becoming pastor here, I would want to know:

Then Ask

Would our current MDP tell me?

Would the candidate resource page tell me?

Would someone tell me in conversation?

Or are we hoping I will not ask?

Discuss

What information would we expect a candidate to disclose honestly about themselves?

What level of honesty are we therefore obligated to offer in return?

Complete

Mutual discernment requires us to...

FM-3.12

Drafting Gifts, Challenges, and Contradictions

Putting Mature Self-Understanding into Words

Purpose

This exercise gathers the chapter's work into prose the writer can use.

Step One — Name Three Significant Gifts

Step Two — Identify Their Shadows

Step Three — Name Two or Three Significant Challenges

Step Four — Identify What the Congregation Is Doing About Them

Step Five — Identify Important Contradictions

Step Six — Draft

Write approximately 200–300 words.

Do not try to sound impressive.

Describe the congregation someone will actually encounter.

Step Seven — Review

Underline anything that sounds defensive.

Circle anything that sounds promotional.

Box anything that blames someone else.

Put a star beside anything that demonstrates learning.

Put a question mark beside anything that lacks evidence.

Ask

Does this describe a congregation capable of learning?

That may matter more than describing a congregation without problems.

Chapter Three Discernment Harvest

The Truth a Candidate Needs from Us

Gifts We Can Name with Confidence

Shadows Connected to Those Gifts

Challenges Important to Our Next Season

Contradictions a New Pastor Is Likely to Encounter

Things We Are Actively Working On

Things We Have Not Yet Resolved

Information That Belongs in the MDP

Information That Belongs in Deeper Candidate Resources

Information That Belongs in Candidate Conversation

Complete

A candidate who knows us well should eventually understand that we are a congregation with the gifts of...

and the challenges of...

and that we are learning...

A Prayer for Courageous Honesty

Leader

God of truth and grace,
you know us completely.

You know the gifts we celebrate
and the weaknesses we would rather conceal.

People

Help us see ourselves with courage.

Leader

For gifts received across generations,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For strengths that sustain ministry,

People

Keep us grateful.

Leader

For places where our strengths cast shadows,

People

Give us wisdom.

Leader

For failures that have taught us,

People

Keep us humble.

Leader

For wounds that still need healing,

People

Give us patience and courage.

Leader

For conflicts through which we have learned,

People

Help us carry the wisdom without carrying the bitterness.

Leader

When we are tempted to make ourselves look better than we are,

People

Remind us that discernment requires truth.

Leader

When we are tempted to make ourselves look worse than we are,

People

Remind us that gratitude also requires truth.

Leader

When we are afraid a candidate will turn away if they know something difficult,

People

Teach us to trust their discernment as we ask them to trust ours.

Leader

When information belongs in conversation rather than on a page,

People

Give us courage to have the conversation.

Leader

When someone's story is not ours to tell,

People

Give us restraint.

Leader

When we do not yet know how to resolve what is difficult,

People

Give us humility to say so.

All

Faithful God,
make us neither proud nor ashamed
of the congregation we actually are.

Help us receive our gifts with gratitude,
our limitations with humility,
our contradictions with curiosity,
and our unfinished work with hope.

Give us courage to tell enough truth
that another person may discern freely.

And give us grace to welcome the truth
they will eventually bring about themselves.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

By the end of Chapter Three, the congregation should have a more mature description of itself.

Not:

We are wonderful.

Not:

We are a mess.

But:

These are gifts we genuinely carry.

These are the shadows sometimes attached to those gifts.

These are challenges that affect ministry.

These are contradictions we are learning to understand.

These are things we have already learned.

These are things we are still working on.

And these are truths a pastoral candidate deserves to encounter during mutual discernment.

That is enough for now.

Because the congregation is only half of the story.

The church does not exist in abstraction.

It has an address.

There are homes around it.

Schools.

Businesses.

Parks.

Organizations.

Institutions.

People who have lived there for generations and people who arrived last month.

There are assets, pressures, hopes, losses, relationships, and possibilities.

The MDP must help a candidate see that place not simply as the location where the church building happens to stand, but as part of the congregation's vocation.

The next question is therefore not:

What is attractive about our town?

It is:

Who has God given us to love?

That is the work of Chapter Four:

Chapter Four

Describe Your Place

The Community God Has Given You to Love

Chapter Four Resources

Describe Your Place

The Community God Has Given You to Love

Every congregation can name its address.

But an address is only a point on a map. A place is a web of lives.

A place has people.

It has stories.

Relationships.

Institutions.

Neighborhoods.

Schools.

Businesses.

Gathering places.

Organizations.

Patterns of belonging.

Sources of pride.

Places of pain.

Things people are trying to protect.

Things people hope will change.

A congregation can occupy the same address for decades and still remain a stranger to the place beyond its doors.

That is why the community section of a Ministry Discernment Profile can so easily become a real-estate advertisement.

The schools are excellent.

The area offers abundant recreational opportunities.

We are conveniently located near shopping, medical facilities, and major transportation.

Our community is a wonderful place to raise a family.

Perhaps all of that is true.

But none of it tells a pastor very much about the **ministry context**.

The Field Guide asks a much better question:

Who has God given us to love?

That changes the task.

You are not trying to persuade a candidate that your community is desirable from a distance.

You are helping a candidate see the particular place in which this congregation has been called to notice, love, and join God's work.

If the congregation has completed Listening, you should already possess much of what you need.

The work of this chapter is to turn that listening into language.

For most congregations, **FM-4.1, FM-4.3, FM-4.4, FM-4.6, FM-4.8, and FM-4.10** provide the core process.

FM-4.1

What Listening Taught Us

Begin with What You Actually Heard

Purpose

This exercise gathers the most important discoveries from Listening before anyone begins writing about the community.

Do not begin with Google.

Do not begin with census data.

Do not begin with the Chamber of Commerce website.

Begin with what you learned by paying attention to your place.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Gather

Bring the final materials from Listening.

Especially useful will be:

neighborhood observations;

community walks;

conversations with neighbors;

interviews with community leaders;

conversations with ministry partners;

demographic information;

community asset maps;

identified pain points;

community hopes;

photographs;

maps;

Listening Discernment Summary.

Ask Individually

Complete:

Before Listening, I thought our community was...

Now I would describe it as...

Then Ask

Something I noticed that I had not seen before was...

Something someone told us that I keep remembering is...

Something that surprised me was...

Something I realized we had misunderstood was...

Something that gives me hope is...

Something that concerns me is...

At Tables

Choose five discoveries that someone considering ministry here should understand.

Test Them

For each, ask:

Did we actually learn this through Listening?

Or did we already believe it before we began?

If it is an assumption, do not turn it into a community description.

Complete

The most important thing Listening changed about the way we see our community is...

FM-4.2

Community Change Map

What Is Different Here Now?

Purpose

A community is not static.

The place a congregation remembers from twenty or thirty years ago may no longer be the place in which it ministers today.

This resource helps distinguish remembered community from present community.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Create Three Columns

THEN

What characterized the community in an earlier period?

NOW

What characterizes it today?

CHANGING

What appears to be emerging?

Consider

Population.

Age.

Housing.

Employment.

Schools.

Economic conditions.

Transportation.

Race and ethnicity, where relevant and supported by appropriate information.

Languages.

Family patterns.
 Development.
 Businesses.
 Public institutions.
 Social organizations.
 Community gathering places.
 Religious participation.
 Patterns of migration.
 Homelessness or housing instability.
 Community leadership.

Example

Then	Now	Changing
Primarily single-family housing	Increasing rental housing	New multifamily development planned
Major local employer dominated economy	More diversified employment	Increased commuting
Church members lived nearby	Members drive from across region	Few current members live in immediate neighborhood

Ask

Which changes most affect ministry?

Which changes has the congregation adapted to?

Which changes has the congregation barely noticed?

Where is our congregational memory still describing a community that no longer exists?

Important

Do not treat change automatically as decline.

“Different” does not mean “worse.”

The community does not exist to remain familiar to the congregation.

Complete

One change a candidate needs to understand is...

It matters because...

FM-4.3

Numbers Need Stories

Using Demographics Without Reducing People to Data

Purpose

Demographic information can be useful.

It can also create the illusion that the congregation understands its community simply because it has statistics.

A median household income cannot tell you what financial anxiety feels like.

An age distribution cannot tell you whether older adults are lonely.

The percentage of households with children cannot tell you what parents hope for.

A racial category cannot tell you how people experience belonging.

Numbers describe patterns.

People interpret their lives.

You need both.

Time

60 minutes.

Choose a Significant Statistic

The number tells us:

Ask

What might this mean?

What does it **not** tell us?

What did actual people tell us that gives the number context?

What did we observe?

Example

Statistic

A significant percentage of households rent rather than own their homes.

Possible interpretation

The community may include a more mobile population.

What the statistic does not tell us

Why people rent.

How long they stay.

Whether they feel rooted.

Whether they want stronger neighborhood relationships.

What listening might add

Several residents described difficulty knowing neighbors because of frequent turnover.

Now the statistic has a human context.

Work Through Several

Data:

Possible significance:

Human story or observation:

What we still do not know:

Writing Rule

Do not write:

Our community has a median age of 41.7, a median household income of \$68,450, 31.6 percent of adults have bachelor's degrees, and 17.2 percent of residents are over age 65.

unless those numbers help the candidate understand something important.

Instead ask:

What story do the numbers help us tell?

Remember

Use data to illuminate people, not replace them.

FM-4.4

Assets, Not Just Needs

Seeing What Is Already Strong

Purpose

Churches are often trained to look for community needs.

Who is hungry?

Who is homeless?

Who is lonely?

Who needs tutoring?

Who needs counseling?

Those questions can matter.

But if they are the only questions we ask, the congregation begins imagining itself as the giver and the community as the recipient.

Listening should have revealed something else.

The community already contains gifts.

Wisdom.

Relationships.

Leadership.

Organizations.

Creativity.

Knowledge.

Resources.

People already doing good work.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Create an Asset Map

Consider:

People

Who carries knowledge, leadership, or trust?

Associations

What informal groups connect people?

Institutions

Schools?

Libraries?

Nonprofits?

Businesses?

Government agencies?

Health organizations?

Other congregations?

Places

Where do people naturally gather?

Relationships

Where do strong networks already exist?

Culture

What traditions, celebrations, stories, or practices create belonging?

Economic Assets

What local businesses or enterprises contribute to community life?

Creative Assets

Where do art, music, recreation, innovation, or imagination flourish?

Ask

Who is already doing work we care about?

Who knows the community better than we do?

Whose leadership should we respect rather than replace?

Where might partnership be more faithful than creating another church program?

The Writing Question

Ask:

If a candidate read only our MDP, would they imagine this community as a collection of problems—or as a place full of people with gifts?

That distinction matters.

FM-4.5

Pain, Pressure, and Hope

Describing What Matters to People

Purpose

A community description should not avoid suffering.

Neither should it make suffering the community's identity.

This exercise holds pain and hope together.

Time

45–60 minutes.

What Pressures Did We Hear About?

Perhaps:

housing;

loneliness;

childcare;

economic insecurity;

mental health;

transportation;

education;

caregiving;

substance use;

violence;

social isolation;

food access;

rapid growth;

loss of community identity;

aging;

political division.

Only include what your Listening work actually supports.

For Each Pressure Ask

What did we hear or observe?

Who described it?

What are people already doing in response?

What hopes did people express?

Example

Do not stop with:

Our community has a growing problem of social isolation among older adults.

Perhaps Listening also revealed:

Several neighborhood organizations, a senior center, and local congregations are already creating opportunities for connection, but transportation and awareness remain barriers.

Now the candidate sees both pain and agency.

Complete

One significant pressure in our community is...

People are already responding through...

The hope we heard was...

Remember

People are never reducible to their problems.

FM-4.6

From Target Demographics to Neighbors

Changing the Language Changes the Relationship

Purpose

Churches sometimes use the language of marketing without realizing what it implies.

Target population.

Target demographic.

Reach young families.

Capture the growing population.

Attract millennials.

Bring in the unchurched.

That language can turn neighbors into categories of people the congregation wants something from.

Listening asks for a different posture.

Time

45 minutes.

Translate the Language

Instead of:

How do we attract young families?

Try:

What are families in our community experiencing, and what might we learn from them?

Instead of:

How do we reach the unchurched?

Try:

How do people around us understand spirituality, community, faith, and church?

Instead of:

How do we bring the neighborhood into our building?

Try:

Where does community already happen, and how might we participate?

Instead of:

What does our target population need?

Try:

What are our neighbors telling us matters to them?

Your Turn

Language we currently use:

What relationship does that language imply?

More relational language might be:

The Neighbor Test

Read your emerging community description.

Underline every place where people appear primarily as:

needs;

markets;

demographics;

problems;

potential members;

recipients of ministry.

Ask:

Where do they appear as neighbors, leaders, partners, and people with gifts?

Complete

The community is not our ministry market. It is...

FM-4.7

Community Relationships Inventory

Who Do We Actually Know?

Purpose

There is a difference between knowing **about** a community and being in relationship with it.

This exercise tests the depth of the congregation's actual connections.

Time

45–60 minutes.

List Relationships

Person/Organization	Relationship	Who Knows Them?	Depth
_____	_____	_____	New / Occasional / Strong
_____	_____	_____	New / Occasional / Strong
_____	_____	_____	New / Occasional / Strong
_____	_____	_____	New / Occasional / Strong

Consider

schools;
 nonprofits;
 neighborhood associations;
 businesses;
 other congregations;
 public agencies;
 community organizers;
 social-service providers;
 arts organizations;
 health providers;
 libraries;
 civic groups;
 people who live nearby.

Ask

Which relationships depend on one church member?

Which are institutional?

Which are reciprocal?

Which primarily involve the congregation giving something?

Which involve the congregation learning or receiving?

The Hard Question

If our congregation disappeared tomorrow, who in the community would notice—not because they lost a service, but because they lost a relationship?

Do not use the question to create guilt.

Use it to measure relational reality.

FM-4.8

Help a Candidate See the Place

Writing Beyond Statistics

Purpose

A candidate may live hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Your MDP may be their first encounter with your community.

Help them see it.

Not as a tourism brochure.

As a ministry context.

Time

60 minutes.

Imagine the Candidate Arrives

They drive through the community for the first time.

What do they see?

Where are people?

Where do people gather?

What is changing?

What is beautiful?

What seems strained?

What is easy to overlook?

Now Walk Toward the Church

What surrounds the church building?

Who lives nearby?

What institutions are close?

What happens during the week?

Does the area feel different at night?

Write a 150-Word Portrait

Do not use statistics yet.

Write what the candidate might notice.

Add What Listening Taught You

Now add one or two things the candidate could not see from the car.

Add Data Only Where It Clarifies

Test

Does the description help someone imagine ministry here?

Or does it merely tell them whether they might enjoy living here?

Both can matter.

Only one is the primary task.

FM-4.9

Weak → Better → Strong

Writing About Place

Example One — The Real-Estate Brochure

Weak

Our community is a wonderful place to live, work, and raise a family, with excellent schools, beautiful parks, convenient shopping, and abundant recreational opportunities.

Better

Our community is growing rapidly and includes strong schools, parks, businesses, and civic institutions.

Stronger

Rapid residential growth is changing a community that many longtime residents still experience as a small town. New neighborhoods continue to appear while older areas retain strong multigenerational ties. Our listening revealed both excitement about new opportunities and concern about whether the relationships that have held the community together can keep pace with growth.

Why It Is Stronger

The candidate learns something about **ministry in this place**.

Example Two — Demographics

Weak

The population within five miles is 42,375 with a median age of 39.8 and median household income of \$72,400.

Better

The area has grown steadily and includes a mixture of young families, working adults, and older residents.

Stronger

New housing has brought many younger households into the area, while longtime residents continue to provide much of the community's institutional memory and civic leadership. Conversations with local leaders suggest that bringing these populations into deeper relationship is both a challenge and an opportunity.

Why It Is Stronger

The numbers have become human significance.

Example Three — Community Need

Weak

Our community has many needy families whom our church hopes to serve.

Better

Some households in our community experience significant economic pressure.

Stronger

School and nonprofit leaders described increasing pressure on families around housing, food, and childcare. They also introduced us to strong networks already responding. We are learning that faithful engagement may mean strengthening partnerships rather than assuming the church needs to create its own solution.

Why It Is Stronger

The community possesses agency.

The congregation is learning.

Example Four — Young Adults**Weak**

Our area has many young families we would like to attract to our church.

Better

A growing number of younger adults and families live in the surrounding area.

Stronger

Younger households are increasingly present in nearby neighborhoods, but relatively few have connections with our congregation. Our conversations suggest that their schedules, relationships, and expectations of community differ from assumptions we have sometimes made. We are still listening.

Why It Is Stronger

The congregation does not turn demographic opportunity into recruitment strategy.

Example Five — Community Assets**Weak**

There are many opportunities for our church to make a difference in the community.

Better

Our community includes numerous organizations addressing important local concerns.

Stronger

One of the most encouraging discoveries from Listening was how much good work is already underway. Schools, nonprofits, neighborhood leaders, businesses, and congregations are addressing concerns ranging from food insecurity to youth development. We are increasingly asking not, “What should our church start?” but, “Where might our gifts strengthen relationships and work already taking shape?”

Why It Is Stronger

It reveals a theology of participation rather than institutional expansion.

FM-4.10

Community Description Drafting Worksheet

From Listening to Language

Purpose

This is the principal writing resource for Chapter Four.

It gathers the material into a coherent description of place.

Part One — What Is This Place?

In two or three sentences, describe the community without trying to make it attractive.

Part Two — What Is Changing?

Part Three — Who Lives Here?

Describe people as more than demographic categories.

Part Four — What Gives the Community Life?

Part Five — What Pressures or Pain Did We Hear?

Part Six — What Hopes Did We Hear?

Part Seven — Who Is Already Doing Good Work?

Part Eight — What Relationships Does the Congregation Already Have?

Part Nine — What Has Listening Changed About Us?

Part Ten — What Does a Candidate Need to Understand?

Now Draft

Write approximately 250–400 words.

Do not worry about the MDP word limit yet.

Review

Underline every statistic.

Does each one matter?

Circle every adjective describing the community.

Is there evidence?

Put a box around every sentence describing a community problem.

Have you also described community assets?

Put a star beside every sentence showing relationship.

Put a question mark beside anything that is really an assumption.

Ask

Would someone who lives in this community recognize the place we have described?

That is an important test.

FM-4.11

Let the Community Read It

A Recognition Check Beyond the Congregation

Purpose

The congregation should not be the only judge of whether its community description is accurate.

If appropriate, invite several trusted people from the community to read it.

Choose Readers

Perhaps:

a school leader;

a nonprofit partner;
a neighborhood leader;
a local business owner;
another pastor;
a civic leader;
someone who lives near the church;
a person with whom the congregation developed a relationship during Listening.

Ask Only a Few Questions

Does this sound like the community you know?

What seems accurate?

What have we missed?

What have we overstated?

What would you describe differently?

Does anything sound as though the church is looking at the community from the outside rather than living within it?

Receive the Feedback

Do not defend the draft.

Listen.

The community gets to know something about itself too.

FM-4.12

What Belongs Beyond the MDP?

Building the Candidate's Deeper Picture of Place

Purpose

The MDP cannot contain everything the congregation learned about its community.

This is an ideal place to begin building the deeper candidate resources discussed in the Introduction.

Review Your Listening Materials

What would help a serious candidate understand this community more deeply?

Consider:

community maps;
selected demographic reports;
photographs;
community history;
school information;
major employers;
housing information;
local news sources;
community organizations;
ministry partners;
nonprofit organizations;
transportation information;
arts and cultural resources;
recreation;
healthcare;
significant community challenges;
links to municipal or county information.

Sort

MDP

What must be included in the limited profile?

CANDIDATE RESOURCE PAGE OR PACKET

What would help someone explore more deeply?

CONVERSATION

What needs interpretation or context?

Curate

Do not send candidates twenty links and call that a resource page.

For each item, ask:

Why would a candidate benefit from seeing this?

If you cannot answer, leave it out.

Consider a Short Introduction

For each major resource, explain why it matters.

Instead of simply linking to a demographic report:

How Our Community Is Changing

This report helped us recognize the rapid growth of rental housing and younger households around us. We have included it because these changes shaped several of the questions emerging from our Listening process.

Now the candidate understands why the resource is there.

Chapter Four Discernment Harvest

The Place We Want a Candidate to See

The Most Important Things We Learned Through Listening

Significant Changes in Our Community

Community Assets We Want to Name

Pain or Pressures We Need to Describe

Hopes We Heard

People and Organizations Already Doing Good Work

Relationships the Congregation Already Has

Assumptions Listening Corrected

Material That Belongs in the MDP

Material for Deeper Candidate Resources

Complete

The community God has given us to love is a place where...

A Prayer for the Place We Have Been Given

Leader

God of every place,
you were here before us.

People

Teach us to pay attention.

Leader

Before our congregation was organized,

People

You were here.

Leader

Before our building was built,

People

You were here.

Leader

Before we created our ministries,

People

You were already at work.

Leader

We give thanks for the people
who share this place with us.

People

Teach us to know them as neighbors.

Leader

For children and elders,

People

Open our eyes.

Leader

For newcomers and longtime residents,

People

Open our ears.

Leader

For people whose lives are very different from ours,

People

Open our hearts.

Leader

For teachers and business owners,
public servants and caregivers,
artists and laborers,
parents and students,
organizers and volunteers,

People

Help us recognize their gifts.

Leader

For people carrying burdens we have begun to see,

People

Keep us from reducing them to their needs.

Leader

For organizations already doing good work,

People

Free us from believing we must always lead.

Leader

For places where relationships are strong,

People

Let us learn from them.

Leader

For places where relationships are broken,

People

Make us patient partners in healing.

Leader

When numbers tempt us to believe we understand people,

People

Send us back into relationship.

Leader

When needs tempt us to see ourselves as rescuers,

People

Remind us how much we have to receive.

Leader

When we ask how to bring people to us,

People

Teach us first to go and meet them.

Leader

When we wonder what ministry we should create,

People

Help us notice where your life is already stirring.

All

God of this place,
give us love deep enough to become curious,
humility strong enough to listen,
and imagination free enough to join work
we did not begin.

Help us describe this community truthfully,
not as a market,
not as a problem,
not as scenery surrounding our church,

but as neighbors
among whom you have placed us.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

By the end of Chapter Four, the committee should be able to describe two things with increasing clarity:

Who we are.

And:

Where we are.

Now place them beside each other.

A congregation has gifts.

A community has gifts.

A congregation carries particular experiences, capacities, relationships, and values.

A community carries particular hopes, pressures, relationships, assets, and possibilities.

Somewhere in the conversation between those realities, patterns may begin to appear.

Perhaps the congregation has deep experience with hospitality and Listening has revealed profound loneliness.

Perhaps the congregation includes educators and the community is wrestling with educational inequity.

Perhaps the congregation has land and the neighborhood lacks gathering space.

Perhaps the church has experience accompanying people through grief and community leaders repeatedly describe isolation among caregivers.

Perhaps the congregation has strong relationships across difference in a community struggling with polarization.

Do not jump immediately to a program.

The question is not yet:

What should we start?

The deeper question is:

What are we beginning to recognize?

The Field Guide describes vocation as emerging where the congregation's identity and the life of its place meet. It is not simply invented by a committee. It is discerned.

That is the work of Chapter Five:

Chapter Five

Name the Vocation Emerging

Where Identity and Place Meet

Chapter Five Resources

Name the Vocation Emerging

Where Identity and Place Meet

Something has been taking shape beneath all this work.

At first, the congregation was looking backward.

Remembering asked:

Who have we been?

Then Listening turned attention outward:

Where are we now?

Writing the Ministry Discernment Profile brings those discoveries into conversation:

What are we beginning to recognize?

Here writing becomes an act of theological attention.

A congregation can produce a perfectly competent MDP without ever asking that question. It can describe its building, summarize its programs, provide community statistics, list desirable pastoral qualities, and submit the form.

But the Field Guide asks for something more.

It describes vocation as emerging where identity and place meet. The congregation has been learning something about itself. It has been learning something about the community God has given it to love. Now it asks what God may be revealing through the relationship between the two.

The sequence remains:

Reflect → Listen → Recognize → Respond.

Notice the order.

Respond comes last.

That matters because congregations often move too quickly from noticing something to inventing a program.

We have retired teachers.

The community has children struggling in school.

Let's start a tutoring program.

Maybe.

But vocation is always larger than the program that first gives it form.

Perhaps what is emerging is a calling to become a congregation that accompanies children and families.

Tutoring might become one expression of that vocation.

Or perhaps the school already has an excellent tutoring program and what it actually needs is adult mentors, volunteers for family events, advocates, financial partners, or simply people willing to listen.

The congregation does not yet need a complete plan.

It needs language clear enough to name the direction of its calling.

For most congregations, **FM-5.1, FM-5.2, FM-5.3, FM-5.5, FM-5.7, and FM-5.9** provide the core process.

FM-5.1

Identity + Place

Bringing Two Stories into Conversation

Purpose

This exercise brings the strongest discoveries from Chapters Two through Four into one place.

You are looking for relationships, not solutions.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Create Two Large Areas

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT OURSELVES

and

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT OUR PLACE

Do not bring everything forward.

Choose only the discoveries that seem most significant.

About Ourselves

List:

lived values;

gifts;

capacities;

relationships;

significant experiences;

wisdom earned through difficulty;

patterns of faithfulness;

evidence of imagination;

important limitations.

About Our Place

List:

community assets;

changes;

relationships;

pressures;

hopes;

people already doing good work;

unanswered questions;

things that surprised you.

Now Look Across the Space

Do not ask:

What program could connect these?

Ask:

What do we notice?

What seems to speak to something on the other side?

What makes us curious?

Where do we see repeated connections?

Where might our history have prepared us for something we did not anticipate?

Mark Connections

Draw lines between items that seem related.

Some items may connect with several others.

Some may connect with nothing.

Do not force connections.

Ask

Which connections seem obvious?

Which surprise us?

Which feel important but unclear?

Which are based on actual relationships rather than speculation?

Complete

When we place what we know about ourselves beside what we know about our community, we begin to notice...

FM-5.2

Patterns That Keep Appearing

Discernment Through Repetition

Purpose

One observation may be interesting.

A pattern deserves attention.

This resource helps the committee notice themes appearing across different parts of the transition work.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Look Across the Whole Process

Return to:

Remembering;

Listening;

Chapter One's Writing Brief;

identity work;

gift-and-shadow work;

community description;

conversations with community partners.

Ask

What themes have appeared repeatedly?

Perhaps:

hospitality;

loneliness;

children;
caregiving;
food;
belonging;
education;
healing;
housing;
arts;
intergenerational relationships;
community gathering;
justice;
spiritual hunger;
isolation;
economic pressure;
partnership;
reconciliation.

Do not choose from this list.

Name what actually emerged from your work.

Pattern One

Theme:

Where did it appear in Remembering?

Where did it appear in Listening?

Where does it connect with congregational gifts?

Where does it connect with community life?

Pattern Two

Theme:

Evidence:

Pattern Three

Theme:

Evidence:

Test the Pattern

Ask:

Is this appearing because God may be drawing our attention toward it?

Or because one committee member cares deeply about it?

Is there evidence across several sources?

Have people outside the congregation helped us notice it?

Does it connect with gifts we genuinely possess?

Does it awaken curiosity?

Mark

Strong pattern

Possible pattern

Interesting but insufficient evidence

Do not give every observation equal weight.

FM-5.3

Where Gifts Meet the Life of the Community

The Convergence Exercise

Purpose

This resource develops the Convergence Map begun in Chapter One.

Now the committee is ready to ask more explicitly what the connections may mean.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Use Three Columns

GIFTS WE CARRY

WHAT WE ARE HEARING

WHAT MIGHT GOD BE INVITING US TO NOTICE?

Example

Gift

Members with long experience accompanying people through illness, caregiving, grief, and loss.

What We Are Hearing

Community leaders repeatedly describe isolation among caregivers and older adults.

What Might God Be Inviting Us to Notice?

Our experience with accompaniment may be a gift intended for relationships beyond the congregation.

Notice again:

That is not yet a program.

Another Example

Gift

A history of creating space for difficult conversations.

What We Are Hearing

Community leaders describe increasing polarization and the loss of places where people can speak across differences.

Possible Significance

Our capacity for facilitated conversation may have a wider community vocation.

Your Turn

Gift:

What we are hearing:

Possible invitation:

Repeat for several strong convergences.

Then Ask

Which connections feel primarily like good ideas?

Which seem connected to the congregation's deeper identity?

Which might still matter if a particular program failed?

That last question is important.

A vocation can survive the failure of a program.

FM-5.4

Vocation Is Not a Program

Going Beneath the First Idea

Purpose

Congregations often recognize something important and immediately turn it into an activity.

This exercise helps the committee move beneath the program to the calling.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Begin with a Program Idea

We should start:

Ask

What concern is this trying to address?

Why does that concern matter to us?

What congregational gift is involved?

What did we hear from the community?

What deeper relationship might God be inviting?

Now Remove the Program

Imagine the proposed program cannot happen.

The building is unavailable.

Funding disappears.

Another organization is already doing it better.

Would the calling remain?

If yes:

What remains?

Example

Program idea

Open an after-school tutoring program.

Beneath it

We are recognizing a calling to accompany children and families and strengthen educational opportunity.

Tutoring might be one response.

Mentoring might be another.

Partnership with teachers might be another.

Providing meals during school events might be another.

Advocacy might be another.

The vocation is larger than any one response.

Practice

Program:

Possible deeper vocation:

Ask

Are we trying to put a program in the MDP?

Or describe a ministry direction that leaves room for pastor and congregation to discern together?

FM-5.5

From “We Should” to “We Are Beginning to Recognize”

Changing the Grammar of Discernment

Purpose

Language shapes the way a committee thinks.

“We should” often expresses obligation.

“We need to” often expresses anxiety.

“The new pastor should” often transfers responsibility.

Discernment uses different language.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Listen for These Phrases

We should...

We have to...

We need a pastor who will...

Somebody needs to...

The church ought to...

Whenever one appears, pause.

Ask:

What are we noticing beneath that statement?

Practice

Instead of:

We need to reach young families.

Try:

Our Listening has made us more attentive to the lives of families in our changing community, and we are beginning to ask what meaningful relationship with them might require.

Instead of:

We should do more mission.

Try:

We are recognizing that some of our strongest gifts emerge when members build relationships beyond the congregation.

Instead of:

We need a pastor who will get us involved in the community.

Try:

We are beginning to recognize deeper community engagement as part of our own congregational vocation and will need pastoral leadership that can help equip us for that work.

Your Turn

We should...

Rewrite:

We are beginning to recognize...

Another

The new pastor needs to...

Rewrite:

We believe the congregation is being called to...

and pastoral leadership may help us by...

Notice

This grammar returns vocation to the congregation.

That is where it belongs.

FM-5.6

The Certainty Ladder

Say Only What You Actually Know

Purpose

Congregations sometimes become more certain on paper than they are in conversation.

The MDP should not require false confidence.

This resource helps match language to the actual strength of discernment.

Time

30 minutes.

The Ladder

We have noticed...

An observation.

We wonder...

A question worth exploring.

We are beginning to recognize...

A pattern is emerging.

We sense...

Discernment is becoming stronger.

We believe...

There is substantial shared conviction.

We are convinced...

The congregation has strong clarity.

Choose Carefully

Consider an emerging vocational statement.

Which phrase accurately describes where the congregation is?

Test

Would most of the congregation agree with that level of certainty?

Does the evidence justify it?

Have we heard enough beyond ourselves?

Rewrite

Too certain:

More accurate:

Remember

Humility is not weakness.

A candidate may find this compelling:

We do not yet know exactly what this ministry will become, but our listening has repeatedly drawn our attention toward loneliness and social isolation in our community. We are beginning to recognize that our gifts for hospitality and accompaniment may have a larger role in our next season of ministry.

That leaves room.

Including room for the person who may become your pastor.

FM-5.7

Evidence for Emerging Vocation

Why Do We Think This Matters?

Purpose

Before naming an emerging vocation in the MDP, test it against evidence.

Time

60 minutes.

Proposed Vocational Direction

Evidence from Remembering

What in our story supports this?

Evidence from Congregational Identity

What lived values connect?

Evidence from Our Gifts

What capacities already exist?

Evidence from Listening

What did neighbors or community leaders actually tell us?

Evidence from Community Assets

Who is already working in this area?

Evidence from Existing Relationships

Where is trust already present?

Evidence of Energy

Where do people become animated when discussing this?

Evidence of Capacity

Can we realistically participate?

Evidence Against It

What complicates this direction?

Ask

Are we discerning vocation?

Or chasing an attractive idea?

Are we responding to something we actually heard?

Or to something we already wanted to do?

Are we naming a calling?

Or trying to solve institutional anxiety?

Complete

We believe this direction deserves attention because...

FM-5.8

Vocation Statement Builder

Giving Emerging Calling Language

Purpose

The committee now begins giving concise language to the vocation it sees emerging.

This is not a mission statement exercise.

Do not spend two hours arguing over verbs.

You are trying to describe a direction of calling.

Begin with Four Questions

Who are we?

Who has God given us to love?

What are we noticing where those realities meet?

What response seems to be emerging?

Draft One

Complete:

Because we are a congregation shaped by _____, and because our listening has drawn our attention to _____, we are beginning to recognize a calling toward _____.

Draft Two

Remove the formula.

Write it naturally.

Draft Three

Cut it to two or three sentences.

Test the Statement

Does it arise from actual discernment?

Does it connect identity and place?

Is it larger than a program?

Does it leave room for discovery?

Does it imply work for the congregation?

Could it help a candidate imagine ministry here?

Does it sound like us?

Avoid

Slogans.

Branding language.

Grandiose claims.

Promises you cannot fulfill.

Statements so broad that every church could use them.

Keep

Particularity.

Humility.

Direction.

Hope.

FM-5.9

Testing an Emerging Vocation

Is This Calling, Anxiety, Nostalgia, or Fashion?

Purpose

Not every compelling idea is vocation.

Some emerge from fear.

Some from nostalgia.

Some from institutional survival.

Some because another church is doing something interesting.

Some because a consultant suggested them.

Some because one energetic person wants them.

This resource slows the process.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Take One Emerging Vocational Direction**Test One — Identity**

Does this grow from who we have actually become?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Evidence:

Test Two — Place

Does this respond to something we actually learned through Listening?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Evidence:

Test Three — Relationship

Does it move us toward deeper relationships?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Test Four — Gifts

Do we possess gifts relevant to this calling?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Test Five — Partnership

Are others already doing work with which we could join?

Yes / Unsure / No

Test Six — Congregational Responsibility

Does this require the congregation to participate?

Yes / No

If the entire idea depends upon hiring a pastor to do it, reconsider.

Test Seven — Survival

Would we still believe this mattered if it did not increase membership?

Yes / Unsure / No

This may be the most revealing question in the chapter.

Test Eight — Nostalgia

Is this primarily an attempt to recreate a ministry or congregation we once had?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Test Nine — Energy

Does this direction generate faithful energy?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Test Ten — Humility

Can we pursue this while remaining open to being wrong?

Yes / No

Complete

After testing this direction, we believe...

FM-5.10

The Membership Growth Test

Would This Still Matter?

Purpose

Institutional anxiety can disguise itself as mission.

Congregations understandably want to survive.

They want new members.

They want children.

They want financial stability.

Those hopes are not shameful.

But they can distort discernment.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Take a Proposed Ministry Direction

Ask

If this ministry brought no new members into the congregation, would it still be worth doing?

If the people involved never attended worship, would their flourishing still matter to us?

If another organization received most of the public credit, would we still participate?

If partnership meant giving up control, would we still be interested?

If this ministry cost us resources without strengthening the institution, could it still be faithful?

Discuss

What do our answers reveal?

Complete

We believe this ministry matters because...

If the sentence ends primarily with:

“It might grow the church,”

keep discerning.

FM-5.11

What Is Ours to Do?

Calling Without Trying to Solve Everything

Purpose

Once congregations begin noticing community realities, they can become overwhelmed.

Housing.

Loneliness.

Schools.

Mental health.

Poverty.

Polarization.

Children.

Caregiving.

Food.

Transportation.

No congregation is called to respond to everything.

Discernment includes limits.

Time

45–60 minutes.

List the Significant Concerns You Have Identified

For Each Ask

Does this connect strongly with our gifts?

Yes / No

Do we have relationships here?

Yes / No

Are others already doing good work?

Yes / No

Do we sense sustained congregational energy?

Yes / No

Would our participation add something useful?

Yes / No

Are we prepared to learn from people already involved?

Yes / No

Sort

POSSIBLY OURS TO JOIN

IMPORTANT, BUT NOT OUR CALLING

WE NEED TO LEARN MORE

Remember

Saying:

“This matters, but it is not ours to lead,”

can be an act of faithful discernment.

FM-5.12

Vocation and the Candidate

Leave Something for Them to Discover With You

Purpose

The MDP is written before the new pastor arrives.

That means the congregation should have enough vocational clarity to know what ministry it is inviting someone into.

But it should not complete all future discernment without them.

Time

45 minutes.

Ask

What do we believe strongly enough to say now?

What are we still exploring?

Where do we want a pastor to help us listen more deeply?

Where might a pastor bring gifts or perspectives we do not currently possess?

What decisions should not be made until congregation and pastor can discern together?

Test the MDP Language

Does it say:

“Here is our plan. We need someone to implement it.”

Or:

“Here is what we are beginning to recognize. We are seeking a partner who can help us continue discerning and responding.”

Those describe very different pastoral relationships.

Complete

We want enough clarity to invite a pastor into...

and enough openness to discover together...

FM-5.13

Weak → Better → Strong

Writing About Emerging Vocation

Example One — Young Families

Weak

We need to attract more young families to ensure the future of our church.

Better

We hope to develop stronger ministries with children and families.

Stronger

Listening has made us more attentive to the pressures facing families in our rapidly changing community. Our congregation has gifts for intergenerational relationships and education, and we are beginning to explore how those gifts might support families beyond the walls of the church as well as within them.

Why It Is Stronger

The focus moves from institutional survival to vocation.

Example Two — Community Engagement

Weak

We want a pastor who will get us more involved in the community.

Better

We hope to become more engaged with our community.

Stronger

Our listening revealed how many organizations and neighborhood leaders are already doing work we value. We are beginning to recognize partnership as an important part of our emerging vocation and will need pastoral leadership that can help equip the congregation to build relationships rather than simply create more church programs.

Why It Is Stronger

The congregation owns the calling.

Example Three — Hospitality

Weak

We want to be known as the most welcoming church in town.

Better

Hospitality is an important value for our congregation.

Stronger

Stories from our past repeatedly revealed hospitality as one of our lived values, while community conversations exposed levels of loneliness we had not fully recognized. We are beginning to wonder whether creating spaces of belonging may be part of the vocation emerging before us.

Why It Is Stronger

Remembering and Listening are brought together.

Example Four — Justice**Weak**

We are committed to making our community a better place.

Better

We hope to become more active in addressing issues of justice in our community.

Stronger

Conversations with community partners have helped us see how housing instability affects families in ways we had not understood. We do not yet know what faithful response will require, but we are beginning to recognize that listening, partnership, and advocacy may need to become more visible expressions of our discipleship.

Why It Is Stronger

The congregation does not pretend to possess a finished solution.

Example Five — Building Use**Weak**

We have a beautiful facility that we would like to use more effectively.

Better

Our building is underused during much of the week.

Stronger

Listening revealed a shortage of accessible gathering spaces for several community groups, while our building sits largely unused during the week. We are beginning to ask whether hospitality may include treating our property less as space we own and more as a resource entrusted to us for shared community life.

Why It Is Stronger

An institutional asset becomes a vocational question.

FM-5.14

Emerging Vocation Drafting Sheet

Preparing Material for the MDP

Purpose

This resource gathers the chapter's work into material for the primary writer.

What We Learned About Ourselves That Matters Most

What We Learned About Our Community That Matters Most

Patterns Appearing Across Both

Gifts Relevant to Those Patterns

Existing Relationships Relevant to Them

What We Think God May Be Inviting Us Toward

Our Level of Certainty

We have noticed / We wonder / We are beginning to recognize / We sense / We believe / We are convinced

What We Do Not Yet Know

What We Want to Discover with a New Pastor

Draft the Emerging Vocation

Write approximately 150–250 words.

Now Cut It in Half

Preserve the Longer Version

The longer version may be excellent material for the candidate resource page or candidate information packet.

This is an important discipline throughout the MDP process:

Cutting something from the MDP does not mean throwing it away.

Some of the congregation's richest discernment may belong in the deeper story available to candidates who want to explore further.

Chapter Five Discernment Harvest

What We Are Beginning to Recognize

Patterns That Keep Appearing

Congregational Gifts Connected to Those Patterns

Community Realities Connected to Them

Existing Relationships That Matter

Possible Vocational Directions

Directions We Tested and Released

Things We Believe with Growing Confidence

Things We Are Still Wondering

What We Want to Say in the MDP

What We Want to Explain More Fully in Deeper Candidate Resources

What We Want to Explore with Candidates in Conversation

Complete

At this point in our discernment, we believe God may be calling this congregation to...

We do not yet know...

We hope our next pastor will join us in discerning...

A Prayer for Recognizing Vocation

Leader

God who calls before we understand,
who acts before we notice,
who is present before we arrive,

People

Teach us to recognize your work.

Leader

We have remembered the road behind us.

People

Thank you for what has formed us.

Leader

We have listened to the place around us.

People

Thank you for what our neighbors have taught us.

Leader

We have named gifts placed in our hands.

People

Keep us from believing they belong only to us.

Leader

We have heard of pain we cannot repair alone.

People

Keep us from imagining ourselves as rescuers.

Leader

We have discovered people already doing good work.

People

Teach us the grace of joining.

Leader

Where our gifts meet the hopes of our neighbors,

People

Help us pay attention.

Leader

Where the same questions keep appearing,

People

Help us become curious.

Leader

Where possibilities excite us,

People

Give us patience before action.

Leader

Where fear makes us desperate for a program,

People

Return us to discernment.

Leader

Where concern for our institution disguises itself as mission,

People

Call us back to love.

Leader

Where we do not yet know what to do,

People

Give us freedom not to know.

Leader

Where conviction is emerging,

People

Give us courage to name it.

Leader

Where another organization is already doing the work,

People

Give us humility to join rather than compete.

Leader

Where something matters but is not ours to do,

People

Give us wisdom to release it.

Leader

And where you may be preparing a pastor
whose gifts will meet ours,

People

Leave room in our plans for what we have not yet imagined.

All

Living God,
you act.
Help us recognize.

You call.
Help us listen.

You give gifts.
Help us offer them.

You place us among neighbors.
Help us love them.

You open possibilities.
Help us resist the need to control them.

Give us enough clarity to respond faithfully
and enough humility to keep discerning.

May the vocation we name
be neither a strategy for survival
nor a program we have decided to impose,

but our best present recognition
of the work of Christ
we are being invited to join.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

By the end of Chapter Five, something important should have changed.

The committee is no longer simply assembling information for a denominational form.

It is beginning to see a ministry.

Perhaps not completely.

Perhaps not with certainty.

But with enough clarity to say:

This is who we are.

This is where we are.

This is what we are noticing.

This may be where God is calling us next.

Now comes an important test.

What does that vocation mean for the actual ministry ahead?

This is where search committees can make a consequential mistake.

They can recognize an emerging ministry and immediately convert it into a list of things the new pastor must do.

Grow the church.

Attract young families.

Visit the members.

Lead mission.

Manage the staff.

Improve stewardship.

Develop leaders.

Engage the community.

Preach inspiring sermons.

Teach.

Provide pastoral care.

And, somewhere between Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning, transform the congregation.

That is not a description of pastoral partnership.

It is an institutional wish list.

The congregation has a vocation too.

If God is calling the church toward something new, the next question is not:

What should the new pastor do for us?

It is:

What ministry are we being called to share?

That is the work of Chapter Six:

Chapter Six

Describe the Ministry Ahead

From Programs to Purpose

Chapter Six Resources

Describe the Ministry Ahead

From Programs to Purpose

By this point, the congregation has traveled a considerable distance.

You have remembered who you have been.

You have listened to the community in which you have been placed.

You have named gifts, challenges, and contradictions.

You have begun recognizing places where congregational identity and community life meet.

You may even have language for an emerging vocation.

Now comes a deceptively simple question:

What ministry lies ahead?

This is where a Ministry Discernment Profile can quietly collapse into a job description.

The committee begins with vocation and, almost without noticing, turns it into a list:

We need a pastor who will grow the church.

We need someone who will attract young families.

We need someone who will strengthen Christian education.

We need someone who will visit our members.

We need someone who will expand mission.

We need someone who will develop leaders.

We need someone who will improve stewardship.

We need someone who will engage the community.

We need someone who will bring new energy.

Perhaps all those things matter.

But notice what has happened.

Without anyone deciding it, the congregation's vocation has become the pastor's assignment.

The Field Guide warns against exactly this move. It asks the congregation to begin not with a pastoral task list, but with a different question:

Given what we have discerned, what ministry will matter most in the next season?

Only after answering that question can the congregation begin discerning what kind of pastoral leadership might help.

The order matters:

Vocation → Ministry → Partnership.

Not:

Problems → Pastor → Solutions.

The congregation has a call of its own.

This chapter will help translate emerging vocation into a realistic description of the ministry ahead while keeping responsibility where it belongs: shared among congregation, pastor, staff, leaders, and community partners.

For most congregations, **FM-6.1, FM-6.2, FM-6.4, FM-6.5, FM-6.7, and FM-6.9** provide the core process.

FM-6.1

Programs, Tasks, and Purpose

What Are We Actually Talking About?

Purpose

Congregations often confuse three different things:

Purpose

Why does this ministry matter?

Program

What organized response might express that purpose?

Task

What particular work needs to be done?

Keeping these distinct prevents the MDP from becoming a list of activities.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Example

Suppose Chapter Five revealed an emerging vocation around belonging and social isolation.

Purpose

Strengthen relationships and create places of belonging.

Possible Programs

Community meals.

Small groups.

Caregiver gatherings.

Shared-interest groups.

Neighborhood events.

Possible Tasks

Recruit volunteers.

Coordinate meals.

Reserve space.

Communicate events.

Train leaders.

Build community partnerships.

The purpose may endure.

Programs may change.

Tasks certainly will.

Your Turn

Choose one emerging vocational direction from Chapter Five.

Emerging vocation:

Purpose

Why does this matter?

Possible Programs

What might express it?

Tasks

What work might be required?

Now Ask

Which of these belongs in the MDP?

Usually the answer will be:

primarily the purpose, perhaps with enough programmatic detail to make it concrete.

Candidates need to understand the ministry.

They do not need every task.

FM-6.2

What Ministry Matters Most?

Choosing the Next Season Rather Than Everything

Purpose

The MDP cannot describe every ministry the congregation has ever done or might someday do.

Nor should it.

A search is an opportunity to ask:

What will matter most in the next season of our life together?

Time

60–75 minutes.

Begin with Chapter Five

List the strongest vocational directions you identified.

For Each Ask

Does this emerge from Remembering?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Does it emerge from Listening?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Does it connect with gifts we actually possess?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Does it respond to the life of our community?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Does it have energy in the congregation?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Does it require partnership?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Can we realistically engage it?

Yes / Somewhat / No

Then Ask

If we could faithfully engage only **three significant ministry priorities** during the next several years, what would they be?

Priority One

Why?

Priority Two

Why?

Priority Three

Why?

The Hard Question

What are we willing **not** to make a priority?

Discernment requires choosing.

A congregation that declares everything important has not yet established priorities.

FM-6.3

Ministry Priority Sort

Essential, Important, Secondary, Not for This Season

Purpose

Search committees can easily produce a pastoral position that assumes every existing ministry will continue while several new ones are added.

This exercise introduces limits.

Time

45–60 minutes.

List Ministries and Priorities

Include:

existing ministries;

emerging ministries;

new possibilities;

longstanding expectations;

things people believe “the church should do.”

Now sort them.

ESSENTIAL FOR THIS SEASON

These are closely connected to emerging vocation.

IMPORTANT

These matter but are not defining priorities.

SECONDARY

Good work that may continue if capacity exists.

NOT FOR THIS SEASON

Good ideas we are intentionally not pursuing now.

Ask

Which existing ministries consume significant energy but no longer connect strongly with vocation?

Which ministries exist primarily because they have always existed?

Which programs might need to change?

Which might need to end?

A Necessary Insight

Beginning something new usually requires releasing something old.

If the congregation's answer to every new calling is:

“We will add that too,”

the next pastor is likely to inherit exhaustion rather than vocation.

FM-6.4

The Congregation Has a Call Too

Returning Responsibility to the People of God

Purpose

This exercise may be one of the most important in the Manual.

Take every statement beginning:

“We need a pastor who will...”

and ask what responsibility belongs first to the congregation.

Time

60 minutes.

Example

We need a pastor who will grow the church.

Ask:

What is the congregation's role?

Perhaps:

build relationships;

practice hospitality;

invite people into community;

participate in ministry;

welcome change;

tell the congregation's story;

develop deeper relationships with neighbors.

Pastoral leadership may help equip this work.

But the pastor cannot perform it on behalf of the congregation.

Practice

We need a pastor who will bring in young families.

What belongs to the congregation?

What might belong to pastoral leadership?

Another

We need a pastor who will get us involved in the community.

What belongs to the congregation?

What might belong to pastoral leadership?

Another

We need a pastor who will develop our spiritual life.

What belongs to the congregation?

What might belong to pastoral leadership?

Another

We need a pastor who will improve stewardship.

What belongs to the congregation?

What might belong to pastoral leadership?

Now Use Your Own Statements

We need a pastor who will...

Rewrite:

We believe the congregation is being called to...

Pastoral leadership could help us by...

Complete

The ministry ahead belongs first to...

If the answer is simply **the new pastor**, return to Chapter Five.

FM-6.5

Who Owns This Ministry?

Mapping Shared Responsibility

Purpose

Ministry rarely belongs to one person.

This worksheet helps identify who actually carries responsibility.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Choose a Ministry Priority**What Is the Congregation's Role?****What Is the Session or Governing Board's Role?****What Is the Pastor's Role?****What Is Other Staff's Role?****What Is Lay Leadership's Role?****What Is the Role of Community Partners?****What Might Belong to the Presbytery or Wider Church?****Now Ask**

Who currently assumes someone else will do this?

Where are responsibilities unclear?

What would happen if the pastor did nothing except equip others?

Would the ministry continue?

The Ownership Test

If the ministry disappears whenever the pastor is away, it may not yet belong to the congregation.

FM-6.6

Shared Ministry Map

Seeing the Ministry as a System of Relationships

Purpose

The next season of ministry will involve more than pastor and congregation.

This resource helps the committee see the larger ecology of ministry.

Time

60 minutes.

Place the Emerging Ministry in the Center

Around it place:

congregation;

pastor;

staff;

Session or governing board;

ministry teams;

community partners;

neighbors;

denominational partners;

people directly affected;

other organizations;

financial resources;

facilities.

Draw Connections

Who needs whom?

Who already knows whom?

Where is trust strong?

Where does relationship need to be built?

Who has expertise?

Who has authority?

Who has lived experience?

Who has resources?

Who has gifts the congregation lacks?

Ask

Where have we assumed the church must lead?

Where could we join?

Where could we support?

Where might we learn?

Where does the pastor need to connect rather than control?

Complete

This ministry will be strongest if...

FM-6.7

From “The Pastor Will” to “Together We Will”

Rewriting the Ministry Ahead

Purpose

Language reveals assumptions about ministry.

This exercise revises pastor-centered statements into descriptions of partnership.

Time

45 minutes.

Example One

Pastor-centered

The pastor will develop new community outreach programs.

Shared ministry

We hope to deepen our relationships with community partners and discern where congregational gifts can strengthen work already underway. We seek a pastor who can help equip and connect us for that work.

Example Two

Pastor-centered

The pastor will grow our ministry with children and youth.

Shared ministry

We are discerning how our congregation can form deeper relationships with children and families in our changing community. We will need both lay commitment and pastoral leadership as we discover what faithful ministry with younger people can become.

Example Three

Pastor-centered

The pastor will recruit and train volunteers.

Shared ministry

Broadening lay participation is important to our next season. We recognize that members must take greater ownership of ministry and hope for pastoral leadership that develops, encourages, and equips people to use their gifts.

Your Turn

Current statement:

Who actually owns the ministry?

Rewrite using “we”:

Now describe the pastor's contribution:

Watch for a Different Problem

Do not simply replace:

“The pastor will do everything”

with:

“Together we will do everything.”

Priorities and limits still matter.

FM-6.8

Ministry Ahead Drafting Worksheet

Turning Vocation into a Description of Shared Ministry

Purpose

This is the primary drafting resource for Chapter Six.

Ministry Priority One

What are we being called toward?

Why does it matter?

What evidence supports it?

What is already happening?

What responsibility belongs to the congregation?

What pastoral contribution may be helpful?

What remains unknown?

Ministry Priority Two

Repeat.

Ministry Priority Three

Repeat.

Now Draft

Write approximately 250–400 words describing the ministry ahead.

Do not write the pastoral gifts section yet.

Review

Underline every sentence beginning:

The pastor will...

Ask whether responsibility belongs elsewhere.

Circle every program name.

Does the candidate need the program or the purpose?

Box every aspiration.

Have you identified it as aspiration?

Put a star beside every place the congregation accepts responsibility.

Put a question mark beside anything that sounds impossible.

FM-6.9

Reality Check

Can This Ministry Actually Be Done?

Purpose

Vocation requires imagination.

It also requires honesty about capacity.

A congregation can write a beautiful vision for ministry that bears little relationship to its people, finances, facilities, energy, or leadership.

That does not make it vision.

It may make it fantasy.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Choose Each Major Ministry Priority

Then test it.

People

Do we have people willing to participate?

Yes / Some / No

Leadership

Do we have people capable of leading?

Yes / Some / No

Time

Do members have realistic capacity?

Yes / Some / No

Financial Resources

Can we support this?

Yes / Some / No

Facilities

Are our facilities useful to this ministry?

Yes / Some / No / Not relevant

Relationships

Do we have relationships with the people or organizations involved?

Yes / Some / No

Knowledge

Do we understand enough to begin?

Yes / Some / No

Partnerships

Are others already doing related work?

Yes / Unsure / No

Congregational Energy

Does this generate sustained energy rather than temporary enthusiasm?

Yes / Some / No

Pastoral Dependence

Would the ministry collapse if the pastor were unavailable?

Yes / Maybe / No

What Must Be Released?

What existing work may need to diminish or end to create capacity?

Ask

Are we inviting a pastor into a realistic ministry?

Or asking the pastor to compensate for capacities the congregation does not possess?

Complete

To pursue this ministry faithfully, we will need to...

FM-6.10

The Impossible Pastor Exercise

Catching the Wish List Early

Purpose

Chapter Seven will examine pastoral gifts more fully.

But before leaving ministry priorities, it is useful to expose unrealistic expectations while they are still forming.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Create the Impossible Pastor

Ask the committee to list everything people have said they want the next pastor to do.

Do not edit.

Write it all.

Perhaps the pastor will:

preach exceptional sermons;

visit every member;

visit every visitor;

lead Bible studies;

teach confirmation;

grow membership;

attract young families;

develop youth ministry;

increase giving;

manage staff;

attend community events;

develop leaders;

moderate meetings;

resolve conflict;

expand mission;

visit hospitals;

be available in emergencies;

maintain office hours;

use social media;

develop technology;

lead strategic planning;

represent the church in the presbytery;

support every committee;
attend fellowship events;
and maintain a healthy family and spiritual life.

Read the list aloud.

Then Ask

How many hours a week would this require?

Which expectations conflict?

Which belong to lay leaders?

Which belong to staff?

Which are not actually priorities?

Which are inherited expectations rather than discerned needs?

Draw a Line Through Everything That Does Not Belong to the Pastor

Then circle the few pastoral responsibilities most important to the ministry you have actually discerned.

Complete

If our emerging vocation is true, the pastoral work that matters most is likely to be...

Save this.

You will need it in Chapter Seven.

FM-6.11

What Might We Need to Stop?

Creating Capacity for the Ministry Ahead

Purpose

Congregations frequently treat ending as failure.

But faithful transition may require releasing ministries that once mattered.

Time

45–60 minutes.

List Existing Ministries

For each, ask:

Does this still serve a clear purpose?

Does it connect with current vocation?

Do people have energy for it?

Does it serve people or primarily preserve tradition?

Would anyone outside the congregation notice if it ended?

What would be lost?

What capacity might be released?

Sort

CONTINUE

ADAPT

DISCERN FURTHER

RELEASE

Ask

What are we afraid would happen if we stopped?

What grief would need to be acknowledged?

What might become possible?

Remember

Ending a program does not erase the faithfulness it once expressed.

Sometimes the most faithful way to honor a ministry is to bless what it has been and release it.

FM-6.12

Weak → Better → Strong

Writing About the Ministry Ahead

Example One — Growth

Weak

Our new pastor will be expected to grow the church and attract new members.

Better

Congregational growth is an important priority for us.

Stronger

We hope to become more deeply connected with people beyond our current membership. We recognize that this will require changes in our own patterns of hospitality, relationships, and participation—not simply a pastor who can attract people. We seek pastoral leadership that can help equip us for that shared work.

Why It Is Stronger

Growth becomes congregational responsibility.

Example Two — Children and Families

Weak

The pastor will rebuild our children's and youth programs.

Better

We hope to strengthen ministry with children and youth.

Stronger

Listening has made us more attentive to the lives of children and families around us, while our own history has reminded us of the importance of intergenerational relationships. We do not assume that rebuilding former programs is the answer. We hope to discern, with new pastoral leadership and community partners, what faithful ministry with children and families might look like now.

Why It Is Stronger

The congregation is not trying to recreate the past automatically.

Example Three — Community Engagement

Weak

We need a pastor who is visible in the community.

Better

Community involvement will be important for our next pastor.

Stronger

Our Listening process has begun relationships we want the congregation to deepen. We hope our next pastor will participate in those relationships, but we do not expect the pastor to carry community engagement on our behalf. We see this as part of the congregation's shared vocation.

Why It Is Stronger

The distinction between pastoral leadership and congregational ministry is explicit.

Example Four — Lay Leadership**Weak**

The pastor will recruit more volunteers.

Better

We need to increase lay participation.

Stronger

A relatively small group currently carries much of our leadership. Broadening participation will require us to invite, trust, and develop people differently. We hope for a pastor who enjoys equipping others for ministry, while recognizing that responsibility for participation belongs to the congregation.

Why It Is Stronger

It describes both the challenge and the partnership.

Example Five — Mission**Weak**

The pastor will create new mission opportunities.

Better

We want to expand our mission program.

Stronger

We are moving from understanding mission primarily as church-sponsored projects toward deeper relationships with people and organizations already serving our community. We expect this shift to require curiosity, partnership, and experimentation from both congregation and pastor.

Why It Is Stronger

It describes purpose and direction rather than assigning programs to the pastor.

FM-6.13

What Goes in the MDP—and What Goes Deeper?

Protecting Important Discernment from the Word Limit

Purpose

The congregation may now have a rich description of the ministry ahead.

The MDP probably cannot hold all of it.

Do not destroy good discernment simply because the form is small.

Sort Your Material

ESSENTIAL FOR THE MDP

What does every serious candidate need to know immediately?

DEEPER CANDIDATE RESOURCES

What would help a candidate understand how you reached these priorities?

Perhaps:

the fuller vocational narrative;

summaries of Remembering and Listening;

descriptions of existing partnerships;

community observations;

ministry histories;

strategic information;

photographs;

selected stories.

CANDIDATE CONVERSATION

What would be better explored interactively?

Preserve the Full Draft

Do not discard the 400-word description because the MDP gives you room for 150.

Create the concise version for the MDP.

Place the fuller version in the candidate resource page or candidate information packet if it adds value.

This allows the MDP to remain focused without reducing months of discernment to whatever happened to fit inside a text box.

Chapter Six Discernment Harvest

The Ministry We Are Inviting Someone to Share

Our Most Important Ministry Priorities

Why These Matter

What Belongs to the Congregation

What May Require Pastoral Leadership

What May Require Community Partnership

What We May Need to Adapt or Release

What We Are Not Making a Priority in This Season

What We Know

What We Are Still Discerning

What Belongs in the MDP

What Belongs in Deeper Candidate Resources

What Belongs in Conversation

Complete

In the next season of our life together, we believe the ministry that matters most is...

The congregation's responsibility in that ministry is...

We hope pastoral leadership will help us...

A Prayer for Shared Ministry

Leader

Christ who calls the church,
you have not called us to hire someone
to be your people for us.

People

You have called all of us.

Leader

You give pastors gifts for ministry.

People

And you give gifts to the whole body.

Leader

You call some to preach and teach.

People

And you call all of us to discipleship.

Leader

You call some to lead.

People

And you call all of us to participate.

Leader

You send pastors into communities.

People

And you have already placed us among our neighbors.

Leader

Forgive us when we place our calling
on someone else's shoulders.

People

Return our vocation to us.

Leader

Forgive us when we expect a new pastor
to restore a church that exists only in memory.

People

Help us receive the church that exists now.

Leader

Forgive us when every good idea
becomes another task.

People

Teach us to choose what matters.

Leader

Give us courage to continue
what remains faithful.

People

Give us perseverance.

Leader

Give us imagination to adapt
what needs to change.

People

Give us freedom.

Leader

Give us grace to release
what has completed its season.

People

Give us gratitude without clinging.

Leader

Give us wisdom to know
what belongs to the congregation,

People

and courage to own it.

Leader

Give us wisdom to recognize
the gifts we need in pastoral leadership,

People

without asking one person to become everything we lack.

Leader

Give us partners in the community,

People

and humility to join work we do not control.

All

Christ, head of the church,
call us again into your ministry.

Make us participants,
not consumers.

Make us partners,
not employers of someone else's discipleship.

Help us name the ministry ahead
with enough clarity to respond
and enough humility to keep learning.

Prepare us to welcome a pastor
not as the person who will do our ministry for us,
but as a companion, teacher, leader, and partner
with whom we may join more faithfully
the work you are already doing.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

At the end of Chapter Six, the committee should be able to describe something much more useful than a pastoral job description.

It should be able to say:

This is the ministry we believe matters now.

This is why it matters.

This is what belongs to us.

These are relationships and partnerships that will matter.

These are things we may need to release.

And this is where pastoral leadership could help us become more faithful.

Only now is the committee ready to ask what kind of pastor might share that work.

That sequence is crucial.

If you begin by asking:

What do we want in a pastor?

you will probably create a wish list.

Charismatic.

Compassionate.

Visionary.

Collaborative.

Excellent preacher.

Strong administrator.

Good with children.

Comfortable with older adults.

Energetic.

Patient.

Innovative.

Experienced.

Young.

Wise.

Available.

And, preferably, able to accomplish everything the congregation has not managed to accomplish itself.

But if you begin with vocation and ministry, the question changes.

The Field Guide gives us the sequence:

Vocation → Ministry → Gifts.

Not:

What kind of pastor would we like?

But:

Given the ministry we have discerned, what gifts would help a pastor become a faithful partner with us?

That is the work of Chapter Seven:

Chapter Seven

What Kind of Partner Does This Ministry Need?

Gifts Before Wish Lists

Chapter Seven Resources

What Kind of Partner Does This Ministry Need?

Gifts Before Wish Lists

Now—and only now—is the committee ready to ask what it needs in a pastor.

That order matters.

Congregations often begin a pastoral search by asking members what they want in their next pastor.

The answers are predictable.

A good preacher.

A caring pastor.

A strong leader.

Someone who relates well to children and youth.

Someone who appreciates older adults.

A visionary.

A good administrator.

A collaborative leader.

Someone who can manage conflict.

Someone who will be active in the community.

Someone who can grow the church.

Someone who can attract young families.

Someone experienced—but energetic.

Someone confident—but humble.

Someone innovative—but respectful of tradition.

Someone who will lead us toward change without changing anything we particularly value.

By the time everyone has contributed, the committee has assembled a remarkable human being from a hundred incompatible hopes.

Unfortunately, that person probably does not exist—and no faithful pastor should be asked to pretend otherwise.

The problem is not simply that the list is unrealistic.

The deeper problem is that it begins with the wrong question.

The Field Guide offers a better sequence:

Vocation → Ministry → Gifts.

First ask:

What do we believe God is calling this congregation toward?

Then:

What ministry will matter most in the next season?

Only then:

What pastoral gifts would help this congregation participate faithfully in that ministry?

That changes the search.

The committee is no longer constructing an ideal pastor from congregational wishes.

It is discerning a partner for a particular ministry in a particular place.

And partnership requires another important recognition:

The congregation already has gifts.

The question is not simply what the next pastor should bring.

It is:

What gifts would complement the gifts God has already placed among us?

For most congregations, **FM-7.1, FM-7.2, FM-7.3, FM-7.4, FM-7.5, FM-7.8, and FM-7.10** provide the core process.

FM-7.1

From Vocation to Pastoral Gifts

Let the Ministry Define the Search

Purpose

This exercise prevents the committee from beginning with preferred personality traits.

Start with the ministry discerned in Chapters Five and Six.

Then work toward pastoral gifts.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Bring Forward the Ministry Priorities

From Chapter Six:

Ministry Priority One

Ministry Priority Two

Ministry Priority Three

For Each Priority Ask

What will the **congregation** need to do?

What kind of pastoral leadership might help the congregation do that?

What knowledge might be useful?

What skills might be useful?

What spiritual or relational gifts might be useful?

Example

Emerging vocation

Deeper community partnership.

Ministry ahead

Build reciprocal relationships with organizations and community leaders rather than simply expanding church-sponsored programs.

Now ask:

What pastoral gifts might help?

Perhaps:

curiosity;

relational initiative;

community engagement;

collaborative leadership;

ability to equip laypeople;

comfort entering unfamiliar settings;

capacity to listen before proposing solutions.

Notice that the answer is not simply:

“We need an extrovert.”

A quiet, reflective pastor may be an exceptional relationship builder.

Name the ministry capacity, not your stereotype of the personality that possesses it.

Complete

Because we believe the ministry ahead involves...

pastoral gifts that may matter include...

FM-7.2

Gifts We Already Have

Do Not Hire the Pastor to Duplicate the Congregation

Purpose

Before naming what the pastor should bring, identify what is already present.

The congregation is not an empty vessel waiting for a gifted professional.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Return to Remembering

What gifts did the congregation identify?

Consider:

teaching;

hospitality;

administration;

pastoral care;

financial management;

music;

community relationships;

technology;

facilitation;

leadership;

organization;

theological reflection;

communication;

conflict navigation;

creativity;

mentoring;

prayer;

advocacy;

property management;

generosity.

Create a Congregational Gift Map

Gift:

Where is it present?

How strong is it?

Strong / Developing / Limited

Is it broadly shared or concentrated in a few people?

Repeat.

Ask

What does the congregation already do well without pastoral leadership?

What expertise exists among members?

What gifts exist among staff?

What capacities exist among community partners?

The Duplication Question

Are we asking the next pastor to bring a gift we already possess abundantly?

If so:

Why?

Perhaps the gift truly needs pastoral expression.

Or perhaps the congregation has failed to recognize its own capacity.

Complete

Our next pastor does not need to be everything because this congregation already carries gifts for...

FM-7.3

Gifts We Need in a Partner

Complementarity Rather Than Completeness

Purpose

Now identify what would strengthen the ministry ecology.

Do not ask:

What gifts make a good pastor?

Ask:

What gifts would help a pastor flourish in partnership with this particular congregation in this particular season?

Time

60 minutes.

Ministry Priority

Gifts Already Present

Gifts That Are Limited or Missing

What Kind of Pastoral Contribution Would Help?

Example

Suppose the congregation has:

strong pastoral-care gifts;

capable administrators;

excellent musicians;

deep institutional knowledge;

but limited experience building community partnerships.

If emerging vocation points outward, the next pastor may not need to be the congregation's strongest administrator.

A gift for relational connection and equipping people for community engagement may matter more.

Ask

What would complement us?

What would challenge us constructively?

What would help us develop gifts rather than depend upon the pastor?

What gifts might help us address our shadows?

Complete

A pastor with gifts for _____ could complement our congregation's gifts for _____ by helping us _____.

That is much more useful than:

“We want a dynamic leader.”

FM-7.4

Complementarity Map

What We Bring and What a Pastor Might Bring

Purpose

This resource makes partnership visible.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Create three columns.

Congregational Gifts	Ministry Ahead	Helpful Pastoral Gifts
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Then Add a Fourth Question

For every proposed pastoral gift, ask:

What will the congregation contribute to this partnership?

Example

Congregational gift

Members deeply committed to pastoral care.

Ministry ahead

Develop broader practices of accompaniment beyond the congregation.

Helpful pastoral gift

Ability to equip and spiritually form lay caregivers.

Congregational contribution

Experienced caregivers willing to learn, lead, and mentor others.

Now the pastor is entering a partnership rather than being assigned a problem.

Ask

Where are we asking the pastor to compensate for something we refuse to do?

Where could pastoral gifts release gifts already present among us?

Where might a pastor need gifts different from those of the previous pastor?

Remember

Different season.

Different ministry.

Possibly different gifts.

That is not criticism of the previous pastor.

It is discernment about the ministry ahead.

FM-7.5

Essential, Desirable, or Unnecessary?

Making Actual Choices

Purpose

If every quality is essential, nothing is essential.

This exercise forces prioritization.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Gather the List

Bring every pastoral gift, skill, characteristic, and hope that has emerged.

Do not evaluate yet.

Put them all where everyone can see them.

Then sort them.

ESSENTIAL

Without these gifts, partnership in the ministry we have discerned would be significantly difficult.

Limit this category.

Aim for **three to five**.

DESIRABLE

These gifts would strengthen ministry but are not necessary for faithful partnership.

LEARNABLE

These are skills a pastor could reasonably develop.

AVAILABLE ELSEWHERE

These gifts already exist among staff, members, consultants, presbytery, or community partners.

UNNECESSARY

These appeared on the list but are not actually important to the ministry ahead.

The Hard Part

You must move things out of **Essential**.

Ask of each item:

Why is this essential?

If the answer is:

“Pastors should be good at that,”

it probably has not passed the test.

Complete

Our Three to Five Essential Gifts

Why These?

Gifts We Have Decided Are Not Essential

That second list may be as important as the first.

FM-7.6

The Impossible Pastor

Meet the Candidate Who Does Not Exist

Purpose

Chapter Six began this exercise.

Now finish it.

A little humor may help.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Create the Candidate

Our ideal pastor:

preaches brilliantly;

provides exceptional pastoral care;

visits everyone;

attracts young families;

relates beautifully to older adults;

engages teenagers;

manages staff;

raises money;

develops leaders;

handles conflict;

builds community partnerships;

teaches Scripture;

leads spiritual formation;

understands technology;

attends every event;

supports every ministry;

responds immediately to email;

takes appropriate time off;

has excellent boundaries;

and is always available when we need them.

Add your congregation's own expectations.

Give This Pastor a Week

Estimate the hours.

Responsibility	Hours
Worship and preaching	_____
Pastoral care	_____
Administration	_____
Staff leadership	_____
Community relationships	_____
Teaching	_____
Meetings	_____
Leadership development	_____
Other	_____
Total: _____ hours	

Then Ask

Which tasks are actually central?

Which could be done by lay leaders?

Which could be done by other staff?

Which should not be done at all?

Which expectations contradict each other?

The Revealing Question

What are we hoping the pastor will do because we do not want to do it ourselves?

Do not answer defensively.

This question can uncover important assumptions about pastoral leadership.

FM-7.7

Expectations Reality Check

What Are We Actually Asking of One Person?

Purpose

Some expectations sound reasonable individually but become impossible collectively.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Review the Desired Gifts

For each, ask:

Does this connect directly with our emerging vocation?

Yes / No

Does this connect with a priority from Chapter Six?

Yes / No

Could someone else provide this gift?

Yes / No

Are we expecting exceptional competence or reasonable competence?

Would we sacrifice strength in one area to gain strength in another?

Forced Choice

Which would matter more in the ministry ahead?

An exceptional preacher or exceptional community relationship builder?

A strong administrator or strong developer of lay leadership?

Extensive pastoral visitation or extensive presence beyond the church?

Deep denominational experience or experience leading organizational change?

These are not universal choices.

Your answers should arise from **your discernment**.

Ask

What tradeoffs are we actually willing to accept?

Complete

We do not need the next pastor to excel at everything. We most need someone whose gifts for _____ will help us _____.

FM-7.8

Gifts-to-Ministry Crosswalk

Can We Trace Every Priority Back to Vocation?

Purpose

This is one of the most useful final checks in the chapter.

Every essential pastoral gift should connect backward through the discernment process.

Time

45 minutes.

Use the full sequence:

Emerging Vocation	Ministry Priority	Congregational Role	Helpful Pastoral Gift
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Now Trace Backward

For each proposed essential gift, ask:

What ministry priority requires this?

If you cannot answer, reconsider it.

Then:

What vocational discernment produced that ministry priority?

If you cannot answer, reconsider it.

Then:

What did Remembering and Listening reveal that supports that vocation?

If you cannot answer, reconsider it.

The Chain Should Be Visible

Remembering + Listening → Vocation → Ministry → Gifts

This gives the pastoral profile theological and practical coherence.

Mark

Any desired gift that cannot be traced backward through the process.

Ask:

Where did this expectation come from?

Possibilities include:

habit;

the previous pastor;

a difficult experience;
a beloved former pastor;
denominational culture;
anxiety;
personal preference;
an outdated job description.
That does not automatically make the expectation wrong.
It means it deserves examination.

FM-7.9

Labels Are Not Gifts

Describe What You Actually Need

Purpose

Committees often rely on vague labels.

Dynamic.

Visionary.

Energetic.

Pastoral.

Collaborative.

Strong leader.

Good communicator.

Innovative.

Relational.

These words may conceal very different expectations.

Time

45 minutes.

Choose a Label

We want a pastor who is:

Ask

What would we see this person doing?

What behavior would demonstrate this gift?

What ministry would benefit?

What would the opposite look like?

Example

Visionary

What does that mean?

Someone who arrives with a vision?

Someone who helps the congregation discern?

Someone who recognizes possibilities?

Someone willing to experiment?

Someone who can communicate direction?

Those are different gifts.

Another

Strong leader

Does that mean:

decisive?

authoritative?

collaborative?

organized?

courageous?

strategic?

able to manage conflict?

able to develop other leaders?

Rewrite

Instead of:

We seek a dynamic visionary leader.

Try:

We hope for a pastor who can help us recognize emerging possibilities, invite others into discernment, and translate shared direction into action.

Now a candidate knows what you mean.

Your Turn

Label:

What we actually mean:

FM-7.10

Pastoral Partner Description Builder

Writing from Ministry Rather Than Preference

Purpose

This is the principal drafting exercise for Chapter Seven.

Begin with the Ministry

The ministry ahead requires the congregation to:

The Congregation Already Brings

The Gifts That Would Complement Us Are

Three to Five Essential Pastoral Gifts

For Each Essential Gift, Complete

This gift matters because...

We would expect to see it expressed through...

It connects with this ministry priority...

Now Draft

Write approximately 200–300 words describing the pastoral partnership you seek.

Do not write:

Our ideal candidate will...

Begin instead with the ministry.

Review

Underline every adjective.

Have you explained what it means?

Circle every expectation that could apply to almost any pastor.

Is it necessary here?

Put a box around every task.

Does it belong to the pastor?

Put a star beside every sentence that describes partnership.

Put a question mark beside every expectation that cannot be traced back to vocation and ministry.

FM-7.11

What Are We Offering a Pastor?

Partnership Is Reciprocal**Purpose**

A search committee can become so focused on what it needs that it forgets another question:

Why might a pastor want to share ministry with us?

Not because the congregation is perfect.

Because partnership is reciprocal.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Ask

What gifts will a pastor find here?

What lay leadership is available?

What relationships are already established?

What ministry does the pastor not have to create from nothing?

What freedom for experimentation exists?

What support will the pastor receive?

What opportunities for growth might this ministry provide?

What will the congregation teach the pastor?

Now Ask

Are we describing a job vacancy?

Or a ministry partnership?

Complete

A pastor joining us will not be coming simply to give. They will also receive...

This material may belong in the MDP, deeper candidate resources, or eventually in candidate conversation.

FM-7.12

Bias and the Imagined Pastor

When “Fit” Becomes a Picture in Our Heads

Purpose

Committees can develop an image of the kind of person who possesses certain gifts.

That image may quietly narrow discernment.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Choose an Essential Gift

Ask

What kind of person do we automatically picture possessing this gift?

Why?

Could someone very different possess it?

Consider

Do we associate energy with age?

Leadership with gender?

Innovation with youth?

Pastoral care with a particular personality?

Authority with physical presence?

Community engagement with extroversion?

Theological depth with academic style?

Administrative ability with corporate experience?

Ask

What evidence will actually demonstrate the gift?

Complete

Instead of looking for someone who looks like our idea of _____, we will look for evidence that the candidate can _____.

This prepares the committee for more disciplined candidate discernment later.

FM-7.13

Weak → Better → Strong

Writing About the Pastoral Partner

Example One — Leadership

Weak

We seek a strong, dynamic, visionary leader who will take us to the next level.

Better

We seek a pastor with strong leadership and vision.

Stronger

We are beginning to see possibilities for deeper community partnership but will need help turning discernment into shared action. We hope for a pastor who can listen carefully, help clarify direction, develop other leaders, and move with us from conversation toward faithful experimentation.

Why It Is Stronger

Leadership is connected to actual ministry.

Example Two — Growth

Weak

The successful candidate will have a proven track record of church growth.

Better

We seek a pastor with gifts for congregational growth.

Stronger

We hope to build relationships beyond our current membership and recognize that this work belongs to the whole congregation. Pastoral gifts for equipping members, cultivating hospitality, and helping us engage people beyond familiar church networks would strengthen that work.

Why It Is Stronger

The pastor is not hired to manufacture growth.

Example Three — Young People

Weak

We want a young, energetic pastor who can relate to families and youth.

Better

We seek an energetic pastor with gifts for ministry with younger people.

Stronger

As we discern deeper relationships with children and families in our community, we hope for pastoral leadership that takes younger people's lives seriously, equips intergenerational ministry, and is curious about forms of connection that may differ from programs we have used in the past.

Why It Is Stronger

It describes gifts rather than an imagined demographic profile.

Example Four — Pastoral Care

Weak

Our pastor must be a caring person who visits the sick and elderly.

Better

Strong pastoral-care skills are important to our congregation.

Stronger

Care for one another is deeply rooted in our congregational culture, and many members participate in it. We value a pastor who will share in significant moments of illness, grief, and transition while also equipping the congregation's existing gifts for mutual care.

Why It Is Stronger

Pastoral care becomes shared ministry.

Example Five — Change

Weak

We need a pastor who can change our congregation.

Better

We seek a pastor who is comfortable leading change.

Stronger

Our traditions matter deeply to us, and we also recognize that some patterns no longer fit the ministry emerging around us. We hope for a pastor who can honor what has formed us, help us understand why adaptation matters, and lead change through participation rather than imposition.

Why It Is Stronger

It names both the gift and the context in which it will be exercised.

FM-7.14

What Belongs in the MDP?

Resist Writing a Catalog of Desired Traits

Purpose

The committee may now possess far more insight about pastoral partnership than the MDP can hold.

Prioritize.

Ask

What does a candidate need to understand immediately about the partnership we seek?

Which three to five gifts are truly essential?

What expectations require more explanation than the MDP allows?

Sort

MDP

Essential pastoral gifts and the ministry context that makes them important.

DEEPER CANDIDATE RESOURCES

A fuller description of the ministry ahead, congregational gifts, staffing structure, leadership culture, and shared expectations.

CANDIDATE CONVERSATION

How pastoral care works.

Staff supervision.

Decision-making.

Work rhythms.

Leadership expectations.

Conflict.

Boundaries.

Community presence.

Specific hopes.

Remember

The MDP should create curiosity.

It does not have to answer every question about the position.

FM-7.15

Final Expectations Audit

Before You Describe the Pastor You Seek

Purpose

Use this as the final check before handing material to the writer.

For every essential expectation, ask:

Does it arise from vocation?

Yes / No

Does it serve a ministry priority?

Yes / No

Is it actually pastoral work?

Yes / No

Is it realistic for one person?

Yes / No

Could the gift be developed?

Yes / No

Does the congregation already possess it?

Yes / No

Are we expecting exceptional performance unnecessarily?

Yes / No

Are we projecting the previous pastor onto the next pastor?

Yes / No

Are we reacting against the previous pastor?

Yes / No

Have we confused personality with capacity?

Yes / No

Are we expecting the pastor to solve something the congregation must own?

Yes / No

Could a candidate who differs from our mental image possess this gift?

Yes / No

Would we recognize evidence of this gift if it appeared differently than we expect?

Yes / No

Final Question

Are we searching for the person our ministry needs—or the person we have become accustomed to imagining?

Chapter Seven Discernment Harvest

The Partner We Are Preparing to Invite

The Ministry Ahead

Gifts Already Present in the Congregation

Gifts Present Among Staff and Community Partners

Three to Five Pastoral Gifts Most Important for This Season

Why These Gifts Matter

Gifts We Have Decided Are Desirable but Not Essential

Expectations We Have Released

Responsibilities We Returned to the Congregation

Assumptions About the Kind of Person Who Possesses These Gifts

What We Offer a Pastoral Partner

What Belongs in the MDP

What Belongs in Deeper Candidate Resources

What Belongs in Candidate Conversation

Complete

We are not searching for a pastor who can do everything. We are seeking a partner whose gifts for...

can join the gifts we already carry for...

so that together we may...

A Prayer for the Partner We Do Not Yet Know

Leader

God who calls people by name,
somewhere there are pastors
discerning their next season of ministry.

People

Be with them as you are with us.

Leader

They carry gifts we have not yet seen.

People

Help us become curious.

Leader

They carry limitations we do not yet know.

People

Keep us from expecting perfection.

Leader

They carry stories that have formed them.

People

Teach us to listen.

Leader

They carry hopes for ministry.

People

Give us room to hear them.

Leader

They may not look like the pastor
we have imagined.

People

Free us from our assumptions.

Leader

They may possess gifts
in forms we do not expect.

People

Help us recognize what matters.

Leader

Forgive us when we search
for someone to do our discipleship for us.

People

Return our calling to us.

Leader

Forgive us when we ask one person
to carry every gift.

People

Remind us that you created a body.

Leader

Forgive us when anxiety creates
an impossible list of expectations.

People

Give us courage to choose.

Leader

For gifts already present among us,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For gifts we do not possess,

People

Teach us to receive them from others.

Leader

For gifts our next pastor may bring,

People

Prepare us to welcome them.

Leader

For gifts they may awaken in us,

People

Prepare us to grow.

All

Christ, who calls both pastors and congregations,
keep us from searching for an ideal.

Help us recognize a partner.

Give us clarity about the ministry ahead,
gratitude for the gifts already among us,
humility about what we lack,
and wisdom to recognize the gifts
that may complement our own.

Prepare us not simply to find the right pastor,
but to become a congregation
ready for faithful partnership.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

The committee has now traveled a long way from:

What do we want in our next pastor?

You can say something much more disciplined:

This is the vocation we are beginning to recognize.

This is the ministry we believe matters in our next season.

These are the gifts God has already placed among us.

These are responsibilities we know belong to the congregation.

And these are the pastoral gifts that could complement ours in the work ahead.

That is enough to describe the partnership you seek.

But the Ministry Discernment Profile has another reader.

The pastor.

That person is not simply waiting to learn whether they meet your requirements.

They are discerning too.

They may be sitting at a kitchen table late in the evening reading several profiles.

They may be wondering whether it is time to leave a congregation they love.

They may be considering a different region of the country.

They may be thinking about a spouse's work, children's schools, aging parents, finances, housing, or what a move would mean for their family.

And beneath all of that, they may be praying:

God, is there something here that belongs to my calling?

The MDP should respect that discernment.

Its purpose is not merely to generate applications.

It is to help the right people become curious enough to enter a conversation—and to help others discern freely that this is not their call.

That is the work of Chapter Eight:

Chapter Eight

Write for a Pastor Who Is Discerning Too

Make the Profile an Invitation

Chapter Eight Resources

Write for a Pastor Who Is Discerning Too

Make the Profile an Invitation

Somewhere, eventually, another person will open these pages and meet the congregation first through its words.

Perhaps late at night after a Session meeting.

Perhaps early in the morning before anyone else in the house is awake.

Perhaps between appointments.

Perhaps after months of wondering whether God may be calling them away from a ministry they love.

They may have several Ministry Discernment Profiles open at once.

They are not simply asking:

Do I qualify for this position?

They are asking:

Could I love these people?

Could these people love me?

Could my gifts matter here?

Could I imagine living in this place?

Does the ministry they describe awaken something in me?

Is God inviting me to become curious?

The committee has spent months arriving at these sentences.

The candidate arrives in a single sitting.

You can hear the stories behind every sentence.

The candidate can see only what the sentences make visible.

That means the MDP must do more than contain accurate information.

It must become a hospitable threshold into discernment.

Not a sales pitch.

Not a recruiting brochure.

Not a carefully polished description designed to produce as many candidates as possible.

An invitation.

A strong profile should help some pastors say:

I want to know more.

And it should give others enough truth to say:

This is not my call.

Both are successful outcomes.

The purpose of the MDP is not to attract everyone.

It is to begin an honest conversation between a congregation discerning its future and pastors discerning theirs.

For most congregations, **FM-8.1, FM-8.2, FM-8.4, FM-8.5, FM-8.7, FM-8.9, and FM-8.12** provide the core process.

FM-8.1

Sit in the Candidate's Chair

Read the MDP from the Other Side

Purpose

Committees become so familiar with their own material that they stop experiencing it as a reader will.

This exercise deliberately changes perspective.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Put the Draft Away

Do not begin by editing.

First imagine the person who will encounter it.

A pastor may be discerning:

whether to leave a current call;

whether to return to parish ministry;

whether to move geographically;

whether their family can make a transition;

whether this ministry fits their gifts;

whether the congregation is ready for the kind of leadership it says it wants;

whether the Spirit is stirring something.

Now Read the Draft

Read it silently from beginning to end.

Do not make corrections.

Then complete:

After reading this, I understand that this congregation is...

The ministry ahead seems to be...

The community seems to be...

The congregation appears to value...

The pastor they seem to need is...

Something that makes me curious is...

Something I would want to ask about is...

Something that makes me hesitant is...

Then Ask

Could a reader actually have learned these things from the words on the page?

Or did we supply information because we already know the congregation?

That distinction matters.

FM-8.2

The Curiosity Test

Does the Profile Make Someone Want to Know More?

Purpose

The MDP cannot tell the whole story.

It should tell enough of the right story that a potentially compatible candidate wants to continue the conversation.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Read Each Major Section

After each section, ask:

What question might this create for a thoughtful candidate?

Congregational Story

A candidate might wonder:

Identity and Values

A candidate might wonder:

Gifts and Challenges

A candidate might wonder:

Community

A candidate might wonder:

Emerging Vocation

A candidate might wonder:

Ministry Ahead

A candidate might wonder:

Pastoral Partnership

A candidate might wonder:

Now Look at the Questions

Are they good questions?

Do they invite deeper conversation?

Or are they questions created by confusion?

There is an important difference between:

“I want to know more about this.”

and:

“I cannot figure out what they mean.”

The first is curiosity.

The second is unclear writing.

Complete

The three things we most hope a candidate becomes curious about are:

Does the profile create those questions?

FM-8.3

The Recognition Test

Would the Right Pastor Recognize Something Here?

Purpose

The MDP does not need to appeal to every pastor.

It needs to describe the ministry clearly enough that pastors can discern whether something in their gifts and calling resonates with it.

Time

45 minutes.

Bring Forward the Essential Pastoral Gifts from Chapter Seven

For Each Gift Ask

Where in the MDP would a pastor with this gift recognize that it matters?

Example

Suppose you seek someone with gifts for developing lay leadership.

Does the MDP merely say:

We seek a pastor who develops leaders.

Or does it describe a congregation where:

leadership is currently concentrated;

members possess gifts that need cultivation;

shared ministry is an emerging priority;

the congregation understands that leadership development belongs to its next season?

The second gives the candidate something to recognize.

Complete

A pastor with gifts for _____ might become interested because they would read that we are _____.

Ask

Are we simply naming desired gifts?

Or showing candidates **why those gifts would matter here?**

FM-8.4

Invitation, Advertisement, or Job Posting?

Identifying the Voice of the MDP

Purpose

An MDP can unintentionally sound like several different kinds of document.

This exercise helps the committee hear its voice.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Listen for the Advertisement Voice

We are a vibrant, welcoming, growing congregation located in a wonderful community with excellent schools and abundant recreational opportunities.

The purpose is:

Come here. We are attractive.

Listen for the Job Posting Voice

The successful candidate will possess excellent preaching, administrative, leadership, pastoral-care, and communication skills and will be responsible for developing programs, increasing membership, supervising staff, and expanding community outreach.

The purpose is:

Meet our requirements.

Listen for the Invitation Voice

We are a congregation with deep roots in this community, learning that some of the forms that served us well in the past no longer fit the ministry emerging around us. Listening has drawn our attention toward growing isolation among our neighbors and reminded us of our own gifts for hospitality and accompaniment. We are seeking a pastor who will help us continue discerning what faithful presence might look like in this next season.

The purpose is:

Come discern with us.

Review Your Draft

Mark:

A beside advertising language.

J beside job-posting language.

I beside invitation language.

Count

Advertisement: _____

Job Posting: _____

Invitation: _____

Ask

What voice dominates?

Rewrite One Advertising Sentence

Original:

Invitation:

Rewrite One Job-Posting Sentence

Original:

Invitation:

Remember

Invitation does not mean vague.

The strongest invitation may also be the most truthful.

FM-8.5

Write to One Thoughtful Pastor

Stop Writing to “Candidates”

Purpose

Institutional writing becomes lifeless when committees imagine an anonymous audience.

Instead, imagine one thoughtful pastor sitting across the table.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Imagine the Conversation

This pastor asks:

Who are you really?

Your answer:

What do you love about this congregation?

What is difficult here?

What have you learned about yourselves?

What are you beginning to see in your community?

What do you think God may be calling you toward?

Why are you searching for a pastor now?

What would you hope we might do together?

Now Compare

Does the MDP sound anything like these answers?

If the spoken answers are alive and the written profile sounds institutional, the problem is probably not your discernment.

It is the writing.

A Useful Rule

Write as though a thoughtful person has asked a serious question and deserves a human answer.

FM-8.6

The First Five Minutes

What Does the Candidate Learn Quickly?

Purpose

Candidates may initially scan before they read deeply.

The profile should reveal its most important character without requiring detective work.

Time

30 minutes.

Give the Draft to Someone Who Has Not Helped Write It

Allow five minutes.

Then remove the document.

Ask:

What do you remember?

What seems distinctive about the congregation?

What ministry seems important?

What challenge do you remember?

What kind of pastor do they seem to seek?

What made you curious?

Compare with Your Intentions

We hoped the reader would notice:

They actually noticed:

Ask

What important material is buried?

What unimportant material is consuming valuable space?

What appears early but does not deserve that prominence?

Remember

Placement communicates priority.

FM-8.7

Particularity Test

Could Another Church Use These Exact Words?

Purpose

Generic language makes congregations disappear.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Search the Draft for Phrases Such As

welcoming;

friendly;

faithful;

mission-minded;

Christ-centered;

Bible-based;

caring;

loving;

vibrant;

inclusive;

family-oriented;

community-focused;

traditional yet open to change;

strong sense of fellowship.

None of these phrases is necessarily false.

But ask:

Could 500 other congregations say exactly the same thing?

If yes, the phrase needs evidence or replacement.

Example

Instead of:

We are a welcoming congregation.

Try:

Members repeatedly described hospitality through stories of meals, practical care, and making room for people during difficult transitions. We are also learning that warmth among people who already know one another does not always feel like welcome to someone entering for the first time.

Now we know something about this congregation.

Another

Instead of:

Mission is important to us.

Try:

Our strongest mission relationships have developed when members stayed involved long enough to know people's names, hear their stories, and allow those relationships to change us.

Your Turn

Generic claim:

Evidence:**Particular rewrite:****The Swap Test**

Replace your congregation's name with the name of another church.

Does the paragraph still work?

If yes, keep working.

FM-8.8

Tell Enough Truth to Permit a No

Respecting the Candidate's Discernment

Purpose

Search committees naturally want candidates to remain interested.

That desire can create subtle pressure to delay difficult information.

But mutual discernment requires freedom.

A candidate must be able to say no.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Return to Chapter Three

Review:

significant challenges;

gift-and-shadow discoveries;

important contradictions;

information a candidate deserves to know.

Ask

Does the MDP contain enough truth for a candidate to understand the kind of congregation this is?

What important truths are intentionally reserved for later conversation?

At what point will they be shared?

Who is responsible for ensuring they are discussed?

The Freedom Test

Would we rather have a candidate:

withdraw after learning the truth during discernment

or

accept the call and discover the truth six months later?

The answer should be obvious.

Complete

A candidate might reasonably decide we are not their call because...

Can we accept that?

Remember

A candidate's no is not necessarily a failed search.

It may be successful discernment.

FM-8.9

What Would Make Me Call Them?

Testing the Invitation

Purpose

This exercise asks readers to identify what creates genuine interest.

Time

45 minutes.

Choose Three Outside Readers

Ideally people who understand pastoral ministry but have not participated in writing the MDP.

Ask them to read the draft.

Then ask only:

What would make you want to have a conversation with this congregation?

What makes this congregation distinctive?

Where did you feel energy?

Where did the document become flat?

What would you want to know more about?

What made you skeptical?

Do Not Ask

“Did you like it?”

That question produces politeness.

You need information.

Compare Responses

What did multiple readers notice?

Where did they agree?

What surprised the committee?

Revise Only What Matters

Do not rewrite the entire MDP because one reader prefers a different style.

Look for patterns.

FM-8.10

Candidate Questions the MDP Should Create

Good Profiles Begin Conversations

Purpose

A strong MDP should generate questions that can become part of later mutual discernment.

Time

45 minutes.

Imagine a Candidate Has Read the Profile Carefully

What questions do you hope they ask?

About Our Story

About Our Theology

About Our Challenges

About Our Community

About Emerging Vocation

About Ministry Priorities

About Leadership Culture

About Staff

About Expectations

About Our Relationship with the Wider Church

Now Ask

Have we provided enough information for the candidate to know these questions matter?

Save This List

These questions will be useful when preparing for **Calling New Leadership**.

The MDP is not the end of discernment.

It creates the next conversation.

FM-8.11

What the MDP Cannot Hold

Create the Doorway to the Deeper Story

Purpose

By now the committee probably has far more useful material than the MDP can contain.

Good.

That means the process has produced genuine discernment.

Do not try to cram all of it into the form.

Create a doorway.

Candidate Resource Page

If possible, create a clearly marked place on the congregation's website specifically for serious pastoral candidates.

It might include:

a fuller congregational story;

Remembering summary;

Listening summary;

community information;

photographs;

staff introductions;

ministry partnerships;

worship information;

recent sermons or services;

financial summaries when appropriate;

organizational information;

leadership structure;

theological reflections;

important ministry documents;

links to community resources.

If a Website Is Not Practical

Create a well-organized PDF packet or collection of documents that can be emailed to candidates who want to explore more deeply.

Do Not Create a Dumping Ground

More information is not necessarily more helpful.

Curate.

For Every Resource Ask

Why should a candidate read this?

What will it help them understand?

Is it current?

Does it tell the same story as the MDP?

Create a Candidate Pathway

A candidate should be able to move naturally from:

MDP → Curiosity → Deeper Resources → Conversation

Not:

MDP → 47 unlabeled files in a shared folder.

Remember

The MDP is the doorway.

It does not need to be the whole house.

FM-8.12

The Professional Writer Conversation

When the Story Deserves Skilled Help

Purpose

A committee may have done excellent discernment and still struggle to write it well.

Those are different skills.

Writing by committee often produces predictable problems:

every sentence has been negotiated;

nothing important is omitted because someone fought to keep it;

different sections have different voices;

language becomes institutional;

sentences grow longer as compromises accumulate;

distinctive stories become generic summaries.

The solution may not be another committee meeting.

It may be a writer.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Ask

Do we have someone who can take the committee's work and write with:

clarity;

economy;

warmth;

narrative coherence;

a consistent voice;

attention to audience;

respect for the word limit?

Yes / No / Unsure

If Not

Consider hiring or inviting a skilled professional writer or editor.

That person does **not** replace the committee's discernment.

The writer's task is to help the committee say clearly what it has actually discerned.

The Committee Owns

the theology;

the truth;

the stories;

the priorities;

the vocational discernment;

the final approval.

The Writer Helps With

structure;

voice;

clarity;

compression;

transitions;

word choice;

eliminating repetition;

making limited space work harder.

A Useful Instruction to the Writer

Do not make us sound more impressive than we are. Help us sound more clearly like ourselves.

Ask

Would a professional writer improve this document enough to justify the expense?

If yes, budget for it.

The MDP may be one of the most consequential pieces of writing the congregation produces during the entire transition.

Treating good writing as part of the search process is not extravagance.

It may be stewardship.

FM-8.13

Voice Audit

Does This Sound Like One Congregation?

Purpose

Different committee members may have drafted different sections.

Now the document needs one voice.

Time

60 minutes.

Read the Entire MDP Aloud

This matters.

The ear catches problems the eye misses.

Mark places that sound:

bureaucratic;

promotional;

defensive;

academic;

vague;

overwritten;

abrupt;

unusually formal;

unlike the rest of the document.

Ask

Does the voice feel:

warm but not sentimental?

confident but not boastful?

truthful but not self-critical?

hopeful but not unrealistic?

theological but not filled with church jargon?

particular rather than generic?

inviting without selling?

Identify Voice Shifts

Section:

Problem:

Revision needed:

The Spoken Test

Would a thoughtful congregational leader actually say this sentence aloud to a candidate?

If not, ask why.

FM-8.14

Jargon Translation

Write for a Pastor, Not for an Institutional Insider

Purpose

Candidates may understand denominational language.

That does not mean institutional jargon improves the MDP.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Circle Terms Such As

visioning;

missional;

transformational;

connectional;

discipleship;

vitality;

adaptive;

emerging;

relational;

community engagement;

faith formation;

shared leadership.

These may be useful terms.

But only if the reader knows what **you** mean by them.

Ask

What does this word mean in our congregation?

What behavior or story demonstrates it?

Can we say it more concretely?

Example

Instead of:

We seek transformational leadership for missional engagement.

Try:

We are seeking a pastor who can help us build relationships beyond the congregation, learn from our neighbors, and turn what we discover into shared experiments in ministry.

The second takes more words.

It also means something.

Complete

Jargon:

What we mean:

Rewrite:

FM-8.15

The Emotional Temperature Test

What Does It Feel Like to Read Us?

Purpose

An MDP communicates more than information.

It communicates emotional posture.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Read the Profile and Mark Places That Communicate

Hope.

Anxiety.

Grief.

Defensiveness.

Pride.

Curiosity.

Urgency.

Humility.

Fear.

Trust.

Ask

What emotional posture dominates?

Watch Especially for Anxiety

Anxiety often appears as:

urgency about growth;

long lists of pastoral expectations;

excessive emphasis on decline;

repeated insistence that the congregation is healthy;

claims that all conflict is behind you;

language about needing someone to “take us to the next level.”

Ask

Are we inviting a pastor into a ministry?

Or recruiting someone to relieve our anxiety?

Complete

The emotional posture we hope the MDP communicates is...

The places where our anxiety shows are...

FM-8.16

The Spouse, Partner, and Family Lens

Remember That a Call May Affect More Than One Person

Purpose

Candidates do not all have spouses, partners, or children.

Some do.

A call may involve decisions affecting an entire household.

The MDP should not make assumptions about family structure, but the congregation should remember that relocation can involve:

employment;

schools;
housing;
caregiving;
community;
healthcare;
distance from extended family;
financial implications.

Time

30 minutes.

Ask

Does our community description provide useful information without turning into a tourism brochure?

Are deeper community resources available?

Can candidates easily explore housing, schools, employment, transportation, and community life if these matter to them?

Are we prepared to answer questions without assuming anything about the candidate's family?

Important

Do not use the MDP to inquire into personal matters.

Simply recognize that discernment may involve more than one life.

Hospitality means making useful information available without making assumptions.

FM-8.17

Weak → Better → Strong

Writing as Invitation

Example One — Congregational Description

Weak

We are a vibrant and friendly congregation seeking a dynamic pastor to lead us into an exciting future.

Better

We are a caring congregation entering an important season of transition.

Stronger

We are a congregation with deep relationships and a long memory, learning that the strengths that sustained us in earlier seasons will not by themselves determine our future. Remembering and Listening have made us both grateful for who we are and curious about who we are becoming.

Why It Is Stronger

It gives the candidate something real to enter.

Example Two — Challenge**Weak**

Like many churches, we have faced challenges but remain optimistic.

Better

Declining participation has created challenges for some ministries.

Stronger

We are smaller than we once were, and some programs designed for a larger congregation are no longer sustainable. Rather than asking only how to restore what we had, we are beginning to ask what faithful ministry is possible with the people, relationships, and resources present now.

Why It Is Stronger

The candidate encounters both reality and theological posture.

Example Three — Community**Weak**

Our church is located in a growing community with many opportunities for outreach.

Better

Our community is growing and changing.

Stronger

New housing is bringing people into neighborhoods where longstanding relationships remain strong. Listening has helped us see both the gifts this growth brings and the difficulty newcomers sometimes experience finding meaningful connection. That tension has become important to our own discernment about hospitality and belonging.

Why It Is Stronger

The community is connected to vocation.

Example Four — Pastor**Weak**

We seek an energetic pastor with excellent preaching, leadership, and people skills.

Better

We seek a collaborative pastor with strong communication and leadership gifts.

Stronger

Because our next season will require both deeper community relationships and broader lay participation, we hope for a pastor who listens well, develops other leaders, and can help turn shared discernment into action without assuming that ministry belongs primarily to the pastor.

Why It Is Stronger

The pastoral gifts arise from the ministry.

Example Five — Invitation**Weak**

If you are looking for an exciting opportunity to lead a wonderful congregation, we invite you to apply.

Better

We welcome candidates who feel called to explore ministry with us.

Stronger

We do not know exactly what our next season will become. We do know that our listening has changed some of the questions we are asking, and we are seeking a pastor willing to ask them with us. If the ministry described here awakens curiosity in you, we would welcome the opportunity to begin a conversation.

Why It Is Stronger

It invites discernment rather than selling a position.

FM-8.18**Candidate Invitation Drafting Sheet****Write the Profile from the Reader's Side****Purpose**

This resource gathers the chapter's work into final candidate-facing language.

What We Most Want a Candidate to Understand About Us**What We Want Them to Understand About Our Place****What We Want Them to Understand About the Ministry Ahead**

What We Want Them to Understand About Our Challenges

What We Want Them to Understand About Partnership

What We Hope Makes Them Curious

What We Are Comfortable Allowing Them to Decide Is Not for Them

What Requires Deeper Conversation

Draft an Invitation Paragraph

Write approximately 150–200 words.

Do not sell.

Do not apologize.

Invite.

Now Cut It

Remove:

generic adjectives;

repeated information;

institutional language;

claims without evidence;

anything written merely to impress.

Read It Aloud

Does it sound like people speaking to another person?

If yes, you are close.

FM-8.19

The Honest No Test

A Final Exercise in Mutual Discernment

Purpose

This exercise tests whether the committee truly believes what it has been saying about mutual discernment.

Time

30 minutes.

Complete Privately

A pastor might read our MDP and decide not to pursue us because...

Share

Listen without defending the congregation.

Then ask:

Are those things described truthfully enough for a candidate to recognize them?

Would we be tempted to soften them merely to keep candidates interested?

Now Complete

A pastor might read our MDP and become deeply interested because...

Compare

The same characteristic may appear on both lists.

For example:

A congregation is in the middle of significant change.

One candidate may say:

No. I do not want that ministry.

Another may say:

That is exactly the work that gives me energy.

That is why truthfulness is more useful than attractiveness.

Final Question

Are we willing to trust the candidate's discernment as much as we want them to trust ours?

Chapter Eight Discernment Harvest

The Invitation We Are Ready to Make

What We Most Want a Candidate to Recognize

What Makes This Congregation Particular

What Makes This Ministry Particular

What We Hope Creates Curiosity

Truths That May Cause Some Candidates to Say No

Why We Are Willing to Tell Those Truths

Questions We Hope Candidates Will Ask

Material That Belongs in the MDP

Material That Belongs on the Candidate Resource Page or in the Candidate Packet

Material That Belongs in Conversation

Places Where a Professional Writer or Editor May Help

Complete

We hope a pastor reading our MDP will understand that we are...

We hope they will become curious about...

We want them to know honestly that...

And if something in this story connects with their own sense of call, we hope they will...

A Prayer for the Person Who Will Read These Words

Leader

God of call and response,
we have spent months finding words.

Somewhere, someday,
someone may read them.

People

Be present with them.

Leader

They may be searching eagerly.

People

Give them wisdom.

Leader

They may be searching reluctantly.

People**Give them freedom.****Leader**

They may be tired.

People**Give them rest.****Leader**

They may be hopeful.

People**Deepen their hope.****Leader**They may be grieving a ministry
they are not yet ready to leave.**People****Hold what they love.****Leader**They may be wondering
whether their gifts still matter.**People****Remind them that every gift comes from you.****Leader**They may read our words
and feel no stirring at all.**People****Bless their no.****Leader**They may read our words
and become curious.**People****Bless the question.****Leader**They may recognize something
we could not have anticipated.**People****Make us curious too.**

Leader

Keep us from presenting ourselves
as better than we are.

People

Give us truthfulness.

Leader

Keep us from describing ourselves
only by our difficulties.

People

Give us gratitude.

Leader

Keep us from hiding what matters
because we fear rejection.

People

Give us courage.

Leader

Keep us from asking candidates
to trust us while withholding the truth
they need for their discernment.

People

Make us worthy of trust.

Leader

Give skill to those who shape these words.

People

Make them clear and human.

Leader

Give humility to those who approve them.

People

Help us release what does not belong.

Leader

And when these words finally leave our hands,

People

Help us trust you with what happens next.

All

Calling God,
somewhere there are pastors

asking questions about their future,
just as we have been asking questions about ours.

We do not ask you to send us
the person who fulfills every expectation.

We ask you to deepen our discernment
and theirs.

May these words tell enough truth
for another person to see us clearly.

May they offer enough hope
for someone to become curious.

May they contain enough humility
for someone to imagine becoming our partner.

And when congregation and pastor
finally meet across these words,
may each recognize in the other
not the answer to every need,
but the possibility of joining together
the work Christ is already doing.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

At the end of Chapter Eight, the committee should be able to see the MDP differently.

It is not merely a form to complete.

It is not an advertisement.

It is not a job posting.

It is not the entire congregational story.

It is a **doorway into mutual discernment.**

On one side stands a congregation saying:

This is who we understand ourselves to be.

This is what we have learned about our place.

This is the vocation we are beginning to recognize.

This is the ministry we believe lies ahead.

These are the gifts we carry.

These are the gifts we believe might complement ours.

These are some of our challenges and unfinished questions.

Would you like to talk with us?

On the other side is a pastor with their own story, gifts, questions, limitations, relationships, and sense of call.

The purpose of good writing is not to push that pastor through the doorway.

It is to make the doorway visible.

Now the committee has accumulated substantial material.

Probably too much.

That is exactly where it should be.

The next work is not more discernment.

It is disciplined writing.

What belongs in the limited space of the Ministry Discernment Profile?

What belongs on the candidate resource page?

What belongs in an emailed packet?

What belongs in conversation?

What should be cut completely?

How do you compress without becoming generic?

How do you preserve stories without using all the available space?

How do you move from months of committee work to a document that another person can actually read?

That is the work of the next chapter:

Chapter Nine

Write the Profile

Compression Without Losing the Story

Chapter Nine Resources

Write the Profile

Compression Without Losing the Story

Now the abundance must become selection.

You have more material than the profile can carry.

That is good.

If the committee has done the work of Remembering, Listening, recognizing identity, naming gifts and challenges, discerning vocation, describing the ministry ahead, and identifying the pastoral partnership that ministry requires, you should have far more to say than the Ministry Discernment Profile allows.

The problem is no longer:

What can we possibly say?

The problem is:

What matters enough to say here?

That is the better problem—and the more demanding one.

But it requires discipline.

Committees often respond to limited space in one of two ways.

The first is **compression by generalization**.

Months of discernment become:

We are a welcoming congregation committed to worship, fellowship, mission, and service to our community.

It fits.

It also says almost nothing.

The second is **compression by accumulation**.

Every committee member has something that must be included. Sentences lengthen. Semicolons multiply. Lists grow. Type shrinks. Every paragraph bends beneath six competing ideas.

The result preserves the information and loses the story that gave it meaning.

The task is neither to say everything nor to reduce everything to slogans.

It is to choose—and to trust what must be left elsewhere.

The Ministry Discernment Profile is not the complete record of your discernment. It is the **front door** into it. Chapter Eight established the pathway:

MDP → Curiosity → Deeper Resources → Conversation

That architecture now becomes essential.

The MDP carries what a candidate needs first.

The candidate resource page or packet carries what deserves greater depth.

Conversation carries what requires relationship, nuance, questions, and mutual exploration.

Some material belongs nowhere and can simply be released.

The committee's task in this chapter is to turn months of work into a coherent, truthful, readable profile without losing the congregation's particularity.

For most congregations, **FM-9.1, FM-9.2, FM-9.3, FM-9.5, FM-9.7, FM-9.10, and FM-9.13** provide the core process.

FM-9.1

Build the Story Before You Cut It

Start with the Full Version

Purpose

Do not begin by writing to the character or word limit.

Beginning with the limit encourages generic language because the committee starts compressing before it has decided what matters.

Write the fuller story first.

Time

60–90 minutes.

Gather the Discernment Harvests

Bring forward the final harvests from the previous chapters.

You should now have material describing:

congregational identity;

lived values;

gifts;

challenges;

contradictions;

community;

community assets and pressures;

emerging vocation;

ministry priorities;

congregational responsibility;
pastoral gifts;
the invitation to candidates.

For Each Area Ask

What is the most important thing we discovered?

What evidence or story makes it believable?

Why does a candidate need to know this?

Now Write the Full Version

Do not worry about length.

Write the story you wish you had room to tell.

Important

This longer version is not wasted work.

Parts of it may become:

website material;

candidate resources;

interview preparation;

congregational communication;

search committee orientation.

You are creating the source from which the shorter profile will be distilled.

FM-9.2

The One-Sentence Test

Know the Job of Every Section

Purpose

Before compressing a section, decide what that section must accomplish.

Time

45 minutes.

For Each Major Section Complete

The job of this section is to help a candidate understand that...

Congregational Story**Identity and Values****Gifts and Challenges****Community****Emerging Vocation****Ministry Ahead****Pastoral Partnership****Invitation****Now Test**

If a paragraph does not help its section accomplish that job, ask:

Does it belong somewhere else?

Does it belong in deeper resources?

Does it need to be cut?

Example

If the job of the community section is:

Help candidates understand how rapid community change is shaping our emerging vocation around belonging, then three sentences about airports, restaurants, climate, and recreational opportunities probably do not deserve much space there.

They may be useful on the candidate resource page.

Remember

Every section needs a job.

That principle alone can eliminate enormous amounts of unnecessary material.

FM-9.3

Must Know / Good to Know / Explore Later / Release

The Primary Compression Exercise

Purpose

This is the central sorting exercise for Chapter Nine.

Time

75–90 minutes.
Take every significant piece of material and place it in one of four categories.

MUST KNOW

A candidate needs this to understand the congregation, ministry, or partnership accurately.
This is MDP material.

GOOD TO KNOW

Useful and meaningful, but not necessary in the initial profile.
This may belong in deeper candidate resources.

EXPLORE LATER

Important, but best understood through conversation.

RELEASE

True perhaps, but unnecessary to the search.

Sort

Material	Must Know	Good to Know	Explore Later	Release
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

The Hard Rule

Not everything meaningful is **Must Know**.

Ask of Every Item

Would omitting this materially distort the candidate's understanding?
If no, it may not belong in the MDP.

Would a serious candidate benefit from it later?

If yes, preserve it elsewhere.

Does it require context or dialogue?

If yes, move it to conversation.

Is it here primarily because someone worked hard on it?

That is not sufficient reason to keep it.

Complete

The material we are most reluctant to cut is...

We are reluctant because...

Sometimes the committee is protecting its work rather than serving the reader.

FM-9.4

The Distinctiveness Test

Spend Space on What Makes This Congregation This Congregation

Purpose

Limited space should be spent on particularity.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Highlight Generic Statements

Mark anything that could appear in hundreds of MDPs.

Examples:

We value worship.

We are committed to mission.

We are a friendly congregation.

We value Christian education.

We seek to serve our community.

We are looking toward the future.

We value children and youth.

Ask of Each

Is this necessary?

If yes:

What makes it particular here?

Example

Generic:

We value mission and outreach.

Particular:

Our strongest mission relationships have developed when members stayed involved long enough to move from providing assistance to knowing people personally. That experience is shaping how we think about community partnership in our next season.

Your Turn

Generic statement:

What makes it particular:

Rewrite:

Space Rule

When space is limited:

Particular beats comprehensive.

A candidate does not need every value named.

They need enough particularity to recognize the congregation.

FM-9.5

Story, Meaning, Direction

A Compression Pattern That Preserves Life

Purpose

Stories make a profile memorable.

Stories also take space.

This exercise helps preserve the meaning of a story without reproducing the entire narrative.

Time

60 minutes.

Choose an Important Story

Perhaps from Remembering.

Full Story

What Happened?

Reduce it to one sentence.

What Did It Reveal About Us?

How Does It Shape Our Future?

Now Write Three Sentences

Story → Meaning → Direction

Example

Full story:

The congregation spent months developing a relationship with a local school, initially expecting to provide supplies. Conversations with teachers eventually revealed that what they valued most was consistent adult presence at school events and relationships with families.

Compressed:

Our relationship with a nearby school began with providing supplies but changed as we listened more carefully to teachers and families. We discovered that consistent presence mattered more than another church-sponsored project. That experience is shaping our growing commitment to partnership rather than simply providing services.

The details are gone.

The story remains.

Remember

Compression does not have to remove narrative.

It removes what the reader does not need yet.

FM-9.6

Cut the Institutional Biography

History Is Not the Same as Story

Purpose

Congregations often devote too much limited space to chronology.

Founded in 1873.

Built sanctuary in 1904.

Education wing added in 1957.

New sanctuary completed in 1982.

Renovated in 2007.

These facts may matter.

But they do not necessarily tell the candidate who the congregation has become.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Review Every Historical Detail

Ask:

Does this explain who we are now?

Does it reveal a lived value?

Does it explain a current challenge?

Does it illuminate emerging vocation?

Would omitting it distort the story?

Sort

HISTORY THAT FORMED US

HISTORY THAT IS INTERESTING

HISTORY THAT CAN MOVE TO THE WEBSITE

Rewrite

Instead of:

The congregation was founded in 1892, built its first sanctuary in 1903, relocated in 1958, and constructed its current educational building in 1974.

Perhaps:

Our congregation has repeatedly adapted its physical life as the community changed around it. That history of adaptation has become important again as we ask how our property might serve a changing neighborhood.

Now history serves discernment.

FM-9.7

Cut Without Becoming Generic

The Three-Pass Compression Method

Purpose

This is a practical editing method for reducing length while protecting meaning.

Time

Varies.

Pass One — Cut Repetition

Look for ideas already stated elsewhere.

If hospitality is established in one section, later sections can apply it rather than explain it again.

Mark repeated ideas.

Estimated reduction: _____ words/characters

Pass Two — Cut Explanation

Committees often explain a point after they have already made it.

Example:

We value collaboration and believe working together is important because ministry is strongest when people cooperate with one another.

Cut:

We value collaboration.

Better still, make it particular:

Major decisions are normally shaped through conversation among Session, staff, and ministry leaders rather than presented as completed plans.

Pass Three — Cut Generalities Before Particulars

When choosing between:

We care deeply about our community.

and:

Members have spent the past year listening with school leaders, nonprofit partners, and neighbors before deciding what new ministry might be needed.

Keep the second.

Compression Order

Cut:

repetition;

throat-clearing;

unnecessary adjectives;

generic claims;
institutional jargon;
unnecessary chronology;
examples that repeat the same point;
details better placed elsewhere.

Protect:

truth;
particularity;
vocation;
meaningful tension;
evidence;
human voice.

FM-9.8

The Sentence Surgery Worksheet

Make Every Sentence Earn Its Space

Purpose

When space is extremely limited, editing must become precise.

Time

30–60 minutes per major section.

Choose a Sentence

Ask

What is this sentence actually saying?

Remove Introductory Padding

Look for:

It is important to note that...

We believe that...

It should also be mentioned that...

One of the things we have discovered is that...

Our congregation has come to realize that...

In an effort to...

Rewrite

Remove Unnecessary Adjectives

Original:

Revised:

Replace Abstract Nouns with Verbs

Instead of:

We have a commitment to the development of community partnerships.

Try:

We are building deeper partnerships in our community.

Remove Duplicate Meaning

Instead of:

We hope and desire to seek and discern...

Choose the word that does the work.

Final Sentence

Count

Original length: _____

Revised length: _____

Meaning lost?

Yes / No

Particularity lost?

Yes / No

If meaning and particularity remain, the cut worked.

FM-9.9

Paragraph Architecture

One Paragraph, One Job

Purpose

Crowded paragraphs often indicate crowded thinking.

Time

45 minutes.

For Each Paragraph Write in the Margin

This paragraph is about:

If you need **and** three times to explain its purpose, the paragraph probably has too many jobs.

Check the First Sentence

Does it establish the paragraph's point?

Yes / No

Check the Middle

Does each sentence develop that point?

Yes / No

Check the End

Does the paragraph arrive somewhere?

Yes / No

Look for Paragraphs That Attempt to Cover

history + values + programs + community + pastor.

Separate the ideas—or choose which one actually matters.

A Useful Pattern

Claim

What is true?

Evidence

How do we know?

Significance

Why does it matter to the ministry ahead?

Not every paragraph requires all three explicitly.

But the pattern keeps writing grounded.

FM-9.10

One Voice

Escape Writing by Committee

Purpose

A committee should discern together.

It should not necessarily compose together.

Sentence-by-sentence group writing often produces weak prose because every sentence becomes a compromise.

Time

Planning: 30–45 minutes.

Choose the Writing Process

The committee should identify:

Primary Writer

Secondary Reader or Editor

Fact Checker

Theological/Discernment Reviewer

Final Approval Body

The Primary Writer's Job

Use the committee's discernment faithfully.

Create one coherent voice.

Compress.

Choose transitions.

Eliminate repetition.

Preserve particularity.

The Committee's Job

Ask:

Is it true?

Does it represent our discernment?

Is anything materially missing?

Has anything been distorted?

The Committee's Job Is Not

to rewrite every sentence according to individual preference.

Establish a Rule

Suggested:

A proposed change must improve accuracy, clarity, or faithfulness—not merely reflect personal wording preference.

Write your committee's editing rule:

Important

If no one on the committee has the skill or confidence to do this well, this is the point at which a professional writer or editor may be especially valuable.

The congregation has already done the theological work.

A professional can help the language carry it.

FM-9.11

Working with a Professional Writer

Give Them Discernment, Not a Blank Page

Purpose

A professional writer cannot discern the congregation's vocation for you.

But a skilled writer can help turn substantial discernment into compelling, economical prose.

Prepare a Writer's Packet

Include:

the Writing Brief;

chapter Discernment Harvests;

the longer narrative draft;

essential facts;

approved vocational language;

ministry priorities;

essential pastoral gifts;

material designated for the MDP;

material designated for deeper resources;

the required MDP questions and limits.

Tell the Writer**Preserve:**

our theology;

our truth;

our particularity;

our tensions;

our emerging vocation;

our voice.

Improve:

clarity;

economy;
organization;
flow;
consistency;
readability.

Avoid:

marketing language;
generic church language;
invented claims;
hiding challenges;
making us sound more certain than we are.

A Useful Brief

Help us tell the truth clearly within the available space. Do not make us sound more impressive, more successful, more certain, or more innovative than the material supports. Preserve what makes this congregation particular.

Review the Draft

Ask first:

Is it true?

Then:

Is it clear?

Only then:

Do we like the wording?

FM-9.12

The Candidate Resource Page

Save What Matters Without Overloading the MDP

Purpose

Good material should not be forced into the wrong container.

Time

60 minutes.

Create Categories

Possible sections might include:

Our Story**Our Community****What We Learned Through Listening**

Our Ministry Partnerships**Worship and Formation****Staff and Leadership****Our Emerging Vocation****Financial and Organizational Information****Living in Our Community****For Each Resource Ask**

What question does this answer?

Why might a serious candidate care?

Is it current?

Who will maintain it?

Link Strategically

If the MDP permits links, use them intentionally.

Do not interrupt every paragraph with links.

Instead, consider a simple invitation:

Candidates wishing to explore our congregation, community, and discernment more deeply may find additional resources at _____.

If You Cannot Build a Website

Create a candidate PDF packet.

Give it:

a table of contents;

clear headings;

current information;

a manageable length;

working links.

Do not send a candidate the committee's entire transition archive.

Remember

Curated depth is helpful.

Accumulated documents are homework.

FM-9.13

The Compression Workshop

Reduce the Draft Together Without Rewriting It Together

Purpose

This exercise gives the committee a disciplined way to make difficult cuts.

Time

90 minutes.

Step One

Give everyone the same full draft.

Step Two

Individually mark:

M — Must remain.

D — Move to deeper resources.

C — Better in conversation.

X — Cut.

Step Three

Compare only places where people disagree significantly.

Do not discuss every sentence.

Step Four

For disputed material, ask:

What would a candidate misunderstand if this disappeared?

If the answer is:

nothing important,

cut or move it.

Step Five

Protect the distinctive material.

Before cutting a story, tension, or unusual observation, ask whether you are about to replace something memorable with something generic.

Step Six

Give the decisions back to the primary writer.

Do not rewrite the paragraphs as a committee.

Final Check

Length before workshop: _____

Length after workshop: _____

Material moved to deeper resources: _____

Material reserved for conversation: _____

Material released: _____

FM-9.14

Weak → Better → Strong

Compression Without Losing Meaning

Example One — Identity

Overloaded

We are a warm, friendly, welcoming, caring, inclusive, mission-minded congregation with a strong commitment to fellowship and a desire to serve God faithfully in our church and community.

Shorter but Generic

We are a welcoming congregation committed to mission and community.

Stronger

Hospitality has shaped some of our strongest ministries, and we are learning to extend that gift beyond relationships among people who already know us.

Why It Is Stronger

It uses fewer claims and says more.

Example Two — Community

Overloaded

Our community is a rapidly growing area with excellent schools, numerous recreational opportunities, diverse shopping, good healthcare, new housing developments, a strong business community, and convenient access to several larger cities.

Shorter but Generic

We live in a growing community with many amenities.

Stronger

Rapid growth is bringing new households into a community still shaped by strong multigenerational relationships, creating both opportunity and tension around belonging.

Why It Is Stronger

The sentence tells a ministry story rather than a tourism story.

Example Three — Vocation

Overloaded

Through our Remembering and Listening work, our committee has spent considerable time discussing our history, values, strengths, weaknesses, community demographics, ministry opportunities, and future hopes, and we believe God may be calling us toward greater engagement with our community.

Shorter but Generic

We believe God is calling us to greater community engagement.

Stronger

Listening has drawn our attention toward growing isolation in our community and reminded us of our own gifts for hospitality and accompaniment. We are beginning to recognize belonging as an important part of our emerging vocation.

Why It Is Stronger

The discernment remains visible.

Example Four — Pastor

Overloaded

We seek a compassionate, energetic, visionary, collaborative, innovative, approachable pastor who is an excellent preacher, teacher, administrator, leader, communicator, and caregiver.

Shorter but Generic

We seek a collaborative pastor with strong leadership and communication skills.

Stronger

We seek a pastor who can listen deeply, develop other leaders, and help us move from shared discernment toward faithful experimentation.

Why It Is Stronger

It prioritizes gifts connected to ministry.

Example Five — Challenge

Overloaded

Like many mainline churches, we have experienced declining membership and attendance over the years, particularly following the pandemic, and although we have many committed members and remain financially stable, we recognize that we need to find new ways to grow and attract younger members.

Shorter but Misleading

We remain a strong congregation looking toward future growth.

Stronger

We are smaller than we once were, and some structures built for a larger congregation no longer fit. We are learning to ask not simply how to recover former numbers, but what faithfulness requires with the people and gifts present now.

Why It Is Stronger

Compression has not removed the truth.

FM-9.15

The Cutting Ladder

What to Remove First

Purpose

When the profile is still too long, committees need a rational order for further cuts.

Time

As needed.

Cut in this order:

1. Repetition

Has the idea already been established?

2. Generic Claims

Could almost any church say it?

3. Unnecessary Adjectives

Does the noun or evidence already carry the meaning?

4. Institutional Chronology

Does the date matter to current discernment?

5. Program Lists

Can purpose replace the catalog?

6. Explanation After the Point Is Clear

Are you saying the same thing twice?

7. Details Available Elsewhere

Could this move to candidate resources?

8. Secondary Examples

Do two examples make the same point?

9. Background Necessary Only for Conversation

Does the material require more nuance than the MDP permits?

Protect Until Last

particular stories;

important challenges;

emerging vocation;

ministry priorities;
congregational responsibility;
essential pastoral gifts;
meaningful tensions.

Final Question

Are we shortening the document—or hollowing it out?

If the distinctive material disappears first, stop.

FM-9.16

The Read-Aloud Edit

Listen for What the Eye Has Learned to Ignore

Purpose

After many revisions, committee members stop seeing awkward prose.
Reading aloud restores attention.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Assign Readers

Change readers at each major section.

Everyone else follows silently.

Mark anything that:

is difficult to say aloud;

runs too long;

sounds institutional;

repeats;

uses unexplained jargon;

creates confusion;

changes voice;

sounds defensive;

sounds like advertising;

does not sound like your congregation.

Do Not Edit During the Reading

Mark only.

Then discuss patterns.

Ask

Where did attention drift?

Where did the language come alive?

What sounded artificial?

What sounded most like us?

Remember

If a sentence is difficult to speak, it is often difficult to read.

FM-9.17

The Outside Reader Test

Can Someone Understand What We Think We Said?

Purpose

The committee knows too much.

An outside reader does not.

That makes the outside reader valuable.

Time

30 minutes plus reading time.

Choose Two or Three Readers

Prefer people who:

understand churches;

were not part of the writing process;

will tell you the truth.

Ask Them to Read Without Background Information

Then ask:

Who is this congregation?

What matters to them?

What have they learned about themselves?

What seems difficult?

What are they being called toward?

What ministry lies ahead?

What do they expect from a pastor?

What would you want to ask them?

Compare Their Answers with Your Intent

Do not explain what you meant.

If they missed something essential, revise the document.

FM-9.18

Final MDP Writing Audit

Before the Committee Approves the Text

Purpose

Use this after substantive writing is complete.

Truth

Is every factual claim accurate?

Yes / No

Current Reality

Does the profile describe the congregation that exists now?

Yes / No

Particularity

Could another congregation use most of these words?

Yes / No

Challenge

Have we told enough truth about difficulty?

Yes / No

Aspiration

Have we distinguished what exists from what we hope will exist?

Yes / No

Community

Have we described a ministry context rather than a tourism brochure?

Yes / No

Vocation

Can a candidate recognize what we believe may be emerging?

Yes / No

Ministry

Are the next season's priorities clear?

Yes / No

Congregational Responsibility

Have we avoided transferring the congregation's call to the pastor?

Yes / No

Pastoral Gifts

Do essential gifts arise from the ministry?

Yes / No

Invitation

Does the document invite mutual discernment?

Yes / No

Voice

Does it sound like one congregation?

Yes / No

Length

Is it within required limits?

Yes / No

Deeper Resources

Have valuable materials that did not fit been preserved appropriately?

Yes / No

Conversation

Have important issues requiring later conversation been recorded?

Yes / No

Final Question

If a pastor eventually accepts our call, could we hand them this MDP a year later without embarrassment and say: "This is the congregation we tried honestly to describe"?

Yes / Not Yet

If not yet, keep working.

Chapter Nine Discernment Harvest

The Profile We Are Ready to Complete

The Essential Story

The Three or Four Things a Candidate Must Understand About Us

The Most Important Truth About Our Community

The Emerging Vocation We Need to Preserve

The Ministry Priorities We Need to Preserve

The Congregational Responsibility We Need to Make Clear

The Essential Pastoral Gifts We Need to Preserve

Material Moved to the Candidate Resource Page

Material Reserved for Candidate Conversation

Material We Have Released

Our Primary Writer

Our Editor or Professional Writing Support

Complete

The story we most need the MDP to tell is...

The material we will protect even under severe space limits is...

The material we are willing to move elsewhere is...

The sentence we hope a candidate remembers after closing the profile is...

A Prayer for the Words We Choose

Leader

Word made flesh,
we have gathered more words
than this small document can hold.

People

Give us wisdom to choose.

Leader

We have remembered stories.

People

Help us preserve their meaning.

Leader

We have named gifts.

People

Keep us grateful without boasting.

Leader

We have named challenges.

People

Keep us truthful without shame.

Leader

We have listened to our neighbors.

People

Keep their voices from disappearing in our editing.

Leader

We have begun recognizing vocation.

People

Keep us from reducing calling to a slogan.

Leader

We have named ministry priorities.

People

Keep us from turning them into a pastor's task list.

Leader

We have discerned gifts for pastoral partnership.

People

Keep us from rebuilding the impossible pastor.

Leader

When we want to include everything,

People

Give us courage to choose.

Leader

When we fear cutting something means losing it,

People

Teach us to place it where it belongs.

Leader

When generic words are easier,

People

Call us back to particular truth.

Leader

When polished words make us sound better than we are,

People

Call us back to honesty.

Leader

When fear makes us hide what is difficult,

People

Call us back to trust.

Leader

When our sentences become crowded
with everyone's preferences,

People

Give us one clear voice.

Leader

Bless those who write.

People

Give them skill.

Leader

Bless those who edit.

People

Give them discernment.

Leader

Bless those who must let beloved words go.

People

Give them freedom.

Leader

Bless the stories that remain on the cutting-room floor.

People

Their truth is not lost.

All

God who speaks creation into being,
teach us the discipline of enough.

Enough truth
to be trustworthy.

Enough story
to be recognizable.

Enough particularity
to become interesting.

Enough challenge
to permit honest discernment.

Enough hope
to invite curiosity.

Enough humility
to leave room for questions.

Give us words worthy of the work
you have led us through.

And when there is no room
for another sentence,
help us trust that a profile
does not have to tell the whole story.

It only needs to open the door.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

The committee now has a draft.

It may be excellent.

It may be concise.

It may tell the congregation's story faithfully.

It may fit every required limit.

It is still not finished.

Something happens after a committee has worked on a document for weeks.

You stop reading what is actually there.

You read what you **know you meant**.

You know the backstory behind the paragraph.

The candidate does not.

You know why a phrase matters.

The candidate may not.

You know that a statement describes an aspiration rather than a current reality.

The candidate may read it as fact.

You know which difficult issues will be discussed later.

Unless someone has recorded that intention, six months from now the search committee may not remember.

And there is another danger.

After finally getting the document under the limit, everyone is tired.

That is precisely when committees become tempted to say:

“It's good enough. Submit it.”

Not yet.

The next task is not another developmental rewrite.

It is quality control.

Read the profile for accuracy.

Read it for coherence.

Read it for consistency.

Read it as a candidate.

Check every link.

Check every number.

Check every name.

Check whether the deeper resources actually exist.

Check whether the profile and those resources tell the same story.

And one more thing:

Make sure the final document still sounds like the congregation you discovered before you began cutting.

That is the work of Chapter Ten:

Chapter Ten

Final Review and Release

Make It True, Clear, and Ready to Travel

Chapter Ten Resources

Final Review and Release

Make It True, Clear, and Ready to Travel

The committee has a draft. The work now changes from shaping language to testing whether that language can bear the weight of truth, hope, and invitation placed upon it.

A final review is not another invitation for every reader to add a favorite sentence. It is the quieter discipline of asking whether the words are true, coherent, accurate, usable, and ready to travel beyond the room that made them.

The committee should be able to answer five questions before release:

Is it true?

Is it clear?

Is it consistent with the deeper resources and the congregation's discernment?

Can a pastor read it without needing the committee's private explanations?

Are we prepared to stand behind what it says?

For most congregations, FM-10.1, FM-10.2, FM-10.4, FM-10.6, FM-10.8, FM-10.9, and FM-10.11 provide the core process.

FM-10.1

The Final Review Map

Separate Review from Rewriting

Purpose

This exercise establishes the order of final review and prevents the committee from reopening every earlier decision.

Time

20–30 minutes.

Name the Review Stages

Complete these stages in order. Do not combine them into one large editing meeting.

1. Truth and evidence review
2. Candidate-perspective review
3. Factual and technical verification
4. Congregational recognition
5. Authorization and release

Assign Responsibility

Who will coordinate the final review?

Who has authority to approve the final text?

Who will make only the changes that reviewers authorize?

Set a Boundary

After the truth review is complete, no new theme, ministry priority, or pastoral expectation should be added without returning to the discernment that would support it.

FM-10.2

The Truth Test

Read Every Claim Against the Evidence

Purpose

This review checks whether the profile describes the congregation that exists and the vocation it has actually discerned, rather than an attractive approximation.

Time

60–90 minutes.

For Every Major Claim, Ask

What evidence supports this statement?

Is it a present reality, an emerging pattern, or an aspiration?

Would people elsewhere in the congregation recognize it?

Would someone directly affected by this claim describe it differently?

What would be misleading if a candidate read this as an established fact?

Claims That Need Attention

Claim:

Evidence:

Revision needed:

A Useful Discipline

If the committee cannot point to evidence, change the claim, qualify it, or remove it.

FM-10.3

Reality, Aspiration, or Invitation?

Make the Tense of the Congregation Clear

Purpose

This exercise prevents hopes for the future from being presented as present congregational strengths.

Time

45 minutes.

Mark Each Significant Statement

- ☐ REALITY — This is consistently true now.
- ☐ EMERGING — We see evidence of this, but it is not yet fully established.
- ☐ ASPIRATION — We hope to become this, but cannot yet claim it.
- ☐ INVITATION — We are naming work we hope to undertake with a new pastor.

Revise Aspirational Language

Instead of: We are deeply engaged with our neighborhood.

Try: We have begun building relationships with neighborhood partners and are seeking pastoral leadership that will help those relationships deepen.

A statement we need to qualify:

FM-10.4

The Candidate Read

Test the Profile Without the Backstory

Purpose

This exercise reveals what the document communicates to someone who has not participated in the congregation's months of discernment.

Time

60 minutes.

Choose Two or Three Readers

Invite readers who were not part of the writing team. At least one should understand pastoral discernment but should not need to know the congregation well.

Ask Them to Read Without Explanation

Then ask:

Who do you believe this congregation is?

What ministry appears to matter most in its next season?

What gifts does the congregation already possess?

What challenges seem important?

What kind of pastoral partnership is being invited?

What remains confusing, generic, or unsupported?

What would make you want to ask a next question?

Compare Their Reading with Your Intention

What they understood accurately:

What they misunderstood or could not see:

FM-10.5

The Coherence Audit

Make Every Section Tell the Same Story

Purpose

This exercise checks whether identity, place, vocation, ministry priorities, and pastoral gifts form one coherent line of discernment.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Trace the Sequence

Identity → Place → Vocation → Ministry → Pastoral Gifts

The identity we describe is:

The place we describe is:

The vocation emerging where they meet is:

The ministry priorities flowing from that vocation are:

The pastoral gifts connected to those priorities are:

Look for Breaks

Does a ministry priority appear without connection to vocation?

Does a desired pastoral gift appear without connection to ministry?

Does the community section describe a place the ministry section ignores?

Does the profile promise a future the congregation has not prepared to pursue?

FM-10.6

Fact, Link, and Name Verification

Check What Can Be Checked

Purpose

This audit ensures that candidates do not encounter preventable errors in the profile or its supporting materials.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Verify

- ☐ Congregational name and location
- ☐ Denominational and presbytery information
- ☐ Membership, attendance, budget, compensation, and staffing figures
- ☐ Community statistics and dates
- ☐ Names and descriptions of ministry partners
- ☐ Every website, document, video, and application link
- ☐ Contact information
- ☐ Required fields, word limits, and submission instructions

Record the Source

Fact checked:

Source and date:

Person responsible:

FM-10.7

Privacy and Appropriate Disclosure

Tell the Truth Without Misusing Someone's Story

Purpose

This review protects individuals while ensuring that candidates receive the material information they need for discernment.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Ask of Every Sensitive Detail

Is this ours to tell?

Has permission been given when a person could be identified?

Can the truth be stated without exposing someone unnecessarily?

Does this belong in the public profile, a private candidate resource, or a later conversation?

Would withholding it create a materially misleading picture of the ministry?

Do Not Use Confidentiality as Concealment

Privacy protects people. It should not be used to hide organizational realities, recurring conflict, financial pressure, staffing instability, or other matters a candidate reasonably needs to understand.

A matter that belongs in later conversation:

Who is responsible for ensuring it is discussed?

FM-10.8

The Congregational Recognition Test

Does This Still Sound Like Us?

Purpose

This exercise gives the congregation an appropriate opportunity to recognize the profile without turning final review into another line-by-line writing committee.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Share the Draft with a Representative Group

Invite people from different generations, tenures, roles, and experiences of congregational life.

Ask Recognition Questions

What feels unmistakably true?

What important part of congregational life can you not yet see?

Where does the language sound more polished than lived?

Where does it describe only the center of the congregation?

What would you want a prospective pastor to ask after reading this?

Receive Feedback by Theme

Do not invite group editing of individual words. Listen for recurring concerns, missing perspectives, and claims that need evidence or qualification.

FM-10.9

Final Authorization

Know Who Is Releasing the Profile

Purpose

This tool creates clear ownership of the final document, its supporting resources, and the commitments they contain.

Time

30 minutes.

Confirm Authority

The body authorized to approve the profile is:

The date of approval is:

The person authorized to submit or publish it is:

Before Approval, Confirm

- ☐ The final version is clearly identified.
- ☐ All required approvals have been received.
- ☐ Compensation, staffing, and organizational information agree across documents.
- ☐ Deeper candidate resources are complete and accessible.
- ☐ The committee understands the commitments the profile makes.
- ☐ A secure master copy and an editable working copy have been preserved.

The Approval Question

Can we release this profile as a truthful invitation and stand behind it in the conversations that follow?

FM-10.10

The Release Plan

Make the Profile Ready to Travel

Purpose

This exercise coordinates publication, distribution, response, and version control after authorization.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Release Details

Submission or publication date:

Denominational platform or contact:

Candidate resource page or packet location:

Primary contact for candidate questions:

Backup contact:

Version Control

Use one clearly named final file. Remove superseded drafts from shared folders used by the search team. Record any post-release correction and make it everywhere the profile appears.

Response Plan

Who monitors inquiries?

How quickly will candidates receive acknowledgment?

What material will be sent before an initial conversation?

FM-10.11

From Profile to Conversation

Carry the Discernment into the Search

Purpose

This handoff prevents the search process from losing the discoveries that shaped the profile.

Time

60 minutes.

Prepare the Search Team

Review together:

the congregation's central identity and lived values;
 the relationship between congregation and community;
 the vocation beginning to emerge;
 the ministry priorities named for the next season;
 the gifts already present in the congregation;
 the pastoral gifts that may complement them;
 the challenges and unfinished questions that require honest conversation.

Questions the Profile Should Open

A question about vocation:

A question about ministry partnership:

A question about the congregation's challenges:

A question about the candidate's own discernment:

Do Not Treat the Profile as a Script

The profile begins a conversation. The search team's task is to listen for how a candidate's story and gifts meet the congregation's story, place, vocation, and ministry.

FM-10.12

A Prayer for Release

Trust the Work Beyond the Document

Purpose

Use this prayer when the profile has been approved and is ready to leave the committee's hands.

Gather the committee around the final profile.

Place beside it one story, image, map, or other sign of the discernment that shaped the work.

Then pray:

God who has accompanied us through memory, listening, recognition, and writing,
 receive these words.

Where they are clear, let them open understanding.

Where they are incomplete, let honest conversation deepen them.

Where they carry hope, keep that hope rooted in truth.

Where they name challenge, give us courage to remain present.

Bless the pastors who will read them.

Grant freedom to those for whom this is not a call, and holy curiosity to those who may recognize something of their vocation here.

Prepare this congregation not merely to choose a pastor, but to become a faithful partner in ministry.

Release us from the illusion that the right document can secure the future.

Teach us to trust the living discernment these words are meant to begin.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

The profile has left the committee's hands. The discernment has not ended.

Every candidate will read the document through the lens of a different life, ministry, family, and sense of call. Their questions may reveal places where the congregation still needs clarity; their stories may enlarge what the committee imagined pastoral partnership could become.

Keep the deeper resources alive. Keep the commitments in the profile visible. Keep returning to the sequence that shaped the work:

Identity → Place → Vocation → Ministry → Gifts → Partnership

And when congregation and pastor begin speaking, listen for more than compatibility.

Listen for recognition.

Can we tell the truth together?

Can our gifts become partnership?

Can we imagine joining the work God is already doing in this place?

The Ministry Discernment Profile has done its work when the words give way to those living questions.