



NAVIGATING PASTORAL TRANSITIONS

A FIELD GUIDE SERIES FOR CONGREGATIONS AND PASTORS

REMEMBERING

A FIELD GUIDE



REDISCOVERING
THE STORY
GOD HAS
BEEN WRITING

A FIELD GUIDE



HELPING PASTORS AND CONGREGATIONS
DISCERN THE WAY FORWARD—TOGETHER

REMEMBERING

Rediscovering the Story God Has Been Writing

A Field Guide in the Navigating Pastoral Transitions Series

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About This Field Guide

Every congregation carries a story.

Some parts are recorded in anniversary books, Session minutes, photographs, newsletters, and annual reports. Much more lives in people.

It lives in stories told over coffee.

In the memory of the Sunday the sanctuary was overflowing.

In the mission project that changed someone's life.

In the pastor whose ministry shaped a generation.

In the conflict people still remember but seldom discuss.

In the child who grew up in the congregation and eventually became a pastor.

In the family the church accompanied through tragedy.

In the ministry that failed.

In the risk that changed everything.

These stories are more than memories.

Together they reveal who a congregation has become.

That makes remembering especially important during a pastoral transition. Before asking where God may be leading next, a congregation needs to understand the story through which God has already been forming this particular community of faith.

This Field Guide is designed to help you do that.

It is not a congregational history project. You do not need to reconstruct every date, pastorate, building campaign, or organizational change.

Nor is it an exercise in nostalgia.

Its purpose is discernment.

We remember in order to ask:

What does our story help us understand about who God has formed us to be?

This volume has two parts.

Part One — The Field Guide explores the spiritual practice of remembering: telling stories, discovering lived values, recognizing God’s faithfulness, receiving difficult memories honestly, rediscovering gifts, and allowing memory to awaken hope.

Part Two — The Field Manual provides practical resources for doing this work together. It will include storytelling exercises, congregational timeline activities, interview guides, reflection tools, and other resources that help turn remembering into a shared congregational practice.

Throughout the Field Guide, references point toward those resources. The Guide can therefore remain reflective and readable while the Field Manual carries the practical tools for congregations ready to undertake the work.

The two parts belong together.

But the goal of both is the same:

Not simply to remember where you have been.

To understand more clearly who you have become.

And to receive your story as a gift God will carry with you into the future.

Introduction

Remembering Forward

Christians are people who live by remembered stories.

We tell the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ruth and Naomi, David and the prophets, Mary and Joseph, Jesus and the disciples, Paul and the early Church.

We preserve these stories for more than the events they recount.

We hold them sacred because they help us interpret the present.

Again and again, the Church returns to Scripture asking:

What does this remembered story help us see about our own time?

What does it reveal about God?

What does it teach us about ourselves?

How does it help us recognize what faithfulness might require of us now?

The Exodus is not remembered merely so that we know Israel once escaped slavery. It becomes a story through which God's people learn to recognize liberation, covenant, dependence, fear, trust, and God's faithfulness.

The wilderness is not merely geography. It becomes a way of understanding seasons when the familiar is behind us and the destination has not yet appeared.

The exile becomes more than an ancient historical event. It helps God's people interpret displacement, loss, longing, and the possibility of faithfulness in circumstances they did not choose.

The resurrection is not simply something Christians remember happened to Jesus. It becomes the story through which we understand every place where death appears to have spoken the final word.

Remembered stories become interpretive points for the present and the future.

Congregations have sacred stories too.

They are not Scripture, and we should never confuse the two. But they preserve the memory of a particular people trying to live faithfully in a particular place.

There are stories of courage.

Stories of generosity.

Stories of conflict and reconciliation.

Stories of people who noticed something that needed to be done and acted.

Stories of ministries that flourished.

Stories of ministries that failed.

Stories of people who arrived as strangers and became family.

Stories of moments when a congregation risked something because it believed God was calling.

Some stories disclose their meaning only years later.

These memories do more than tell us where we have been.

They help us interpret where we are.

A congregation facing an uncertain future can remember another season when the future was uncertain.

A congregation wondering whether it can change can remember times when it changed before.

A congregation questioning whether it has enough can remember what happened when people offered the gifts they had.

A congregation struggling to understand its identity can listen again to the stories in which its deepest values became visible.

This is why remembering belongs in a pastoral transition.

Before asking what comes next, a congregation needs to understand the story it is already carrying.

Not because the future should reproduce the past.

It shouldn't.

The community has changed.

The congregation has changed.

The world has changed.

The Holy Spirit continues to lead the Church toward encounters and possibilities it has not yet imagined.

But the past gives us interpretive wisdom.

It helps us recognize patterns.

It uncovers values.

It restores gifts we may have forgotten.

It exposes mistakes we need not repeat.

It recalls risks we once found the courage to take.

Above all, it reminds us of the faithfulness of God.

The question of this Field Guide, therefore, is not simply:

What happened here?

It is:

What does our remembered story help us understand about who we are, where we are now, and how we might faithfully enter the future?

That is remembering forward.

We look back so that we can see more clearly where we stand.

From there, we begin to recognize where God may be leading next.

Chapter One

Telling the Story

What Has Shaped Us?

Ask a congregation to tell its history and someone will probably reach for a list.

The church was organized in 1923.

The first sanctuary was built in 1928.

The education building was added in 1957.

The congregation called a new pastor in 1974.

The sanctuary was renovated in 1996.

All of those facts may be important.

But they are not yet the story.

Stories begin when someone says:

“Let me tell you what happened.”

The year the education building opened may matter less than the members who mortgaged their homes because they believed the congregation needed room for children.

The date a food pantry began may matter less than the person who noticed families arriving at the church for help and wondered whether the congregation could respond differently.

The name of a former pastor may matter less than the night that pastor sat in a hospital waiting room with a frightened family until morning.

A chronology records events.

Stories disclose the meaning people have made of those events.

Begin with What People Remember

One of the simplest ways to begin this work is to ask people:

When you think about this congregation, what story comes to mind?

Do not begin by correcting dates.

Do not ask whether it belongs in the official history.

Listen.

Someone may remember a Christmas pageant.

Someone else may remember a hurricane.

A longtime member may tell about the congregation integrating its worship when that decision required courage.

A teenager may remember the youth leader who noticed when she was struggling.

A parent may remember the congregation surrounding the family when a child became seriously ill.

A neighbor who never joined the church may remember the congregation opening its building after a disaster.

These are congregational stories too.

In fact, some of the most important stories may never have appeared in Session minutes.

The overview of this transition journey reminds us that attendance, budgets, and buildings tell only part of a congregation's story. The deeper story is often found in changed lives, enduring friendships, acts of compassion, children formed in faith, neighbors who discovered belonging, and moments of grace no annual report could adequately record.

Memory Is Partial

No one remembers the whole story.

Two people may remember the same event differently—not because one is dishonest, but because each stood in a different place and experienced something different.

Congregational records can clarify dates and decisions. They cannot determine which experience mattered most or settle every disputed meaning.

Receive memories as testimony, not verdict. Ask what each account reveals, which other voices are needed, and what remains uncertain.

A trustworthy remembering process does not force many memories into one approved version of the past.

It allows a fuller story to emerge.

Make the Circle Wide

Congregational memory can easily become the memory of the people who have been present longest.

Their stories matter.

But longevity does not create ownership of the story.

Someone who joined six months ago has already experienced something about the congregation.

Ask:

What made you come back after your first visit?

When did you begin to feel that you belonged here?

Children have stories.

Teenagers have stories.

Former members have stories.

Community partners have stories.

Staff members have stories.

People who rarely speak in congregational meetings have stories.

The wider the circle, the fuller—and sometimes more complex—the memory becomes.

A Story from the Field

A congregation once held a storytelling evening expecting its longtime members to carry most of the conversation.

They did.

Then a newer member said:

“May I tell you why I stayed?”

She described arriving at worship during one of the most difficult seasons of her life. She knew almost no one. During the passing of the peace, an older woman greeted her, remembered her name the next Sunday, and eventually invited her to lunch.

“I don’t remember the sermon that first Sunday,” she said.

“But I remember that someone saw me.”

The room grew quiet.

The congregation had been describing itself as friendly for years.

That story revealed something deeper.

They were most themselves when they noticed people.

That became an important interpretive clue.

Practices to Consider

Invite people to bring photographs, bulletins, newsletters, objects, or other items that carry stories.

Create an open timeline and let people add moments they believe mattered.

Ask small groups to tell stories rather than compile accomplishments.

Interview people from different generations.

Invite community partners to tell you what they remember about the congregation.

Throughout the process, keep asking:

Why does this story still matter?

For remembering becomes discernment when we begin to interpret what our stories reveal.

For Conversation

What stories are told most often in our congregation?

Whose stories are seldom heard?

Which moments seem to carry meaning long after the event itself has passed?

What do the stories people remember suggest about what has mattered most to us?

What story would you want someone joining this congregation today to hear?

Chapter Two

Beneath the Stories

Discovering the Values We Have Lived

Congregations often have lists of values.

Welcoming.

Faithful.

Generous.

Christ-centered.

Mission-minded.

Inclusive.

Caring.

Each is a worthy aspiration.

Yet a list of words does not necessarily tell us what a congregation values.

Stories do.

If hospitality is one of your deepest values, somewhere in your history there should be stories of hospitality.

If mission matters deeply, there should be stories of people moving beyond the church walls.

If children matter, the congregation's decisions should reveal that commitment.

If justice matters, there should be moments when that conviction required something of the congregation.

Values become visible in the choices people make.

Ask the Story to Interpret the Value

Suppose someone says:

“This congregation has always cared about the community.”

Rather than simply writing **community** on a list, ask:

Tell us a story.

When did that care become visible?

What happened?

Who noticed?

What did the congregation do?

What did it cost?

What changed because of it?

The story may confirm the value—or complicate it.

Perhaps the congregation cared deeply about one part of the community while rarely noticing another.

Perhaps generosity was strong during crises but less evident in ordinary times.

Perhaps a congregation that thinks of itself as welcoming discovers that most of its stories are about welcoming people who were already comfortable in church.

That discovery is not failure.

It is the beginning of honest discernment.

Aspirational Values and Lived Values

There is nothing wrong with aspirational values.

They tell us who we hope to become.

But remembering asks a different question:

What values have actually shaped us?

A congregation may discover values it never named.

Resilience.

Loyalty.

Education.

Beauty.

Independence.

Service.

Stability.

Risk.

Hospitality.

Tradition.

Adaptability.

Sometimes the deepest values appear not in mission statements, but in the stories people tell with tears in their eyes.

A Story from the Field

Values Have Shadows

A lived value can be a gift while still carrying a shadow.

Loyalty can sustain a congregation through hardship, or make honest disagreement feel like betrayal. Stability can provide trust, or become resistance to necessary change. Independence can encourage initiative, or make it difficult to receive help.

The work is not merely to praise the values you discover. It is to understand how they have shaped your life together: when they served faithfulness, when they narrowed it, and what maturity may require now.

A congregation described itself as deeply committed to Christian education.

Its history certainly supported that claim.

Sunday school had once filled dozens of classrooms. Vacation Bible School had been a major community event. Generations of children had memorized Scripture and learned the stories of faith there.

But as people told stories, something else emerged.

Again and again, they remembered the teachers.

Not curricula.

Not classrooms.

People.

A retired teacher who kept writing birthday cards to former students.

A youth adviser who continued attending graduations years after the students left the program.

A confirmation mentor who stayed connected to a young adult through college.

The deeper value was not simply education.

It was **formation through relationships**.

The distinction mattered.

The old Sunday school structure might never return.

Its vocation to form people through relationships could endure.

That is the difference between preserving a program and carrying forward a value.

What Does This Help Us Understand Now?

That question should accompany every important memory.

Not:

“How can we recreate what worked?”

But:

“What does this story reveal that remains important?”

The program may have belonged to another era.

The value beneath it may remain alive.

Remembering helps us distinguish the two.

For Conversation

Which values appear repeatedly in our stories?

Which values do we claim but have difficulty finding in our history?

What programs from the past expressed values that remain important even though the programs themselves are gone?

What values have we discovered that we have never named?

What do these lived values help us understand about ourselves now?

Chapter Three

Thus Far the Lord Has Helped Us

Remembering God's Faithfulness

The people of God have always given memory a form.

After Israel crossed the Jordan, twelve stones were taken from the river and set up as a memorial.

The stones were not magical.

Their purpose was to awaken a question.

When children asked,

“What do these stones mean?”

the story would be told again.

Later, after Israel had endured danger and uncertainty, Samuel raised a stone and named it Ebenezer:

“Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

The stone did more than mark the event.

It interpreted the event.

We were not alone.

That is one of the deepest purposes of Christian remembering.

Looking backward, we sometimes recognize what remained hidden while we were living through it.

God Was Faithful Then

No congregation is a stranger to uncertainty.

A beloved pastor left.

A building became too small.

Or too large.

Money became scarce.

A ministry ended.

The neighborhood changed.

A conflict divided people.

A storm damaged the building.

A pandemic emptied the sanctuary.

At the time, people may have wondered:

What will happen to us?

Years later, they may see the story differently.

Not because everything worked out as they hoped.

But because the congregation continued.

People adapted.

Unexpected leaders emerged.

New relationships formed.

A ministry ended and another appeared.

People discovered capacities they had not known they possessed.

Looking back, they could name ways God had remained present.

Then,

here,

among these people.

Remembering as a Spiritual Practice

This kind of remembering requires more than recounting events.

It asks us to reflect.

What happened?

What did we experience?

What did we learn?

Where do we now recognize grace?

How were we changed?

What did we discover about God?

This rhythm of reflection and recognition is explored more fully in *Living God's Call Together*, which invites congregations to Reflect, Listen, Recognize, and Respond as they discern God's activity in their common life.

The important thing here is not to force God into every outcome.

Christian remembering does not require us to say that everything that happened was God's will.

Some things were harmful.

Some decisions were wrong.

Some losses remain losses.

Rather, faith asks:

Where was God present in the midst of what happened?

That is a different question.

A Story from the Field

A congregation remembered a financial crisis decades earlier.

At first, the story sounded like a stewardship success.

The budget had collapsed.

Leaders appealed to the congregation.

People gave generously.

The crisis passed.

But when the story was explored more deeply, another memory surfaced.

One member had quietly begun calling people who had stopped attending because she feared financial anxiety was causing the congregation to become so focused on money that people were being forgotten.

Those conversations brought several families back into relationship with the church.

Years later, someone said:

"I always thought the story was that we raised enough money."

Another replied:

“Maybe the story was that we remembered what the money was for.”

That is interpretation.

A remembered event had become a source of theological wisdom.

Build Your Ebenezer

Every congregation has places where it can say:

Thus far the Lord has helped us.

Name them.

Tell those stories.

Let them remind you: today’s uncertainty is not the first through which God has accompanied this congregation.

Memory cannot tell you exactly what comes next.

It can give you courage to enter it.

For Conversation

When has our congregation faced an uncertain future before?

Where can we now recognize God’s presence that was difficult to see at the time?

Who helped us recognize hope?

What did those seasons teach us about God?

What would our congregation name as its Ebenezer—its reminder that “thus far the Lord has helped us”?

Chapter Four

Remembering the Whole Story

Gratitude Without Nostalgia, Honesty Without Shame

Every family has stories it enjoys telling.

Every family also has stories people would rather avoid.

Congregations are no different.

There are anniversaries we celebrate and conflicts we hope no one mentions.

Pastors we remember with affection and pastors whose names change the temperature of the room.

Decisions that make us proud.

Decisions we wish we could make again.

People we welcomed.

People we wounded.

Risks that succeeded.

Opportunities we missed.

Faithful remembering makes room for the whole story.

Nostalgia Edits

Nostalgia is selective memory.

It remembers full sanctuaries but forgets who was excluded.

It remembers successful programs but forgets exhausted volunteers.

It remembers beloved leaders but forgets the conflicts surrounding their ministry.

It remembers “the good old days” without asking: Good for whom?

Gratitude is different.

Gratitude can receive the gifts of the past without pretending the past was perfect.

Honest remembering can hold gratitude and truth together.

Painful Stories Need Wisdom

Not every painful congregational story needs to be publicly retold.

Some involve confidential pastoral relationships.

Some contain trauma.

Some belong partly to people who are no longer present.

Some disputes have been rehearsed so often that another retelling would deepen division rather than produce wisdom.

Remembering does not require reopening every case.

Nor does it ask a congregation to decide, decades later, who was right.

The question is:

What wisdom does this experience offer us now?

Perhaps the congregation learned that avoiding conflict does not create peace.

Perhaps it learned that major decisions require wider participation.

Perhaps it learned how easily anxiety can turn disagreement into suspicion.

Perhaps it discovered that reconciliation is possible.

Perhaps it owes an apology.

Perhaps it simply needs to acknowledge that something painful happened and stop pretending otherwise.

A Story from the Field

Some Memories Require More Than a Congregational Conversation

A storytelling gathering is not therapy, mediation, an investigation, or a disciplinary process.

When memories involve abuse, misconduct, trauma, legal concerns, or unresolved harm, leaders should not ask a public group to carry work for which it is not equipped.

Appropriate denominational authorities, safeguarding professionals, mediators, therapists, or legal counsel may be needed. Confidentiality and the well-being of those who were harmed matter more than completing an exercise.

Faithful remembering includes knowing when to pause, protect, and seek qualified help.

A church had experienced a painful conflict years earlier.

Whenever it surfaced, people quickly changed the subject.

“We’re past that,” someone would say.

During a remembering conversation, a newer member finally asked:

“If you’re past it, why does everyone become uncomfortable whenever it is mentioned?”

No one answered immediately.

Eventually, an older member said:

“Maybe we’re not past it. Maybe we just stopped talking about it.”

The congregation did not spend months reconstructing the dispute.

Instead, leaders asked a more useful question:

What did that season teach us about how we want to handle disagreement now?

That conversation drew from the old conflict something the congregation had never received: wisdom.

Memory Without Shame

Congregations sometimes discover things about their history they wish were different.

That does not require shame.

Christian faith has never depended on pretending that God’s people always get things right.

Scripture itself refuses that kind of storytelling.

Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Paul, and the early Church are remembered with remarkable honesty.

Their failures remain within the sacred story.

But they do not become the final word.

Grace makes honest memory possible.

We can tell the truth because our identity does not depend upon proving we have always been right.

For Conversation

Which parts of our story are easiest to celebrate?

Which are difficult to discuss?

Are there memories we have romanticized?

What have painful seasons taught us?

Is there anything from our past that needs acknowledgment, repentance, reconciliation, or simply a more truthful telling?

How can we receive our whole story without allowing its hardest chapters to define us?

Chapter Five

What We Carry Forward

Recognizing the Gifts Hidden in Our History

When congregations talk about resources, they often begin with numbers.

How many members?

How much money?

How large is the endowment?

How much building space?

How many staff?

Those resources matter.

But they are only part of what a congregation carries.

A congregation's history creates assets that may never appear on a balance sheet.

Trust.

Relationships.

Reputation.

Experience.

Skills.

Community partnerships.

Institutional memory.

Resilience.

Spiritual practices.

The ability to organize.

The ability to care.

The ability to survive.

The ability to begin again.

Remembering helps congregations rediscover these gifts.

What Has God Entrusted to Us?

Consider a congregation that once operated a large children's ministry.

The program no longer exists.

It would be easy to conclude:

"We don't have children's ministry anymore."

But memory might reveal something else.

Perhaps members learned how to create safe spaces for children.

Perhaps retired educators remain in the congregation.

Perhaps the church has relationships with local schools.

Perhaps the building contains excellent classroom space.

Perhaps people still care deeply about children even though the old program disappeared.

The program is gone.

The gifts are not.

That distinction can transform how a congregation understands itself.

Small Does Not Mean Empty

This is especially important for congregations that are smaller than they once were.

Decline can become a story large enough to swallow every other truth.

"We used to have..."

"We don't have enough..."

"We can't do what we once did..."

Each statement may be factually true.

Yet scarcity can become so dominant that a congregation no longer sees what remains.

A congregation of forty people may contain a retired principal, a nurse, two gifted musicians, a carpenter, a social worker, three excellent cooks, people who know every community leader in town, a building used only three days a week, and seventy years of trust in the neighborhood.

That is not nothing.

It is a real abundance—though not an unlimited one—waiting to be recognized.

The question is not:

Do we still possess everything we once had?

It is:

What has God placed in our hands now?

A Story from the Field

Gifts Must Be Available, Not Merely Remembered

A gift evident in the past is not automatically available in the present.

People may be tired. Skills may no longer be present. A trusted relationship may have changed. A building may need repair before it can serve a new purpose.

Remembering should reveal possibility without assigning old expectations to people who no longer have the capacity to carry them.

Ask not only which gifts exist but also whether they are available, sustainable, and freely offered now.

One small congregation described itself as having “almost no resources.”

Someone asked them to list everything they knew how to do.

The list kept growing.

Teach.

Cook.

Repair things.

Organize events.

Visit people.

Garden.

Sing.

Manage money.

Listen.

Work with children.

Navigate community agencies.

Make people feel at home.

Then they listed their relationships.

Schools.

Nonprofits.

Neighborhood associations.

Local businesses.

Other churches.

By the end of the exercise, someone laughed.

“Apparently we’re only poor if we count money.”

Remembering had made abundance visible.

Receive the Gift, Not Necessarily the Form

The future does not require reproducing the ministries through which these gifts first appeared.

A congregation that once ran a large youth program does not necessarily need another youth program.

But perhaps its gift for mentoring young people still matters.

A congregation that once operated a weekday school may no longer be able to operate one.

But perhaps its commitment to education still belongs to its vocation.

Remember the gift.

Release the form.

That distinction creates room for the Holy Spirit to do something new with gifts rooted deeply in who you already are.

For Conversation

What gifts has our history placed in our hands?

Which gifts have we overlooked because the programs associated with them ended?

What relationships are part of our congregational wealth?

What skills and experiences exist among our people?

Where have we mistaken “smaller” for “having nothing”?

Which gifts do we believe God may be asking us to carry forward?

Chapter Six

Remembering When We Were Most Alive

Recovering Our Capacity for Imagination

Most congregations can remember the moment someone asked:

“What if we...?”

Sometimes the idea worked.

Sometimes it did not.

The question itself mattered.

Someone was imagining.

Congregations often speak about creativity as though it belongs to younger churches, larger churches, growing churches, or churches with innovative pastors.

Their own history frequently tells another story.

They have imagined before.

Remember the Risk, Not Just the Result

Perhaps the congregation started a ministry because someone noticed children going hungry.

Perhaps it opened its building to a group others were reluctant to welcome.

Perhaps worship changed.

Perhaps property was used in a new way.

Perhaps the church partnered with an organization it had never worked with before.

Perhaps someone suggested an idea that initially sounded impossible.

Years later, a successful ministry can look inevitable.

They were not.

Someone had to notice.

Someone had to wonder aloud.

Someone had to persuade.

Someone had to risk.

Remembering that process matters because it reveals something important:

This congregation has been capable of imagination before.

A Story from the Field

Remember the Attempts That Failed

Imagination is not visible only in ideas that succeeded.

Some experiments ended quickly. Some arrived before the congregation was ready; others were poorly designed. Still others served their purpose for a season and then concluded.

Even without producing a program worth repeating, these stories can reveal curiosity, courage, and learning.

A congregation that remembers only its successes may become afraid to experiment. A congregation that can learn from faithful attempts recovers permission to try.

A congregation remembered a community ministry that had become one of its proudest achievements.

People spoke warmly about how successful it had been.

Then someone asked:

“What did people say when it was first proposed?”

The room erupted in laughter.

Apparently, many had thought it was a terrible idea.

Too expensive.

Too difficult.

Not really the church’s responsibility.

Someone remembered saying:

“That will never work.”

Yet it did.

Suddenly, the successful ministry was no longer the most important memory.

It was the congregation’s capacity to move from **That will never work** to **Let’s try**.

That capacity still belonged to them.

Missionary Imagination

This is one of the practices explored more fully in *Reimagining the Church*: learning to notice what others overlook, becoming curious about the community around us, and recovering the imagination to join what Christ may already be doing there.

Remembering contributes something important to that work.

Before a congregation says,

“We’re not imaginative,”

its history deserves a hearing.

Ask:

When have we noticed something others overlooked?

When have we adapted because circumstances changed?

When did we try something without knowing whether it would succeed?

When did someone outside the congregation change the way we understood our mission?

When did necessity force us to become creative?

When were we surprised by what happened?

These stories bear witness.

Not evidence that the old ministry should return.

They show that imagination belongs to your story.

We Have Imagined Before

Recovering its capacity to imagine may be one of the most hopeful discoveries a congregation can make during transition.

The future remains uncertain.

The neighborhood may be changing.

The church may be smaller.

Old strategies may no longer work.

Yet you are not beginning with nothing.

You carry memories of adaptation.

Courage.

Curiosity.

Creativity.

Faith.

We have imagined before.

Therefore:

We can imagine again.

Not yet.

First there is more listening to do.

Remembering prepares us to listen without requiring the future to resemble the past.

For Conversation

When has our congregation been especially creative?

What risk are we now grateful someone took?

When did circumstances force us to adapt?

What did those experiences reveal about us?

What old story challenges the claim, “We could never do something like that”?

What might happen if we remembered ourselves as people capable of imagination?

Chapter Seven

The Story We Tell About Ourselves

Choosing a Faithful Narrative

Every congregation tells a story about itself.

Often, it does so without realizing it.

“We are a family church.”

“We’re the church that cares about mission.”

“We’ve always been traditional.”

“We used to be the largest church in town.”

“We’ve been through a lot.”

“We’re getting old.”

“Young people don’t come here anymore.”

“We tried changing once.”

“We don’t have enough people.”

“We are survivors.”

Each of these stories may contain truth.

None contains the whole truth.

Repeated often enough, however, a congregational story can begin to function like destiny.

Stories Shape What We Can Imagine

Consider the difference between:

“We’re a dying church.”

and:

“We are a smaller congregation learning what faithfulness looks like in a new season.”

Neither sentence denies the decline.

But they interpret it differently.

Or consider:

“We don’t have young families anymore.”

and:

“We have not yet learned how to build meaningful relationships with the young families who now live around us.”

The first closes the story.

The second leaves the story open to curiosity.

Faithful narratives do not conceal difficult facts.

They place those facts inside a larger story without diminishing their weight.

Who Gets to Tell the Story?

Sometimes a congregation’s dominant story belongs to one generation.

Or one family.

Or one former pastor.

Or one painful conflict.

Or one period of extraordinary growth.

Remembering asks whether that story is spacious enough for everyone.

What would newer members say?

What would children say?

What would neighbors say?

What would people who left say?

What would the community organizations that use your building say?

Different voices need not invalidate the congregation’s story.

They deepen and enlarge it.

A Story from the Field

A Faithful Narrative Remains Open

No sentence should become the definitive description of a living congregation.

The story you tell at the end of this process should be truthful enough to guide you, yet humble enough to be revised by what you hear next.

Remembering offers an identity from which to listen. It does not give a congregation the last word about itself.

A congregation repeatedly described itself this way:

“We’re not what we used to be.”

It was true.

Membership had declined.

The choir was smaller.

Several programs had ended.

But after weeks of remembering, someone finally asked:

“Why is the congregation we were twenty-five years ago the standard by which the congregation God has given us today must be judged?”

That question changed the conversation.

They had been treating one period of their history as the definitive version of the church.

It wasn’t.

It was one chapter—

important,

beloved,

but still only one chapter.

The story was continuing.

A Truthful Story Spacious Enough for Hope

The goal is not positive thinking.

It is not replacing every difficult sentence with an optimistic one.

It is learning to tell the truth while leaving room for God.

Perhaps:

We have experienced significant loss, and we have also discovered remarkable resilience.

Perhaps:

We have made mistakes in welcoming people, and we are learning to become a more generous community.

Perhaps:

Our congregation is smaller than it once was, but our relationships with the community are stronger.

Perhaps:

We have often resisted change, yet our own history contains moments when faithful change renewed us.

These are not slogans, but interpretations.

Through them, memory becomes wisdom.

For Conversation

What sentences do we repeat about ourselves?

Which are still true, and which were once true but no longer are?

Which stories give us courage, and which diminish us?

Whose perspective is missing from the story we usually tell, and how might that perspective help us tell the truth while leaving room for hope?

Chapter Eight

From Memory to Hope

Carrying the Story Forward

You have been looking backward.

Now notice what the looking has made possible.

You have not simply collected memories.

You have begun interpreting them.

You have heard stories that reveal what has shaped this congregation.

You have recognized values that have become woven into your common life.

You have remembered seasons when God's faithfulness became visible.

You have made room for difficult chapters without allowing them to define the whole story.

You have rediscovered gifts hidden inside old ministries and forgotten relationships.

You have remembered that this congregation has imagined, adapted, risked, and begun again before.

And you have listened to the story you tell about yourselves.

Together, these discoveries change how you stand in the present.

Hope Has a Memory

Christian hope is not optimism.

Optimism says:

"Everything will probably work out."

Hope says:

"Whatever comes, God has not finished with us."

Memory gives that hope substance.

We remember deliverance.

We remember wilderness.

We remember exile and return.

We remember cross and resurrection.

Within the smaller story of a congregation, we remember moments when an apparent ending became the beginning of something we could not yet see.

God was faithful then.

We trust God now.

Do Not Rush Ahead

This is an important moment in the transition.

You may be tempted to turn everything you have learned into a plan.

Don't.

Not yet.

Remembering has helped you understand yourselves.

It has not yet told you what your community needs.

It has not told you where new relationships are waiting.

It has not told you what neighbors are experiencing.

It has not told you where Christ may already be at work beyond the congregation's walls.

Those discoveries require a different posture.

Listening.

For now, receive what remembering has given.

Perhaps your congregation can say:

This is who we have been.

This is what God has taught us.

These are the gifts entrusted to us.

These are the mistakes from which we have learned.

This is how we have changed.

This is where we have seen grace.

This is why we can enter the future with hope.

For this movement, that is enough.

A Story from the Field

At the conclusion of a remembering process, one congregation was asked:

“So what should we do next?”

A member answered:

“I don’t know yet.”

Then she smiled.

“But I know we’re not starting from nothing anymore.”

This may be remembering’s gift.

The future is still unknown.

But you know more clearly who is entering it.

For Conversation

What have we rediscovered about ourselves?

What surprised us?

What gives us gratitude?

What gives us courage?

What have we learned that we need to carry forward?

What do we now trust about God that will help us enter the next movement of this transition?

Epilogue

Now Turn and Look Around

Remembering begins with a backward glance.

Faithful remembering eventually turns us toward the present.

We have listened to the stories behind us.

Now we stand in the present.

We know more about the people we have become.

We know something about the values woven into our life together.

We have remembered gifts.

We have acknowledged wounds.

We have rediscovered courage.

We have recognized places where God's faithfulness becomes clearer in retrospect.

Christian vocation, however, is never discovered by looking backward alone.

God has placed this congregation here.

In this neighborhood.

In this town.

In this city.

At this moment.

Around you are people whose stories you do not yet know.

Families carrying hopes and anxieties.

Schools facing challenges.

Businesses opening and closing.

Neighbors arriving.

Neighbors leaving.

People experiencing loneliness.

Communities changing.

Organizations doing remarkable work.

People longing for belonging, purpose, friendship, justice, healing, and hope.

Somewhere in the midst of it all, Christ is already at work.

The next question is not yet:

What should our church do?

The next question is:

What do we need to hear?

That requires a different posture.

We have spent time telling our own stories.

Now curiosity turns us toward the stories around us.

We listen to one another with fresh ears.

We listen to people who know the congregation well.

We listen to people who barely know it at all.

We listen to neighbors.

Community leaders.

Children.

Young adults.

People who will never enter our sanctuary unless we first meet them somewhere else.

Beneath and among those voices, we listen for the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Remembering has given us a clearer identity from which to listen.

Now the circle widens.

That is the work of the next Field Guide:

Listening

We have remembered where we have been.

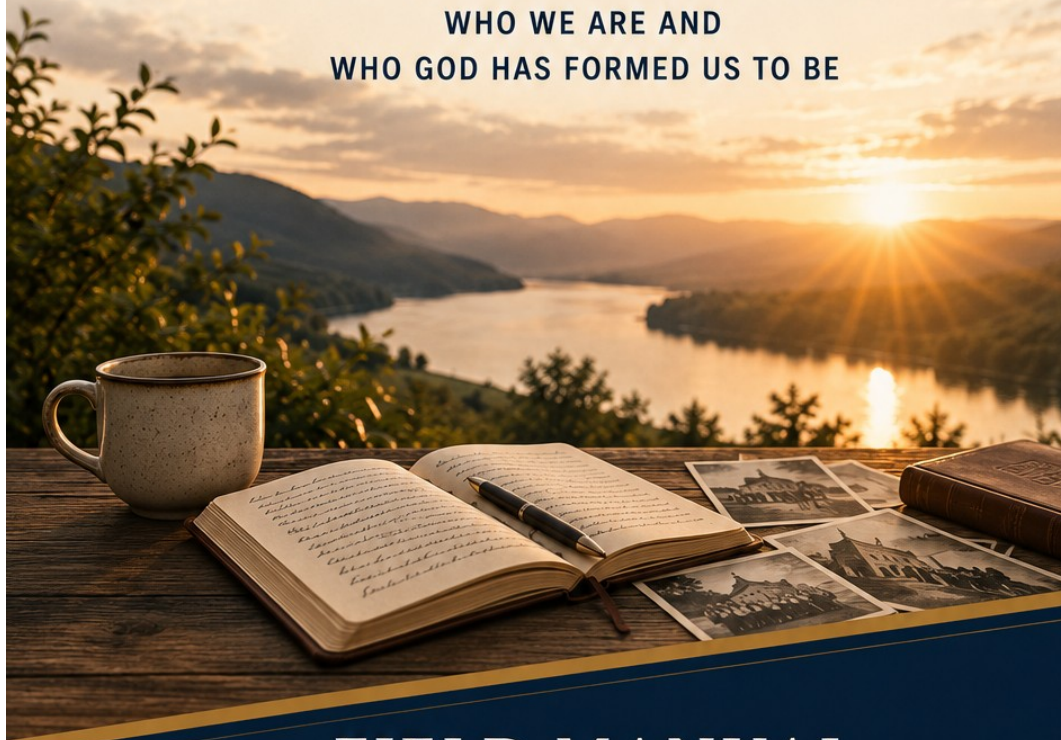
Now let us pay attention to where we are.



REMEMBERING 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



CARE FOR PEOPLE



LAUNCH WITH HOPE

REMEMBERING

Field Manual

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Chapter One Resources

Telling the Story

What Has Shaped Us?

Remembering begins with stories.

Not dates alone.

Not lists of pastors.

Not buildings constructed or budgets adopted.

Those things help locate the story, but they are not the story itself.

The resources in this chapter are designed to help a congregation remember together. They provide several different ways of doing that because congregations are different. A congregation of forty people may be able to gather nearly everyone around tables on a Saturday morning. A congregation of four hundred may need several gatherings, interviews, and small-group conversations. Some congregations have extensive archives. Others carry most of their history in the memories of people.

You do not need to use every resource in this chapter.

In fact, you probably should not.

Choose the combination that will help you hear a wide and representative collection of stories. The goal is not to document everything that has happened. It is to gather enough of the congregation's remembered life that patterns, values, gifts, wounds, and signs of God's faithfulness can begin to emerge.

For now, resist the urge to interpret too quickly.

First, let the stories speak.

How to Use This Field Manual

This Field Manual is a menu, not a checklist to complete from beginning to end. The goal is a faithful remembering process, not the exhaustion of every exercise. Begin with the Field Guide, then choose the smallest combination of resources that will gather representative stories, deepen interpretation, and yield a clear harvest for the next chapter.

Choose a Pathway

Each chapter identifies a core process. Use one of these three pathways:

- Core pathway — Complete the resources named as core in the chapter introduction.
- Expanded pathway — Add one or two supplemental resources when they will broaden participation, include missing voices, or address a particular congregational need.
- Targeted pathway — Use selected resources with a smaller group when the full congregation has limited time or energy. Return the harvest to the wider congregation for recognition and correction.

Do not add an activity simply because it is available. Let every resource serve a clear purpose in the larger journey.

Plan the Whole Movement Before You Begin

Before scheduling the first gathering, map the Remembering movement from start to finish. Decide who will coordinate it, which resources form the core pathway, when the congregation will see the emerging work, and how the final Remembering Discernment Summary will be approved and handed into Listening. Leave enough space between gatherings for leaders to organize what they have heard.

Keep One Working Archive

Create one secure working archive for timelines, story cards, interview notes, photographs, chapter harvests, and drafts. Label materials by chapter and resource number. Record the source and date when possible. Separate material intended for broad sharing from confidential or restricted material. Chapter Eight will help you decide what to preserve, protect, or release.

Safeguard People and Stories

Remembering can surface grief, conflict, exclusion, misconduct, and trauma. Before inviting stories, tell participants how notes will be used, what may be shared, and what cannot remain confidential. Carry these boundaries throughout the process:

- Invite participation; do not pressure anyone to disclose a painful experience.
- Do not promise confidentiality in a group setting. Ask permission before recording, quoting, attributing, or circulating a personal story.
- Do not use congregational storytelling as therapy, mediation, investigation, or adjudication.
- If a disclosure involves abuse, danger, misconduct, or a reporting obligation, pause the activity and follow applicable safeguarding, denominational, legal, and professional procedures.
- Provide accessible ways to participate, including written responses, interviews, small groups, remote options, and alternatives for people who cannot attend.
- Plan for pastoral support and qualified facilitation when the congregation carries unresolved trauma or conflict.

Separate Facilitation from Discernment

Facilitators protect the process: they explain the purpose, invite participation, keep time, make room for quieter voices, and uphold agreed boundaries. The coordinating team gathers and organizes what is heard. The congregation recognizes, questions, and refines the emerging interpretation. No facilitator should decide alone what the congregation's story comes to mean.

Produce One Harvest from Each Chapter

Preserve the working material, but carry forward only a concise chapter harvest:

- Chapter One — formative stories and turning points;
- Chapter Two — values demonstrated in lived choices;
- Chapter Three — stories in which God's faithfulness is recognized;
- Chapter Four — wisdom from difficult or contested chapters;
- Chapter Five — gifts and capacities available now;
- Chapter Six — conditions that have supported imagination and adaptation;
- Chapter Seven — a faithful narrative the congregation can carry;
- Chapter Eight — the Remembering Discernment Summary and questions for Listening.

Know When to Stop

A good Remembering process is broad enough to reveal patterns and honest enough to unsettle easy conclusions. It need not recover every event, reconcile every memory, or settle every question. When the chapter harvest is clear, move forward. Memory is a bridge, not a destination.

FM-1.1 — Choosing Your Remembering Process

Purpose

This resource helps leaders design a remembering process appropriate to the size, history, energy, and circumstances of the congregation.

There is no single correct way to remember.

The best process is one that:

- invites broad participation;
- allows people to tell stories rather than simply report facts;
- includes voices from different generations and periods of congregational life;
- makes room for differing memories;
- does not require everyone to attend every event;
- gathers enough material for later discernment without exhausting the congregation.

Before You Begin

Gather a small leadership group responsible for coordinating Remembering.

This might be:

- the transition team;
- the Session or governing board;
- a subgroup of the search committee;
- a specially appointed Remembering Team;
- several people with gifts for facilitation and listening.

Do not automatically appoint only the congregation's historians.

Historical knowledge is valuable, but this process is about **meaning**, not simply historical accuracy.

Include people who are curious about the congregation's story.

Choose Your Core Process

Most congregations will benefit from choosing **one primary congregational event** and then supplementing it with one or two additional methods.

Option A — World Café

Best when:

- you want broad participation;
- people enjoy conversation;
- you want to hear many stories quickly;
- you have a moderate or large group.

Typical time: 90 minutes to 2 hours.

See FM-1.3.

Option B — Congregational History Timeline

Best when:

- the congregation has a long or complex history;
- people benefit from seeing the whole story visually;
- different generations know different parts of the story;
- you want to identify turning points and periods of change.

Typical time: 90 minutes to 2 hours.

See FM-1.2.

Option C — Story Circles

Best when:

- deeper storytelling is desired;
- the congregation is relatively small;
- quieter voices need room;
- relationships are strong enough for more personal sharing.

Typical time: 60–90 minutes.

See FM-1.4.

Option D — Gallery Walk

Best when:

- the congregation has photographs, documents, objects, and other historical materials;
- visual memory helps people tell stories;
- you want an intergenerational event;
- people may participate at different times.

Typical time: 60–90 minutes, or the display may remain available for several weeks.

See FM-1.5.

Add Supplemental Voices

After the primary event, ask:

Who did we not hear?

You might then add:

- several oral-history interviews;
- an intergenerational story exchange;
- conversations with former members;
- interviews with community partners;
- stories collected from people unable to attend.

A Simple Remembering Process

For many congregations, this will be enough:

Gathering One: Congregational Timeline

Gathering Two: World Café or Story Circles

Between Gatherings: Selected interviews

Final Step: Harvest the stories using FM-1.10

Do not confuse thoroughness with faithfulness.

You do not need every story.

You need enough stories to begin seeing the congregation more truthfully.

FM-1.2 — The Congregational History Timeline

Purpose

A congregational timeline helps people see their history as a shared story rather than a collection of isolated memories.

The timeline provides chronology.

The conversation provides meaning.

Time

90 minutes to 2 hours.

For congregations with a long history, the timeline can remain displayed for several weeks so people can continue adding memories.

Materials

You will need:

- a long roll of butcher paper or several sheets of flip-chart paper;
- painter's tape;
- large markers;
- sticky notes;
- pens;
- photographs or historical materials if available;
- dots or stickers for identifying significant moments.

Prepare the Timeline

Create a long horizontal timeline.

Mark years or decades across it.

Include only enough historical information to help people orient themselves.

For example:

1950 — 1960 — 1970 — 1980 — 1990 — 2000 — 2010 — 2020 — Today

Do not fill the timeline beforehand.

The congregation is going to create it.

Opening

The facilitator might say:

Today we are not trying to write the definitive history of this congregation. We are trying to remember the experiences that shaped us.

Some memories will be shared by many people. Others may belong to only one person.

We may remember the same event differently.

That is all right.

We are gathering memories before we begin interpreting them.

Round One — What Happened?

Invite participants to walk along the timeline and add events they remember.

Examples might include:

- founding of the congregation;
- pastoral changes;
- building projects;
- new ministries;
- ministries that ended;
- community crises;
- significant deaths;
- financial difficulties;
- periods of growth;
- periods of decline;
- conflicts;
- mission initiatives;
- worship changes;
- community partnerships;
- disasters;
- celebrations;
- denominational events;
- cultural or community changes that affected the congregation.

Encourage participants to add events that might never appear in an official history.

Someone may write:

“The year the youth group began meeting at our house.”

Another:

“When the factory closed.”

Another:

“The first same-sex couple joined.”

Another:

“A hurricane destroyed the fellowship hall.”

Another:

“We opened the church every night for two weeks after the storm.”

These may reveal more about congregational identity than the date an education building was constructed.

Round Two — Tell the Stories

Once the timeline begins filling, gather people near it.

Ask:

Which of these entries has a story behind it that we should hear?

Allow people to tell short stories.

Keep asking:

What happened?

Why do you remember it?

Why did it matter?

Do not yet ask:

What should we do because of this?

That comes later.

Round Three — High Points, Low Points, and Turning Points

Give participants three kinds of marks or stickers.

Ask them to identify:

High Points

When did the congregation experience unusual energy, joy, vitality, or faithfulness?

Low Points

When did the congregation experience significant difficulty, loss, conflict, disappointment, or uncertainty?

Turning Points

When did something happen after which the congregation was somehow different?

One event may receive more than one designation.

A painful conflict might also have become a turning point.

A building campaign might have been both a high point and the beginning of financial strain.

Do not resolve the contradictions.

Notice them.

Round Four — What Do You Notice?

Now stand back.

Ask:

What periods contain many stories?

Where are there gaps?

Which events received many marks?

Where do different people remember the same period differently?

What surprises you?

What story had you never heard before today?

What events seem to have changed the congregation?

What events in the community changed the congregation?

Whose names appear repeatedly?

Who or what seems absent?

Do Not Interpret Too Much Yet

The temptation will be to move immediately from:

“This happened”

to:

“Therefore this is who we are.”

Wait.

The timeline is evidence, not conclusion.

Photograph the completed timeline.

Preserve the sticky notes.

Record important stories that surfaced.

You will return to them in later chapters.

Optional Variation — Church and Community Timeline

Create two parallel lines:

OUR CONGREGATION

and

OUR COMMUNITY AND WORLD

Participants place events on both.

Then ask:

Where did the two stories intersect?

This can reveal how changes in population, economics, schools, race, transportation, industry, disasters, migration, cultural attitudes, or neighborhood development shaped congregational life.

It also begins preparing the congregation for the next movement of transition: **Listening**.

FM-1.3 — World Café

The Stories That Made Us

Purpose

A World Café allows a large number of people to participate in several rounds of meaningful conversation while stories and ideas travel from table to table.

It is especially useful when you want people to hear memories beyond their usual circle.

Time

Approximately 90 minutes.

Room Setup

Arrange small tables seating four to six people.

Cover each table with paper or provide a large sheet of paper in the center.

Place markers on every table.

If possible, make the room feel more like a café than a meeting.

Coffee and food are not required.

They rarely hurt.

Choose Table Hosts

Each table has a host.

The host remains at the same table while everyone else rotates.

The host does not control the conversation.

The host:

- welcomes each new group;
- briefly summarizes what previous groups discussed;
- encourages participants to add stories;
- records important words, phrases, and questions;
- makes room for quieter voices.

Opening

Explain:

We are going to tell stories about this congregation.

You will move among several tables.

At each table, you will encounter a different question.

We are not trying to agree on one version of our history.

We are listening for experiences that have shaped us.

Tell stories.

Be curious.

If someone remembers something differently, ask about the difference rather than correcting the person.

Round One

When Were We Most Alive?

Ask:

Tell about a time when you experienced this congregation as especially alive.

What was happening?

Who was involved?

What made that time memorable?

What did you experience?

Round Two

When Did We Face Something Difficult?

Tell about a season when the congregation faced uncertainty, loss, conflict, crisis, or significant change.

What happened?

How did people respond?

What helped?

What made things harder?

What do you remember most?

Round Three

When Did We Make a Difference?

Tell about a time when this congregation made a meaningful difference in someone's life or in the community.

Who noticed the need or opportunity?

What happened?

Why does the story stay with you?

Round Four

When Did We Take a Risk?

Tell about a time when the congregation tried something new, changed direction, took a chance, or did something people were not sure would work.

What made the risk possible?

What happened?

What did the congregation learn?

Round Five

When Did Someone See You?

This question takes the remembering from institutional accomplishment to human experience.

Ask:

When did someone in this congregation notice you, welcome you, care for you, challenge you, teach you, or help you know that you belonged?

What happened?

Why did it matter?

Optional Sixth Table

Where Did We Experience God's Faithfulness?

This can be used here or reserved for Chapter Three.

Ask:

Looking back, when do you recognize God's presence or faithfulness in the life of this congregation?

Timing

Allow approximately 12–15 minutes per round.

Participants move to a new table after each round.

They do not need to remain with the same people.

Harvesting the Café

After the final round, gather everyone.

Ask each table host:

What stories kept appearing?

What words or themes were repeated?

What surprised you?

Where did people remember things differently?

What question remains with your table?

Record responses where everyone can see them.

Final Question

Ask participants individually:

Of all the stories you heard today, which one do you most want this congregation to remember?

Have them write it on a card.

Collect the cards.

These become important material for FM-1.10, Harvesting the Stories.

FM-1.4 — Story Circles

“Let Me Tell You What Happened”

Purpose

Story Circles create enough time and safety for people to tell experiences rather than exchange quick opinions.

They are particularly useful because congregational conversations can easily be dominated by people who know the most history or are most comfortable speaking.

In a Story Circle, everyone gets a story.

Group Size

Six to eight people.

Time

60–90 minutes.

Ground Rules

Begin by agreeing:

We will listen without interrupting.

We will not correct another person’s memory while they are telling it.

We will distinguish between what we experienced and what we heard from someone else.

We will not use someone’s story later as ammunition in another disagreement.

We will make room for everyone.

We will remain curious when memories differ.

Story Prompts

Choose three or four.

Do not attempt all of them.

Tell us about a time when you felt especially grateful to be part of this congregation.

Tell us about a person who shaped your experience of this church.

Tell us about a time when the congregation did something courageous.

Tell us about a time when the congregation went through something difficult.

Tell us about a time when someone here helped you belong.

Tell us about a ministry that mattered deeply to you.

Tell us about something this congregation once did that you hope people never forget.

Tell us about a time when the congregation surprised you.

The Circle

Read one prompt.

Allow a moment of silence.

Then invite each person to tell a story.

Give approximately three minutes per person.

After everyone has spoken, allow conversation.

The facilitator can ask:

What did you hear?

Which stories were new to you?

What seemed important?

Where did you hear similarities?

Where did you hear different experiences of the same congregation?

A Word to Facilitators

Do not let Story Circles become history lectures.

If someone begins explaining thirty years of institutional history, gently ask:

“Can you take us to one moment that captures that for you?”

That question usually returns people to story.

FM-1.5 — Gallery Walk

Objects That Carry Our Story

Purpose

Memory is often awakened by things.

A photograph.

A communion chalice.

A youth-group T-shirt.

A mission-trip photograph.

An old hymnal.

A newspaper clipping.

A building plan.

A banner.

A church cookbook.

A handwritten page from the Session minutes.

A child's drawing.

Objects can retrieve stories people did not know they remembered.

Preparation

Several weeks before the event, invite people to bring something connected to an important congregational memory.

Make clear:

The object does not need to be historically important.

It needs to carry a story.

Ask people to attach a card containing:

What is this?

What story does it carry?

Why does the story matter to you?

Arrange objects and photographs around the room.

The Gallery Walk

Give participants sticky notes.

Invite them to move quietly through the gallery.

Provide several prompts:

I remember...

I didn't know...

The story behind this is...

This makes me wonder...

This still matters because...

Participants attach comments near the objects.

Gather for Stories

After the walk, invite participants to stand near something that particularly caught their attention.

Ask several people to tell the story.

Do not try to discuss every object.

Look for the Unexpected

Ask:

Which objects generated the most conversation?

Which stories surprised us?

Which objects represented institutional achievements?

Which represented relationships?

Which represented mission?

Which represented difficult times?

Which represented change?

What important parts of our story have no object on display?

That last question may be particularly revealing.

Afterward

Photograph the objects and comments.

Return borrowed materials carefully.

Do not assume the church should keep someone's personal artifact.

The story is the resource.

The object opened the door.

FM-1.6 — Across the Generations

An Intergenerational Story Exchange

Purpose

Congregational history often becomes the property of people who have been present longest.

This exercise deliberately challenges that assumption.

A person who joined six months ago already has a story.

A twelve-year-old has a story.

Someone who has been a member for sixty years has a story.

They are different windows into the same congregation.

Pair People Intentionally

Whenever possible, pair people who differ in:

- age;
- length of membership;
- congregational involvement;
- family background;
- experience of the church.

Avoid turning this into:

older person teaches younger person the history.

Both people interview.

Both people listen.

Conversation One

The person who has been part of the congregation longer answers:

What first brought you here?

What is one of your earliest memories?

When did this congregation become important to you?

What has changed most?

What do you hope newer people understand about this church?

Conversation Two

The newer or younger participant answers:

What did you notice when you first came here?

What made you return?

When did you first feel that you belonged—or when have you not felt that way?

What do you notice that longtime members might no longer notice?

What do you hope this congregation will become?

Reverse the Assumptions

Then ask both:

What did you learn from the other person?

What surprised you?

What does the other person's experience help you see that you could not see from your own?

Whole-Group Harvest

Do not ask everyone to report everything.

Ask:

What did you hear that the whole congregation should hear?

Record those responses.

FM-1.7 — Voices Beyond the Congregation

Listening to Those Who Know Us from the Outside

Purpose

A congregation does not carry the only memory of its life.

Others remember it too.

A school principal may remember volunteers who showed up every week.

A nonprofit director may remember the congregation offering space when no one else would.

A former member may remember both belonging and disappointment.

A neighbor may know the congregation mostly by its building.

These voices do not determine the congregation's identity.

They enlarge the story.

Whom Might We Ask?

Consider:

- former members;
- former staff;
- community partners;
- neighboring clergy;
- school personnel;
- nonprofit leaders;
- neighborhood leaders;
- people who use the church building;
- local civic leaders;
- longtime neighbors.

Choose people because they have a genuine relationship with the congregation, not because they are prominent.

Interview Questions

What is your relationship with this congregation?

What is your earliest or strongest memory of it?

Can you tell us about a time when you saw this congregation make a difference?

What do you think this congregation has cared about?

What gifts have you seen in its people?

Is there a story about this church that you think its members should remember?

What do you think we may not see about ourselves?

Listen Without Defending

Someone may describe the congregation differently from the way members describe themselves.

Do not argue.

Say:

“Tell me more about that.”

Outside perception is not automatically correct.

Neither is inside perception.

The difference may itself be worth noticing.

Record

With permission, take notes.

Do not turn informal interviews into public quotations without permission.

Bring themes and stories back to the Remembering Team.

FM-1.8 — Oral History Interview Guide

Gathering Stories One Person at a Time

Purpose

Some stories will not emerge in congregational gatherings.

Some people cannot attend.

Others speak more freely one-to-one.

Some people carry memories from periods of congregational life few others remember.

Oral-history interviews help preserve these voices.

Whom Should We Interview?

Do not simply choose the oldest members.

Consider:

- longtime members;
- newer members;
- former leaders;
- people who lived through important transitions;
- people associated with significant ministries;
- staff;
- people who became less active;
- people whose experience differed from the dominant narrative.

Before the Interview

Explain the purpose.

You are not creating an investigative record.

You are listening for stories that help the congregation understand its life.

Clarify whether the person's name may be associated with the stories.

Opening Question

When you think about this congregation, what story comes to mind first?

Then listen.

Additional Questions

What brought you to this congregation?

When did it become important to you?

Who shaped your experience here?

What period do you remember as especially meaningful?

When did the congregation face a difficult decision or season?

When did you see people respond with unusual generosity or courage?

What ministry made an important difference?

When did the congregation change?

What do you think this congregation values most deeply?

What do you hope we never forget?

What do you wish we understood better about our own history?

Is there a story I did not know enough to ask you about?

Follow the Story

The most useful interviewer response may be:

“Tell me more.”

Other useful prompts:

What happened next?

What did that mean to you?

Who else was involved?

Why do you think you still remember it?

How did that affect the congregation?

After the Interview

Do not immediately summarize the person into a theme.

Record the story first.

Interpret later.

FM-1.9 — Whose Story Is Missing?

Widening the Circle of Memory

Purpose

Every remembering process produces gaps.

This resource helps leaders discover them before they mistake the stories they have collected for the whole story.

Review Who Participated

List the people whose voices have contributed.

Then consider:

Longtime members?

New members?

Children?

Youth?

Young adults?

Middle-aged adults?

Older adults?

People who attend regularly?

People who participate less frequently?

Current staff?

Former staff?

Community partners?

Former members?

People associated with different worship services or ministries?

People who disagreed with important congregational decisions?

Review the Stories

Ask:

Who appears frequently in our stories?

Who appears mostly as a recipient of ministry rather than as a contributor?

Who is spoken about but has not spoken for themselves?

Which generations dominate the story?

Which ministries dominate?

Which periods of history dominate?

Are there entire decades we barely discussed?

Are there groups of people whose experience may have been different from the dominant story?

Do Not Manufacture Representation

The purpose is not to achieve a mathematically perfect sample.

It is to become aware of whose experiences are shaping the narrative.

If an important voice is missing, ask:

Can we still hear it?

Who might we interview?

Who might know part of this story?

What records might help?

What must we simply acknowledge that we do not know?

A Necessary Humility

Sometimes a missing voice cannot be recovered.

Do not speak for people whose experience you do not know.

The sentence:

“We do not know how they experienced this”

may be more truthful than filling the silence with an assumption.

FM-1.10 — Harvesting the Stories

What Have We Heard?

Purpose

By this point you may have:

a wall-sized timeline,

dozens of sticky notes,

World Café table papers,

interview notes,

photographs,

Story Circle observations,

objects and artifacts,

and more stories than anyone knows what to do with.

Do not panic.

You are not writing a history book.

You are preparing for discernment.

This resource helps the Remembering Team gather what has been heard without prematurely deciding what it means.

Step One — Gather the Material

Bring together the products of the remembering process.

Do not begin with someone's memory of what happened at the event.

Use the actual materials.

Step Two — Identify Recurring Stories

Which stories appeared repeatedly?

Write each on a separate sheet or card.

Do not worry if several versions exist.

For example:

Opening the church after the hurricane

The conflict over the new sanctuary

Starting the food pantry

The youth mission trips

The financial crisis

Welcoming the refugee family

Step Three — Identify Stories Told with Energy

Some stories may have appeared only once but changed the room.

Record those too.

Ask:

Which stories produced laughter?

Which produced tears?

Which produced pride?

Which produced discomfort?

Which surprised people?

Which made someone say:

“I had forgotten that.”

Step Four — Notice Repeated Words

What language kept appearing?

Family.

Welcome.

Service.

Survival.

Children.

Mission.

Tradition.

Community.

Generosity.

Conflict.

Courage.

Music.

Education.

Independence.

Faith.

Do not yet turn these words into an official values statement.

Just notice them.

Step Five — Identify Turning Points

Which events seem to have changed the congregation?

For each, record:

Before this...

Something happened...

Afterward...

This can help distinguish a memorable event from a formative event.

Step Six — Notice Tensions

Some of the most important discoveries may appear in contradictions.

For example:

“We are a family.”

and

“It is hard for newcomers to break in.”

Or:

“We value tradition.”

and

“Our proudest moments came when we changed.”

Or:

“We have always cared about the community.”

and

“Most of our stories are about ourselves.”

Do not resolve these tensions yet.

Record them.

They may contain important wisdom.

Step Seven — Record the Questions

What questions emerged that the stories did not answer?

What do we want to understand better?

What surprised us enough that we want to explore it?

What assumptions have become less certain?

Our Chapter One Harvest

Complete these sentences:

Stories we heard repeatedly:

Stories that surprised us:

Turning points that shaped us:

Words and themes we kept hearing:

Different or competing memories we need to hold:

Voices we may still need to hear:

Questions we are carrying forward:

Do Not Write the Congregation's Story Yet

You are not finished remembering.

And you are certainly not ready to decide what all of this means for the congregation's future.

For now, you have accomplished something important.

You have moved beyond:

Here are the dates.

You have begun to hear:

Here are the stories.

The next chapter listens beneath them.

What did people care about enough to act?

What values became visible in their choices?

What remained important even when programs and circumstances changed?

That is Remembering's next movement:

discovering the values you have actually lived.

REMEMBERING — FIELD MANUAL

Chapter Two Resources

Beneath the Stories

Discovering the Values We Have Lived

Chapter One gathered stories.

People remembered moments of courage, conflict, generosity, belonging, change, loss, risk, faithfulness, and surprise. Some stories appeared repeatedly. Others surfaced for the first time. Together they began to reveal the congregation as something more than a chronology of pastors, programs, and buildings.

Now the work turns.

The congregation begins to ask what the stories mean.

Congregations often describe their values with familiar words:

Welcoming.
Faithful.
Mission-minded.
Caring.
Inclusive.
Generous.

Those may be sincere descriptions. But remembering asks for evidence.

Where can we see those values in the life the congregation has actually lived?

What did people care about enough to give time, money, energy, property, reputation, or themselves?

What choices did the congregation make when something important was at stake?

What remained important even after particular programs disappeared?

And what values have shaped the congregation that it has never thought to name?

The resources in this chapter move from **story to interpretation**. They are designed to help a congregation distinguish between values it claims, values it aspires to, and values its history demonstrates it has actually lived.

The Field Guide also cautions that lived values can have shadows: loyalty may sustain a congregation or make disagreement feel like betrayal; stability can create trust or resistance to change; independence can produce initiative or make receiving help difficult. The purpose is therefore not to create an attractive list of congregational virtues. It is to understand how values have actually shaped the congregation's life.

You do not need to use every resource in this chapter.

For most congregations, **FM-2.1, FM-2.4, and FM-2.7** will provide the core process. The others can be used where they deepen the work.

FM-2.1 — From Story to Value

What Mattered Enough to Act?

Purpose

This is the foundational exercise for Chapter Two.

It helps participants move from:

What happened?

to:

What does this story reveal about what mattered to us?

The goal is not to assign a value word to every story. Some stories may reveal several values. Others may remain ambiguous.

The purpose is to learn how to listen beneath the story.

Time

60–90 minutes.

Group Size

Tables of four to six work well.

Materials

You will need:

- selected stories from Chapter One;
- one copy of the Story-to-Value worksheet for each table;
- markers;
- flip-chart paper or wall space;
- sticky notes.

Preparation

The Remembering Team should select approximately eight to twelve stories from the Chapter One harvest.

Choose stories representing different periods and experiences.

Include:

- stories told with energy;
- stories that appeared repeatedly;

- turning points;
- stories of difficulty as well as success;
- stories involving relationships;
- stories involving significant congregational choices.

Do not choose only the congregation's proudest moments.

Opening

The facilitator might say:

We have spent time remembering what happened.

Now we are going to listen beneath those stories.

Values become visible when people make choices.

What did we care about enough to act?

What were we trying to protect, create, preserve, change, or offer?

We are not trying to decide which values sound best. We are trying to discover which values our stories show us.

The Story-to-Value Process

Give each table one story.

Ask the group to work through the following questions.

1. What Happened?

Describe the story in two or three sentences.

Do not interpret it yet.

2. What Choice Was Made?

What did people actually decide or do?

3. What Did the Choice Require?

Did people give:

Time?

Money?

Property?

Energy?

Leadership?

Comfort?

Reputation?

Tradition?

Security?

Something else?

4. What Were People Trying to Protect or Create?

5. What Seems to Have Mattered Most?

6. What Value or Values Became Visible?

Try to use simple language.

Perhaps:

Hospitality.

Children.

Education.

Community.

Beauty.

Justice.

Tradition.

Care.

Belonging.

Service.

Generosity.

Faithfulness.

Relationships.

Independence.

Adaptability.

Courage.

Stability.

7. What Makes You Think So?

Point back to the story.

What evidence supports your interpretation?

Rotate the Stories

After approximately ten minutes, pass the story to another table.

The new group reviews the previous group's interpretation.

They may add:

Another value we see is...

or:

We interpret this differently because...

Do not require agreement.

Whole-Group Harvest

Post the stories and identified values around the room.

Ask:

Which values appear beneath several different stories?

Which appeared only once?

Which surprised us?

Which values seem to have endured across different periods?

Where did groups interpret the same story differently?

What did the evidence support?

Remember

A value is more convincing when it appears across several stories.

One generous act does not necessarily establish generosity as a defining congregational value.

Look for patterns.

FM-2.2 — Show Us the Story

Testing the Values We Claim

Purpose

Most congregations already have words they use to describe themselves.

This exercise tests those words against congregational memory.

It is not designed to prove the congregation hypocritical.

It is designed to move from **claim** to **evidence**.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Preparation

Before the gathering, collect existing language from:

- mission statements;
- vision statements;
- websites;
- brochures;
- Ministry Discernment Profiles or previous search documents;
- congregational values statements;
- strategic plans;
- membership materials.

Identify the words the congregation most often uses about itself.

Place the Words Around the Room

For example:

WELCOMING

MISSION-MINDED

FAITHFUL

CARING

INCLUSIVE

GENEROUS

CHRIST-CENTERED

FAMILY

Use the congregation's actual words.

The Exercise

Invite participants to move around the room.

At each word, ask:

What story from our history demonstrates this value?

Write the story on a sticky note and place it beneath the word.

The story need not be long.

For example, under **Welcoming**:

"When the refugee family arrived, members furnished their apartment and helped the children enroll in school."

Under **Children Matter**:

"During the building campaign, the congregation reduced the sanctuary renovation so it could afford safe classroom space."

Under **Community**:

"After the hurricane, the church became a distribution center even though our own building was damaged."

When There Are No Stories

Do not rush to fill the space.

An empty wall may tell you something.

Ask:

Is this a value we actually live?

Is it something we deeply desire to become?

Is it a word we inherited?

Does the evidence exist but we have not yet heard the story?

Ask the Harder Question

For each claimed value, ask:

Are there stories that complicate this claim?

For example:

A congregation may have powerful stories of hospitality and also stories of people who struggled to enter established friendship circles.

Both belong.

Final Reflection

For each claimed value, identify it provisionally as:

Strongly demonstrated in our stories

Present, but inconsistent

Primarily aspirational

We need more evidence before deciding

Do not eliminate aspirational values.

Simply name them honestly.

There is a difference between:

This is who we have consistently been

and:

This is who we hope increasingly to become.

Both can matter.

They should not be confused.

FM-2.3 — What Did It Cost?

Discovering Values Through Sacrifice and Choice

Purpose

Sometimes the clearest evidence of a value appears when the congregation had to choose between competing goods.

Values become particularly visible when they cost something.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Begin with Significant Decisions

Return to the Chapter One timeline.

Identify several moments when the congregation made a consequential choice.

Perhaps:

- building or renovating;
- starting or ending a ministry;
- responding to a community crisis;
- changing worship;
- calling a particular pastor;
- welcoming a group;
- taking a public stand;
- spending significant money;
- entering a partnership;
- remaining in a neighborhood;
- selling property;
- changing denominational relationships;
- responding to conflict.

For Each Decision, Ask

What choices were available?

What did we choose?

What did we gain?

What did we give up or risk?

Who benefited?

Who carried the cost?

What does the decision suggest mattered most to us at that moment?

Competing Values

Some decisions reveal not one value but a choice between values.

For example:

Preserving financial reserves versus funding a new ministry.

Maintaining tradition versus adapting worship.

Protecting harmony versus speaking about injustice.

Preserving a building versus investing in people.

Maintaining independence versus entering partnership.

Ask:

What values were in tension?

Which one prevailed?

What did that choice teach us?

A Caution

Do not judge every past decision by today's standards without understanding its context.

At the same time, historical context does not require pretending every decision was wise or faithful.

The goal is understanding.

FM-2.4 — The Values Beneath the Programs

Receive the Gift, Release the Form

Purpose

This is one of the most important exercises in the Remembering process.

Congregations often confuse a value with the program through which that value once became visible.

The Field Guide illustrates this with Christian education: people may initially remember classrooms and Sunday school programs, only to discover that what mattered most was **formation through relationships**. The program may end while the deeper value remains available for new expression.

This exercise helps distinguish:

what we did

from:

why it mattered.

Time

60–90 minutes.

Preparation

From the Chapter One stories and timeline, identify significant ministries from different periods.

Include ministries that:

- still exist;
- ended successfully;
- declined;
- disappeared;
- changed form;
- people remember with affection.

Write each ministry on a separate sheet.

Examples

Sunday school.

Choir.

Youth ministry.

Food pantry.

Women's association.

Mission trips.

Weekday school.

Community dinners.

Vacation Bible School.

Small groups.

Homeless ministry.

Stephen Ministry.

Campus ministry.

Scouting.

Work in Small Groups

Assign one or two ministries to each group.

For each ministry, complete the following.

1. What Was the Ministry?

2. What Did People Actually Do?

3. Who Was Served or Formed Through It?

4. What Made This Ministry Important?

Do not answer simply:

“Because people liked it.”

Dig deeper.

5. What Value Did the Ministry Embody?

Perhaps:

Formation.

Belonging.

Service.

Hospitality.

Beauty.

Community.

Justice.

Mentoring.

Care.

Learning.

Evangelism.

Intergenerational relationship.

Partnership.

6. What Gifts Developed Through This Ministry?

What did people learn to do?

What relationships developed?

What capacities grew?

7. Is the Program Still Necessary to Carry the Value?

Yes

No

We don't know

Why?

The Critical Question

Now ask:

If this program never returned in its old form, what would we still want to carry forward from it?

Whole-Group Harvest

Create two columns:

THE FORM	THE ENDURING VALUE
Sunday school	Formation through relationships
Annual mission trip	Service and relationship beyond ourselves
Large choir	Beauty and participation in worship
Church supper	Hospitality and belonging

Do not use these examples as predetermined answers.

Let the congregation discover its own.

Receive the Gift, Release the Form

Conclude by asking:

Which old forms are we grieving?

Which values beneath them remain alive?

Have we sometimes tried to preserve a program because we feared losing the value it once carried?

Could naming the deeper value allow us eventually to imagine another form?

Do not design the new form yet.

That comes later.

For now:

Remember the gift.

Release the assumption that the old form is the only way to carry it.

FM-2.5 — Values We Never Named

Discovering What the Stories Reveal

Purpose

Some of a congregation's deepest values may never appear in its mission statement.

This exercise looks for them.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Return to the Chapter One Harvest

Review:

- recurring stories;
- turning points;
- repeated words;
- moments of strong emotion;
- stories of sacrifice;
- stories people insisted should not be forgotten.

Then ask:

What seems important in these stories that we have never named as a congregational value?

Possible Discoveries

A congregation may discover:

Resilience

People repeatedly rebuilt after difficulty.

Loyalty

Relationships endured across decades.

Education

The congregation consistently invested in learning.

Beauty

Worship, music, art, and sacred space received unusual attention.

Independence

People repeatedly solved problems themselves.

Place

The congregation remained committed to a neighborhood despite opportunities to leave.

Adaptability

The congregation repeatedly changed when circumstances required it.

Care

People consistently showed up during illness, death, or crisis.

Excellence

People expected things to be done carefully and well.

None of these is automatically good or bad.

They are clues.

Complete the Sentence

For each possible value:

We believe _____ may be a lived value because...

Then list at least three pieces of evidence.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

If you cannot find evidence, hold the value lightly.

Ask

Why have we never named this?

Does the value still describe us?

How has it served us?

What might we understand differently about ourselves because we see it now?

FM-2.6 — Gift and Shadow

Understanding How Our Values Shape Us

Purpose

Every deeply held value can serve faithfulness.

Every deeply held value can also become distorted.

The Field Guide specifically warns against simply praising the values discovered through remembering. Loyalty, stability, independence, and other values can both strengthen and constrain congregational life.

This exercise helps a congregation examine its values with maturity rather than turning them into advertising language.

Time

60 minutes.

Preparation

Use five to seven values emerging most strongly from the previous exercises.

Place one value on each sheet of paper.

Begin with the Gift

For each value ask:

When has this value served us well?

What has it made possible?

Who has benefited from it?

What story shows this value at its best?

Record responses under:

THE GIFT

Then Ask About the Shadow

When can this same value become limiting?

What happens when we protect it too strongly?

What might people experience differently because of it?

Record responses under:

THE SHADOW

Examples

These are illustrations, not diagnoses.

Loyalty

Gift: People remain committed through difficult seasons.

Shadow: Disagreement can feel like betrayal.

Stability

Gift: People experience continuity and trust.

Shadow: Necessary change may feel threatening.

Independence

Gift: Members take initiative and solve problems.

Shadow: The congregation may resist partnership or receiving help.

Excellence

Gift: Ministry is thoughtful and well prepared.

Shadow: People may become afraid to experiment or fail.

Family

Gift: People experience deep belonging.

Shadow: Newcomers may feel as though they are entering someone else's family.

Tradition

Gift: The congregation carries a rich inheritance.

Shadow: Familiar forms may become confused with faithfulness itself.

A Third Question — Maturity

Add a third column:

WHAT WOULD MATURITY LOOK LIKE?

How could we continue receiving the gift without being controlled by its shadow?

For example:

Loyalty

Maturity might mean:

We remain committed to one another while learning that honest disagreement need not threaten belonging.

Important

Do not use this exercise to attack another group in the congregation.

If participants begin saying:

“Those people are the ones who...”

return to:

“How does this value shape us?”

The subject is **we**.

FM-2.7 — Our Lived Values

Gathering What We Have Learned

Purpose

This is the synthesis resource for Chapter Two.

Its purpose is not to create a polished values statement.

It is to gather the values for which the congregation now has substantial historical evidence.

Preparation

Bring together the results from:

- FM-2.1 From Story to Value;
- FM-2.2 Show Us the Story;
- FM-2.3 What Did It Cost?;
- FM-2.4 The Values Beneath the Programs;
- FM-2.5 Values We Never Named;
- FM-2.6 Gift and Shadow.

You do not need to have used all six resources.

Step One — Collect the Candidate Values

Write every value that appeared repeatedly.

Do not debate yet.

Step Two — Cluster Similar Words

For example:

Care
Compassion
Showing up for people
Pastoral support

may belong together.

Or they may not.

Ask what participants actually mean.

Avoid selecting a polished word simply because it sounds better.

Step Three — Require Evidence

For every value being considered as a significant lived value, complete:

VALUE

Stories that demonstrate it:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Choices or sacrifices that demonstrate it:

Ministries through which it has been expressed:

Does it appear across more than one period of our history?

Does it remain visible today?

What is its gift?

What is its possible shadow?

Step Four — Distinguish Three Categories

Place values under one of three headings.

VALUES WE HAVE CONSISTENTLY LIVED

There is substantial evidence across our stories.

VALUES THAT ARE EMERGING OR INCONSISTENT

There is evidence, but the story is mixed.

VALUES WE ASPIRE TO LIVE MORE FULLY

These matter deeply to us, but our history does not yet demonstrate them consistently.

There is no shame in the third category.

An aspiration honestly named is more useful than an aspiration disguised as an accomplishment.

Step Five — Choose the Values Most Helpful for Discernment

Do not create a list of fifteen.

Ask:

Which values most help us understand the particular congregation God has formed here?

Which values appear most consistently across different kinds of stories?

Which help explain why certain experiences mattered so deeply?

Which help us understand both our gifts and our struggles?

For most congregations, **five to seven** is enough.

Our Lived Values

For each final value, write one sentence.

Not:

Hospitality — We are a welcoming church.

Instead:

Hospitality — Across several generations, some of our strongest stories involve people noticing strangers, making room, and helping them become part of the community.

Or:

Formation Through Relationships — Although the programs through which we educated children have changed, our stories consistently emphasize teachers, mentors, and adults who remained in relationship with young people over time.

The sentence matters because it keeps the value connected to the evidence.

FM-2.8 — Chapter Two Discernment Harvest

What Do Our Stories Reveal About What Matters?

Purpose

This short resource carries the discoveries of Chapter Two into the rest of Remembering.

It is not another major congregational exercise.

The Remembering Team can complete it from the work already done.

What We Have Learned

The lived values that appear most consistently in our stories are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Values we claim but want to examine more honestly:

Values we aspire to live more fully:

Values we discovered that we had never named:

Old programs whose deeper values remain important:

What Ended or Changed	What Still Matters
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

What Ended or Changed

What Still Matters

Values whose shadows we need to remember:

Something that surprised us:

Something we understand differently now:

The Question We Carry Forward

We have begun to understand not simply **what happened** in our history, but **what mattered**.

Now another question rises from beneath the stories:

Where, in all of this, do we recognize the faithfulness of God?

That question cannot be answered merely by naming successful ministries.

Some signs of God's faithfulness may become clearest in seasons when almost nothing went according to plan.

Some become visible only in retrospect.

Some appear in the people who showed up.

In endurance.

In reconciliation.

In unexpected possibility.

In grace that remained when something else was lost.

Remembering now turns from naming our values toward theological reflection:

Thus far the Lord has helped us.

That is the work of Chapter Three.

REMEMBERING — FIELD MANUAL

Chapter Three Resources

Thus Far the Lord Has Helped Us

Remembering God's Faithfulness

The first two chapters have helped the congregation remember what happened and begin interpreting what those stories reveal.

Chapter One asked:

What has shaped us?

Chapter Two asked:

What have we cared about enough to act upon?

Now the questions become explicitly theological:

Where, in the story we have remembered, do we recognize the presence and faithfulness of God?

This requires care.

Christian remembering does not mean assigning God's intention to everything that happened. Not every successful program was necessarily God's plan. Not every painful event happened for a divine purpose. Congregations make mistakes. People hurt one another. Ministries fail. Circumstances beyond anyone's control produce genuine loss.

The Field Guide makes an important distinction: the question is not whether everything that happened was God's will. The question is, **"Where was God present in the midst of what happened?"**

Sometimes that presence was recognizable immediately.

Sometimes it becomes visible only in retrospect.

Someone showed up.

A relationship formed.

Unexpected leadership emerged.

People discovered courage they did not know they possessed.

A congregation survived something it thought might end its ministry.

A closed door eventually made another possibility visible.

Someone spoke a word people needed to hear.

A community gathered around people who were hurting.

Grace appeared.

This chapter invites the congregation to look again at the stories already gathered and ask:

Where, looking back, can we now say: Thus far the Lord has helped us?

Not every resource needs to be used. For most congregations, **FM-3.1, FM-3.3, FM-3.5, and FM-3.7** will provide a complete core process.

FM-3.1 — Looking Again

Where Do We Now Recognize God?

Purpose

This is the foundational exercise for Chapter Three.

Participants return to stories already gathered rather than generating an entirely new collection of memories.

The question changes.

Earlier we asked:

What happened?

Now we ask:

Looking back, where do we recognize grace?

Time

60–75 minutes.

Group Size

Tables of four to six.

Preparation

Select six to ten significant stories from Chapters One and Two.

Choose a mixture:

- joyful stories;
- uncertain seasons;
- significant changes;
- difficult experiences;
- unexpected developments;
- stories involving important relationships.

Do not select only successful outcomes.

Opening Scripture

Read:

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Thus far the LORD has helped us.’”

— 1 Samuel 7:12

Allow a brief silence.

Then say:

Samuel did not raise the stone because Israel would never face difficulty again.

The stone marked something the people needed to remember.

We were not alone.

Today we are going to look again at some of our own stories and ask where, in retrospect, we recognize God's presence.

Choose a Story

Give each group one story.

Ask them first to describe what happened without theological interpretation.

What Happened?

What Did People Experience at the Time?

What were people feeling?

What were they hoping?

What were they afraid of?

What could they not yet know?

What Happened That No One Could See at the Beginning?

What Changed?

People?

Relationships?

Leadership?

Understanding?

Direction?

Faith?

Community connections?

Where Do We Now Recognize Grace?

Through Whom or What Did Grace Become Visible?

A person?

A community?

An unexpected opportunity?

A difficult truth?

A relationship?

An act of courage?

A moment of generosity?

A new leader?

The strength to endure?

What Did This Experience Teach Us About God?

What Did It Teach Us About Ourselves?

A Necessary Question

Ask:

Are we claiming more about God's intention than this story allows us to know?

If so, revise the interpretation.

There is an important difference between:

"God caused this crisis so that we would..."

and:

"In the midst of this crisis, we experienced God's presence through..."

Faithful remembering does not require certainty about God's hidden purposes.

It asks us to recognize grace where grace became visible.

FM-3.2 — Then We Did Not Know

Remembering Seasons of Uncertainty

Purpose

Pastoral transition is a season of uncertainty.

Congregations sometimes experience today's uncertainty as though they have never faced an unknown future before.

Usually they have.

This exercise retrieves those memories.

Its purpose is not to prove that everything will work out.

It is to remember that uncertainty itself is not evidence of God's absence.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Return to the Timeline

Look specifically for periods when people could not know what would happen next.

Perhaps:

A pastor left unexpectedly.

Membership declined.

A building became too small.

A building became too large.

Money became scarce.

A major employer closed.

A neighborhood changed.

A conflict divided people.

A ministry ended.

A disaster damaged property.

A pandemic disrupted worship.

A beloved leader died.

A major decision had to be made.

Choose Two or Three Seasons

For each, complete:

What Was Happening?

What Did We Fear Might Happen?

What Could We Not Know Yet?

What Helped Us Continue?

Who Emerged as Leaders or Companions?

What Unexpected Developments Occurred?

What Was Lost?

Do not skip this question.

What Was Gained or Discovered?

Looking Back, Where Do We Recognize God's Presence?

Then and Now

Complete:

Then we did not know...

Now we can see...

Do Not Turn the Story into a Guarantee

Avoid:

"God got us through that, so God will make everything work out this time."

Instead:

"We have entered uncertain seasons before without knowing the outcome, and we discovered that God remained present among us."

That is a much stronger foundation for hope.

FM-3.3 — People Through Whom Grace Came

Remembering the Human Faces of Faithfulness

Purpose

When congregations remember God’s faithfulness, they may be tempted to speak only in abstractions.

Yet much of the grace we experience comes through people.

Someone noticed.

Someone stayed.

Someone taught.

Someone challenged.

Someone prayed.

Someone gave.

Someone repaired.

Someone listened.

Someone spoke truth.

Someone refused to give up.

This exercise helps a congregation remember the human relationships through which God’s care became tangible.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Individual Reflection

Give each participant several cards.

Ask:

When you think about the story of this congregation, who comes to mind as someone through whom you experienced God’s grace?

Write one name on each card.

Then ask:

What did this person actually do?

Avoid simply writing:

“She was wonderful.”

Tell the story.

Possible Prompts

Who welcomed people?

Who quietly cared for people others overlooked?

Who taught?

Who prayed?

Who challenged the congregation?

Who helped during a crisis?

Who opened doors for others?

Who gave generously?

Who built relationships beyond the congregation?

Who helped the church change?

Who preserved something important?

Who asked a question that changed the conversation?

Who showed up?

Share in Small Groups

Each participant chooses one person and tells the story.

Then ask:

What qualities appeared repeatedly?

What kinds of faithfulness did these people embody?

What did they teach the congregation about ministry?

Look Beyond Official Leadership

Pay attention if nearly every named person was a pastor.

Pastors matter.

But so do:

teachers,

elders,

deacons,

custodians,

secretaries,

musicians,

youth leaders,

children,

quiet caregivers,

community partners,

people who never held office.

Ask:

Whose faithfulness might disappear from our history because it never appeared in Session minutes?

Create a Cloud of Witnesses

Place the names where everyone can see them.

Do not rank them.

Do not turn this into a hall of fame.

Read several names aloud.

Then read Hebrews 12:1:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

Allow silence.

A Question for Discernment

Ask:

What qualities did God repeatedly raise up among the people of this congregation?

Perhaps:

Compassion.

Courage.

Persistence.

Teaching.

Hospitality.

Truth-telling.

Generosity.

Prayer.

Imagination.

Leadership.

These qualities may become important later when the congregation considers gifts it still carries.

For now, give thanks.

FM-3.4 — Grace in the Hard Places

Remembering Without Explaining Away the Pain

Purpose

Some of the congregation's strongest experiences of God's presence may have occurred during difficult seasons.

That does not make the difficulty good.

This resource provides a careful way to reflect theologically without romanticizing suffering.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Use With Care

Do not use this resource to process:

- abuse;
- misconduct;
- unresolved trauma;
- confidential pastoral situations;
- active legal matters;
- situations requiring investigation or formal reconciliation.

Those matters require appropriate processes and qualified leadership.

This exercise is for difficult congregational experiences that can responsibly be reflected upon together.

Choose a Story

Identify one difficult period already named in the remembering process.

Hold Two Truths Together

Complete both sentences:

Something genuinely difficult or painful happened:

God's presence or grace became visible in these ways:

Do not allow the second statement to erase the first.

What Did Grace Look Like?

Perhaps:

People remained with one another.

Someone told the truth.

Someone apologized.

People found courage.

The congregation asked for help.

A relationship survived disagreement.

People cared for those who were hurting.

New leadership emerged.

People learned to pray differently.

The congregation discovered that something needed to change.

What Should We Not Say?

Complete:

We should not use this story to claim that...

For example:

The loss did not matter.

Everyone experienced the event the same way.

The conflict was necessary.

God caused someone's suffering.

Everything eventually turned out well.

What Can We Faithfully Say?

Perhaps:

“That was a painful period in our life. We would not choose to repeat it. Yet we remember people who remained faithful to one another, and we recognize God’s grace in the courage that eventually allowed us to tell the truth.”

That is faithful remembering without spiritualizing harm.

FM-3.5 — Our Ebenezer Stories

Thus Far the Lord Has Helped Us

Purpose

This is the central communal practice of Chapter Three.

It helps a congregation identify a small number of stories that function as theological landmarks:

Here we remember God’s faithfulness.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Opening

Read 1 Samuel 7:7–12.

Explain briefly that *Ebenezer* means “stone of help.”

Samuel’s stone was a physical reminder of something Israel needed to remember:

Thus far the Lord has helped us.

Ask:

If this congregation placed stones at moments when we especially needed to remember God’s faithfulness, where would they stand?

Individual Reflection

Give each participant three cards.

On each, complete:

I would place an Ebenezer at the time when...

Then:

Because looking back, I recognize...

Place the Cards

Create a large heading:

THUS FAR THE LORD HAS HELPED US

Invite people to place their cards beneath it.

Allow time for everyone to read them.

Cluster Similar Stories

Several people may identify the same event.

Place those cards together.

Do not assume the most frequently named event is necessarily the most important.

Hear the Stories

Choose several clusters.

Ask:

What happened?

Why does this story function as an Ebenezer for us?

Where do we recognize God's help?

What did we learn?

What does this memory allow us to trust today?

Select Several Congregational Ebenezers

Do not attempt to create an official canonical list.

But identify perhaps five to eight stories that seem especially significant.

Record:

OUR EBENEZER

The story:

Where we recognize God’s faithfulness:

What we learned about God:

What we learned about ourselves:

What this memory gives us courage to trust now:

Important

An Ebenezer is not:

“Look what a successful congregation we were.”

It is:

“Remember how God accompanied us.”

The subject matters.

FM-3.6 — Building an Ebenezer

A Congregational Ritual of Remembering

Purpose

Some congregations will benefit from giving their remembered faithfulness a physical form.

This resource can be used during worship, a congregational gathering, or at the conclusion of Chapter Three.

It is optional.

Materials

Gather stones large enough to hold comfortably in one hand.

You may also use:

- wooden pieces;
- cards;
- tiles;
- another object appropriate to the congregation.

Avoid creating something so elaborate that the symbol becomes more important than the remembering.

Preparation

Place the stones in baskets.

Create a central space near the communion table, baptismal font, or another appropriate location.

Invitation

After recalling the story of Samuel's Ebenezer, say:

We do not place these stones because every part of our history has been easy.

We place them because, looking back, we can name places where God's faithfulness accompanied us.

Take a stone.

Remember one place in the story of this congregation where you can say:

Thus far the Lord has helped us.

Allow silence.

Bringing the Stones

Invite participants to bring their stones forward.

They may place them silently.

Or, if the congregation is small enough, each may speak a word or short phrase:

“Through the hurricane.”

“When we nearly closed.”

“Through the people who welcomed us.”

“During the conflict.”

“Through our children.”

“When the new ministry began.”

“Through people who kept praying.”

Prayer

When all the stones have been placed:

Faithful God,

these stones do not contain our memories,
and they do not contain you.

They simply remind us.

You have met us in joy and uncertainty,
in beginnings and endings,
in courage and fear,
in people who stayed,
in people who challenged us,
in grace we recognized immediately
and grace we saw only years later.

Receive our gratitude for all that has brought us this far.

Keep us from turning memory into nostalgia
or faithfulness into certainty about the future.

Give us instead the courage to trust:

You have been with us.
You are with us.
You will not abandon the work of your people.

Amen.

Afterward

The Ebenezer may remain visible during the transition.

Do not allow it to become a shrine to the past.

Its purpose is to remind the congregation of God's faithfulness as it moves forward.

FM-3.7 — What Have These Stories Taught Us About God?

Theological Reflection on Congregational Memory

Purpose

It is possible to identify stories of God's faithfulness without asking what those stories have taught the congregation about God.

This resource takes the next step.

It is best used after FM-3.1 or FM-3.5.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Prepare the Room

Post several significant Ebenezer stories around the room.

Under each, leave space for responses.

First Question

At each story ask:

What does this story lead us to say about God?

Participants write responses.

Perhaps:

God is present in uncertainty.

God works through ordinary people.

God provides companions.

God calls us beyond ourselves.

God does not abandon us when plans fail.

God gives courage.

God surprises us.

God meets us through community.

God brings new life from endings.

Second Question

Now ask:

What does this story NOT allow us to claim?

This protects the congregation from turning testimony into theological certainty.

For example:

A financial recovery does not prove that faithful congregations will always have enough money.

A successful ministry does not prove that God wanted the ministry to continue forever.

Survival does not prove that congregations that close lacked faith.

Third Question

Ask:

Which understandings of God appear across several different stories?

Record them.

Complete

Across our remembered story, we have often experienced God as...

Then Ask

How has this understanding shaped the way we worship?

How has it shaped the way we respond to difficulty?

How has it shaped our mission?

How might it shape the way we enter this pastoral transition?

A Theological Humility

Finish the exercise with:

What about God remains mystery to us?

A congregation's history bears witness to God's faithfulness.

It does not explain God.

FM-3.8 — Chapter Three Discernment Harvest

What Do We Now Remember About God's Faithfulness?

Purpose

This is the synthesis resource for Chapter Three.

It preserves what has emerged without requiring another major congregational event.

The Remembering Team may complete it using the work already done.

Our Ebenezer Stories

The stories in which we most clearly recognize God's faithfulness are:

1. _____

Because:

2. _____

Because:

3. _____

Because:

4. _____

Because:

5. _____

Because:

People Through Whom Grace Became Visible

In Seasons of Uncertainty, We Discovered...

In Difficult Seasons, Grace Appeared Through...

Our Stories Have Taught Us to Speak About God in These Ways

Claims About God We Should Be Careful Not to Make

Something We Can Trust as We Enter the Future

Complete This Sentence

Thus far the Lord has helped us by...

FM-3.9 — A Prayer of Remembering and Thanksgiving

This prayer may conclude a congregational gathering, Session meeting, retreat, or the entire Chapter Three process.

Leader

God of Abraham and Sarah,
Moses and Miriam,
Ruth and Naomi,
Mary and Joseph,
Peter and Paul,
you have always called your people to remember.

People

We remember your faithfulness.

Leader

For those who planted what we now enjoy,
for those whose names we know
and those whose names have been forgotten,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For teachers and leaders,
caregivers and truth-tellers,
builders and dreamers,
servants and friends,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For seasons of joy
when your presence seemed near,

People

We remember your faithfulness.

Leader

For seasons of uncertainty
when we could not see what came next,

People

We remember your faithfulness.

Leader

For places where we failed,
for wounds we still carry,
for things we wish had been different,

People

Give us courage to remember truthfully.

Leader

For grace that met us even there,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For doors that opened,
for ministries that ended,
for relationships that endured,
for strangers who became companions,
for people who showed up when they were needed,

People

We remember your faithfulness.

Leader

Keep us from believing that because you were faithful yesterday, tomorrow must look like yesterday.

People

Make our memory a source of courage, not captivity.

Leader

Keep us from believing that our successes prove our faithfulness or our struggles prove your absence.

People

Teach us to recognize grace.

Leader

As Samuel raised a stone and said,
“Thus far the Lord has helped us,”
we remember the road by which we have come.

People

Thus far the Lord has helped us.

Leader

And because you have accompanied us this far,
give us courage to enter what we cannot yet see.

All

**Faithful God,
receive the story we remember.
Receive our gratitude.
Receive our questions.
Receive our unfinished understanding.
And continue forming us
for whatever faithfulness requires next.
Amen.**

Carrying the Work Forward

Chapter Three should not leave the impression that remembering God’s faithfulness means casting a religious glow over the congregation’s history.

Quite the opposite.

If grace allows us to remember truthfully, it also allows us to face the parts of our story that are harder to tell.

The conflicts.

The exclusions.

The mistakes.

The disappointments.

The people who experienced the congregation differently.

The periods we have romanticized.

The memories we would rather avoid.

We do not turn toward those stories to shame the congregation.

We turn toward them because Christian memory does not depend on a perfect past.

Scripture itself remembers the story of God's people with extraordinary honesty.

The same grace that allows us to say:

Thus far the Lord has helped us

also allows us to say:

This happened too.

That is the work of Chapter Four:

Remembering the Whole Story — Gratitude Without Nostalgia, Honesty Without Shame.

REMEMBERING — FIELD MANUAL

Chapter Four Resources

Remembering the Whole Story

Gratitude Without Nostalgia, Honesty Without Shame

The first three chapters have helped the congregation gather its stories, discover the values beneath them, and recognize places where God's faithfulness became visible.

Now remembering asks more of the congregation.

Every congregation has stories it enjoys telling.

There are also stories people tell selectively, stories people remember differently, and stories people would prefer not to tell at all.

A beloved era may look different to someone who felt excluded from it.

A pastor remembered warmly by some may have been experienced differently by others.

A decision celebrated as courageous may have carried costs rarely mentioned.

A conflict may have ended institutionally without ever being understood.

And some painful experiences should not be reopened casually in a congregational gathering.

The Field Guide names the task carefully: **gratitude without nostalgia, honesty without shame**. Nostalgia edits the story. Gratitude does not. Gratitude can treasure what was good while acknowledging what was incomplete or harmful. The Guide also makes an essential distinction: a storytelling gathering is not therapy, mediation, an investigation, or a disciplinary process. Some memories require qualified help and appropriate denominational, safeguarding, therapeutic, or legal processes.

For that reason, Chapter Four should be handled differently from the first three chapters.

The goal is **not to uncover every painful event in the congregation's history**.

The goal is to help the congregation receive a more truthful story and ask:

What wisdom from our whole story needs to travel with us?

For most congregations, **FM-4.1, FM-4.3, FM-4.5, and FM-4.7** provide the core process. The remaining resources should be used where appropriate.

FM-4.1 — Looking at the Whole Story

What Is Easy to Remember? What Is Hard?

Purpose

This opening exercise helps a congregation recognize that some parts of its history receive much more attention than others.

It does not begin by asking people to disclose painful experiences.

It begins by noticing the shape of the story already being told.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Preparation

Return to the Chapter One timeline and story harvest.

Create three large headings:

STORIES WE TELL OFTEN

STORIES WE SELDOM TELL

STORIES WE REMEMBER DIFFERENTLY

Begin with Stories We Tell Often

Ask participants:

Which stories from our history do people seem to enjoy telling?

Which appear at anniversaries?

Which appear in congregational publications?

Which do newcomers eventually learn?

Which stories make us proud?

Write each on a card and place it under:

STORIES WE TELL OFTEN

Now Ask About Silence

Do not ask:

“What terrible things are we hiding?”

Ask instead:

Are there important periods we rarely discuss?

Are there ministries that ended but are seldom mentioned?

Are there decisions people become uncomfortable discussing?

Are there people important to our history whose names rarely appear?

Are there losses that seem to have disappeared from the official story?

Place those under:

STORIES WE SELDOM TELL

No one is required to tell the full story.

Simply naming:

“The conflict in 1998”

may be enough for now.

Then Ask About Different Memories

Which events do people remember differently?

Perhaps:

A building project.

A pastoral departure.

A worship change.

A merger.

A conflict.

A decision to begin or end a ministry.

A period of rapid growth.

A denominational controversy.

Place those under:

STORIES WE REMEMBER DIFFERENTLY

Stand Back

Ask:

What do you notice?

Which column filled most quickly?

Why might some stories be told repeatedly?

Why might others be rarely mentioned?

Where do different memories suggest that people's experiences were genuinely different?

Do Not Force Resolution

The purpose of this exercise is awareness.

A mature congregation can say:

“We remember this differently.”

That sentence may be more truthful than forcing a single version everyone is expected to accept.

FM-4.2 — Gratitude or Nostalgia?

Looking Again at the Good Old Days

Purpose

Congregations often carry a cherished period of history that becomes the standard against which the present is judged.

Perhaps:

The sanctuary was full.

Sunday school rooms overflowed.

The choir was large.

There were hundreds of children.

Money was plentiful.

A beloved pastor served for many years.

Community influence was strong.

Those memories may be genuine gifts.

The problem begins when a cherished period becomes an edited version of the past.

This exercise helps distinguish gratitude from nostalgia.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Choose a Cherished Era

Complete:

A period of our history we often remember with particular affection is:

What Was Genuinely Good?

Name it freely.

What flourished?

What brought joy?

What relationships formed?

What ministry mattered?

What should be received with gratitude?

What Made That Period Possible?

Consider:

Population.

Economics.

Cultural expectations.

Demographics.

Volunteer availability.

Staffing.

Community circumstances.

Denominational life.

Social patterns.

Family structures.

What conditions existed then that may no longer exist?

What Did the Familiar Story Leave Out?

Ask gently:

Who may have experienced that period differently?

What difficulties existed alongside the successes?

Were volunteers exhausted?

Were some people excluded?

Were conflicts present?

Did financial strength conceal other problems?

Did everyone experience the congregation as welcoming?

What was happening in the surrounding community?

The Question Nostalgia Rarely Asks

Good for whom?

Do not use the question sarcastically.

Use it curiously.

Whose experience is represented in the phrase:

“Those were our best years”?

Whose might not be?

Gratitude Can Say

“That was a wonderful season in our life, and we are grateful.”

without saying:

“The future will be faithful only if we can become that congregation again.”

Complete

What we gratefully receive from that period is:

What belonged particularly to that time and place is:

What we do not need to recreate is:

What may still matter deeply is:

FM-4.3 — Many Windows on One Story

Receiving Different Memories as Testimony

Purpose

Two people can experience the same congregational event very differently.

This does not necessarily mean one is telling the truth and the other is not.

Each may have stood at a different window.

This exercise helps congregations receive differing memories as testimony rather than immediately turning them into competing verdicts.

Time

60 minutes.

Choose Carefully

Use an event for which differing perspectives are known but which can safely be discussed.

Do not use active misconduct allegations, unresolved trauma, confidential pastoral matters, or situations requiring investigation.

Name the Event

What Do We Know?

Begin with facts that can reasonably be established.

What happened?

When?

What decisions were made?

What records exist?

What Did Different People Experience?

Invite people to use first-person language.

I remember...

I experienced...

At the time I thought...

What mattered to me was...

Avoid:

“Everybody knew...”

“They were trying to...”

“The real reason was...”

Listen Without Cross-Examination

After each account, the group may ask:

“Can you tell us more about what that was like for you?”

Do not ask questions designed to disprove the person’s experience.

Place the Accounts Side by Side

Ask:

What does each account help us see?

What did one person notice that another did not?

Did people’s roles affect what they experienced?

Did age, length of membership, leadership position, or other circumstances affect perspective?

What remains uncertain?

A Useful Sentence

Practice saying:

“Both of these experiences belong to our story.”

That does not mean every factual claim is equally accurate.

It means the congregation does not need to erase one person’s experience in order to honor another’s.

Record

What we can say with confidence:

What people experienced differently:

What remains uncertain:

What the different accounts help us understand:

FM-4.4 — Good for Whom?

Widening the Lens of Congregational Memory

Purpose

This exercise helps congregations examine important periods and ministries from perspectives that may not have been central to the dominant story.

It is particularly useful after FM-4.2 or FM-4.3.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Choose One Story or Era

Look Through Several Windows

Ask:

How might this period have been experienced by:

Longtime members?

Newcomers?

Children and youth?

People holding leadership positions?

People who rarely held leadership positions?

Staff?

Neighbors or community partners?

People who eventually left?

Important Discipline

Do not invent other people's experiences.

If you do not know, write:

We don't know.

Then ask:

Is there someone we could ask?

Is there a record we could consult?

Or is this simply a limit of our memory?

Ask About Belonging

Who found it easy to belong during this period?

Who may have found it harder?

What behaviors or structures created belonging?

What behaviors or structures created barriers?

Ask About Voice

Who helped make decisions?

Whose voices carried authority?

Whose voices were seldom heard?

The Goal

The goal is not to prove that a cherished period was secretly bad.

It is to make the remembered story spacious enough to contain more than one experience.

FM-4.5 — Receiving Wisdom from Difficult Seasons

What Did This Experience Teach Us?

Purpose

This is the central discernment exercise of Chapter Four.

It deliberately avoids reconstructing an old dispute in order to decide who was right.

Instead, it asks:

What wisdom does this experience offer us now?

Time

60–75 minutes.

Choosing the Experience

Choose a difficult period that:

- continues to influence congregational life;
- can be discussed responsibly;
- does not require formal investigation or professional intervention;
- contains potential wisdom for present relationships.

Establish the Boundary

The facilitator should say:

We are not reopening this event in order to retry the case.

We may never agree completely about what happened or why.

Our question today is narrower:

What did this season teach us about how we want to live together now?

Describe the Season Briefly

What happened?

Use as neutral a description as possible.

What Happened to Our Life Together?

Did trust change?

Did people leave?

Did people stop speaking?

Did new leaders emerge?

Did communication improve or deteriorate?

Did the congregation seek help?

Did relationships heal?

What Made the Situation Harder?

Perhaps:

Avoidance.

Gossip.

Secrecy.

Poor communication.

Anxiety.

Rushing decisions.

Personal attacks.

Unclear authority.

Failure to listen.

Outside pressures.

What Helped?

Perhaps:

Honest conversation.

Prayer.

Mediation.

Clear leadership.

Outside assistance.

Time.

Apology.

Forgiveness.

Better information.

Listening.

Boundaries.

What Do We Wish We Had Done Differently?

What Did We Learn?

Complete:

Because of this experience, we now understand that...

Turn Memory into Wisdom

Now complete:

When we face disagreement in the future, we want to remember...

When anxiety rises, we want to remember...

When major decisions are made, we want to remember...

When relationships become strained, we want to remember...

Release the Case

End by saying:

We do not need to settle every question about the past in order to receive wisdom from it.

The memory has given us something.

Carry the wisdom.

Do not carry the old argument into every new disagreement.

FM-4.6 — What Does This Memory Ask of Us?

Acknowledgment, Repentance, Reconciliation, or Release

Purpose

Not every difficult memory requires the same response.

Some simply need to be remembered truthfully.

Some call for acknowledgment.

Some reveal wrong for which repentance may be appropriate.

Some relationships may need reconciliation.

Some stories need to be released after their wisdom has been received.

This resource helps leaders discern the difference.

It is not a substitute for professional or denominational processes.

Begin With the Memory

Ask First

Is there unfinished work here?

Yes.

No.

We do not know.

Does the Story Need Acknowledgment?

Perhaps something important happened that has never been publicly recognized.

Acknowledgment says:

“This happened, and it belongs to our story.”

What needs acknowledgment?

Does the Story Call for Repentance?

Was there behavior, policy, exclusion, injustice, dishonesty, or harm for which the congregation bears responsibility?

Repentance is more than feeling bad.

It means truth-telling and turning.

What might repentance require?

Is Reconciliation Possible or Appropriate?

Is there a relationship that can responsibly be repaired?

Who would need to participate?

Would mediation or outside help be necessary?

Does the Story Need Release?

Some events have been discussed repeatedly.

No new wisdom is emerging.

No further action is possible.

The story may have become a permanent lens through which every new event is interpreted.

Ask:

Have we learned what we can?

Is there anything faithful left to do?

What would it mean to stop allowing this event to govern the present?

Sometimes the Answer Is: We Do Not Know Yet

Do not manufacture closure.

Record the question and seek appropriate guidance.

FM-4.7 — When to Stop the Exercise

A Safety and Referral Guide for Leaders

Purpose

Remembering has limits.

Congregational leaders need to recognize when an ordinary storytelling or discernment process is no longer the appropriate container for what has surfaced.

This resource should be available to every person facilitating Remembering.

Pause the Congregational Process When a Story Involves

- allegations of abuse or misconduct;
- sexual misconduct;
- abuse of children or vulnerable adults;
- threats or current safety concerns;
- serious unresolved trauma;
- confidential pastoral information;
- possible criminal conduct;
- active litigation or credible legal concerns;
- matters subject to denominational disciplinary processes;
- information that someone has no right to disclose publicly;
- circumstances in which a participant appears significantly overwhelmed or unsafe.

Do Not

Investigate the allegation yourself.

Ask the group to determine whether someone is telling the truth.

Require a person to tell more.

Promise confidentiality you cannot legally or denominationally guarantee.

Ask participants to reconcile publicly.

Invite the accused person and the person reporting harm to “work it out.”

Use prayer as a substitute for appropriate action.

Assume that because something happened long ago it no longer matters.

Instead

Pause.

Protect privacy.

Document only what is appropriate.

Consult the relevant denominational authority or safeguarding process.

Seek qualified professional guidance where needed.

Follow applicable reporting requirements.

Attend first to the well-being of those who may have been harmed.

A Facilitator Can Say

This is important, and I do not want us to treat it casually.

This gathering is not equipped to investigate or resolve what you have described.

We need to pause this part of the conversation and determine the appropriate way for it to be addressed.

Remember

Stopping an exercise is not failure.

Sometimes stopping is the most faithful act of leadership available.

FM-4.8 — Chapter Four Discernment Harvest

What Wisdom Does the Whole Story Give Us?

Purpose

This resource gathers the insights from Chapter Four without cataloguing every painful memory.

The goal is **wisdom**, not an archive of congregational wounds.

What We Receive with Gratitude

What parts of our history can we celebrate without needing to recreate them?

Where Nostalgia May Have Edited Our Story

Stories We Have Learned to Tell More Truthfully

Different Experiences We Need to Hold Together

Things We Know

Things We Do Not Know

Wisdom We Have Received from Difficult Seasons

Things That May Require Further Attention

Without recording confidential detail:

Things We May Be Ready to Release

Complete These Sentences

Our history does not require us to pretend that...

We are grateful that...

We regret that...

We have learned that...

We want to carry forward the wisdom that...

FM-4.9 — A Litany for Receiving the Whole Story

This litany may conclude Chapter Four or a congregational gathering devoted to honest remembering.

Leader

Faithful God,
you know the whole story.

The parts we celebrate
and the parts we avoid.

People

Give us courage to remember truthfully.

Leader

For moments of joy,
for ministries that gave life,
for friendships that endured,
for people whose faithfulness formed us,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For cherished seasons
whose gifts remain with us,

People

Teach us gratitude without nostalgia.

Leader

For times when our memories differ,
when one person's joy was another person's struggle,
when no single story contains the whole truth,

People

Teach us to listen with humility.

Leader

For things we did well,

People

Receive our gratitude.

Leader

For things we did poorly,

People

Give us courage to tell the truth.

Leader

For people we welcomed,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For people we failed to welcome,

People

Lead us toward repentance and greater faithfulness.

Leader

For conflicts from which we learned,

People

Help us carry the wisdom rather than the wound.

Leader

For wounds that still require care,

People

Give us patience, courage, and wise companions.

Leader

For things we cannot repair,

People

Teach us what it means to release them into your mercy.

Leader

Keep us from shame that says our failures are the whole story.

People

Your grace is larger than our failures.

Leader

Keep us from pride that says our successes are the whole story.

People

Your grace is the source of every good gift.

Leader

Help us receive the congregation we have actually been—

not the congregation we wish we had been,

not the congregation nostalgia remembers,

not the congregation our failures accuse us of being,

but this imperfect community
in which your Spirit has continued to work.

All

God of grace and truth,
receive our whole story.

Give us gratitude for its gifts,
humility about its failures,
wisdom from its difficult chapters,
and freedom from what no longer needs to bind us.

Teach us to remember truthfully
so that we may walk faithfully
into what comes next.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

Chapter Four has asked the congregation to look at its story without editing away either gratitude or difficulty.

That is enough.

Do not remain here indefinitely.

Remembering can become unhealthy when a congregation begins to believe that digging ever deeper into the past will eventually resolve every present problem.

The purpose has never been exhaustive historical analysis.

It is discernment.

Now another possibility opens.

Having remembered what happened, discovered the values beneath the stories, recognized God's faithfulness, and received difficult chapters more honestly, the congregation can now ask:

What has all of this history placed in our hands?

Not simply:

How many members remain?

How much money do we have?

How large is our building?

But:

What have we learned to do?

What relationships have we built?

What capacities have we developed?

What trust have we earned?

What gifts remain even though the ministries through which they first appeared are gone?

The past is not merely something to understand.

It has placed gifts in our hands.

That is the work of Chapter Five:

What We Carry Forward — Recognizing the Gifts Hidden in Our History.

REMEMBERING — FIELD MANUAL

Chapter Five Resources

What We Carry Forward

Recognizing the Gifts Hidden in Our History

The congregation has spent considerable time looking back.

By now, it has gathered stories, discovered lived values, recognized God's faithfulness, and received parts of its history that required more truthful telling.

Chapter Five asks a different question:

What has that history placed in our hands?

When congregations assess their resources, they often begin with what can be counted.

Members.

Money.

Staff.

Buildings.

Endowment.

Those things matter. But they are not the whole of a congregation's wealth.

Years of ministry also create resources that rarely appear on financial statements:

Trust.

Relationships.

Skills.

Experience.

Reputation.

Community knowledge.

Resilience.

Spiritual practices.

Leadership.

The ability to organize.

The ability to care.

The ability to adapt.

The ability to begin again.

The Field Guide makes two distinctions that should govern this chapter. First, the disappearance of a program does not necessarily mean the disappearance of the gifts developed through it. Second, a gift that existed historically is not automatically available today. People become tired. Skills disappear. Relationships change. Buildings deteriorate. Remembering should reveal possibility without assigning old expectations to people who no longer have the capacity to carry them.

For that reason, this chapter moves through three questions:

What gifts has our history developed?

Which of those gifts remain available now?

What has God actually placed in our hands today?

For most congregations, **FM-5.1, FM-5.3, FM-5.5, and FM-5.7** provide the core process. The remaining resources deepen particular areas without requiring every congregation to complete every exercise.

FM-5.1 — Gifts Hidden in Our Stories

What Did We Learn to Do?

Purpose

The stories gathered in earlier chapters contain evidence of congregational capacities.

This exercise helps participants discover them.

The question is no longer simply:

What happened?

It becomes:

What did this experience teach us to do?

Time

60–75 minutes.

Preparation

Select eight to twelve stories from earlier chapters.

Choose a range:

- successful ministries;
- difficult seasons;
- community engagement;
- building projects;
- pastoral transitions;
- conflicts;
- emergencies;
- ministries that ended;
- moments of change;
- significant partnerships.

Opening

The facilitator might say:

Every experience leaves something behind.

A ministry may end, but people may have learned how to organize.

A crisis may pass, but people may have learned how to care for one another.

A partnership may change, but relationships and community knowledge may remain.

Today we are looking beneath our stories again. This time we are asking what those experiences taught us to do.

Give Each Group a Story

For each story ask:

What Happened?

What Did This Experience Require of Us?

Did we need to:

organize?

listen?

teach?

raise money?

build relationships?

solve problems?

adapt?

care?

advocate?

communicate?

learn something new?

work with other organizations?

manage conflict?

take a risk?

What Did People Learn?

What Capacities Developed?

What Relationships Developed?

What Did We Discover We Were Capable of Doing?

Does Any of That Capacity Remain?

Do not answer this question too quickly.

For now:

Yes

Maybe

Probably not

We need to find out

Harvest

Create a large heading:

OUR STORIES SAY WE KNOW HOW TO...

Invite groups to post their discoveries.

Perhaps:

Teach.

Listen.

Organize.

Cook.

Raise money.

Repair.

Welcome.

Mentor.

Respond to emergencies.

Manage property.

Partner.

Care for grieving families.

Advocate.

Create beautiful worship.

Work with children.

Adapt.

Begin new ministries.

Look for Patterns

Which capacities appear in several different stories?

Which surprised us?

Which have we stopped noticing because they seem ordinary?

Which once depended on only one or two people?

Do not yet turn every capacity into a future ministry.

First, recognize what the history reveals.

FM-5.2 — Gifts That Outlived the Ministry

What Remains After the Program Ends?

Purpose

Chapter Two distinguished the value beneath a program from the program itself.

This exercise asks a related but different question:

What capacities, relationships, experience, or resources did the program leave behind?

Time

45–60 minutes.

Choose Several Former Ministries

Select ministries that no longer exist or have changed substantially.

For each, complete:

The Ministry

What Did It Do?

Why Did It Matter?

What Did People Learn Through It?

What Skills Developed?

What Relationships Developed?

What Physical Resources Were Created?

What Community Knowledge Was Gained?

What Spiritual Practices or Habits Developed?

Now Ask

Which of those gifts disappeared with the program?

Which may still exist?

Which need to be investigated?

An Example

Suppose a congregation once operated a weekday preschool.

The preschool closes.

It may appear that the resource is gone.

But the ministry may have left behind:

members experienced in early childhood education;

relationships with elementary schools;

knowledge about child safety;

classroom space;

playground equipment;

community recognition;

relationships with families;

a congregational commitment to children.

None of this means:

Restart the preschool.

It means:

The preschool may have left gifts behind.

Receive the gift.

Do not assume the old form must return.

FM-5.3 — Gifts Among Us

A Congregational Skills and Experience Map

Purpose

Congregations frequently know what members volunteer to do at church without knowing much about what those same people know how to do in the rest of their lives.

This exercise makes some of that hidden abundance visible.

It is not a volunteer recruitment form.

That distinction matters.

Identifying a gift does not obligate someone to use it for the congregation.

Time

60 minutes, or distribute the individual inventory in advance and use 45 minutes to map the results.

Individual Inventory

Complete:

I Know How To...

Check or add anything that applies.

Teach.

Listen.

Cook.

Garden.

Repair things.

Build things.

Work with children.

Work with teenagers.

Care for older adults.

Organize events.

Manage projects.

Manage money.

Write.

Edit.

Design.

Use technology.

Communicate publicly.

Make music.

Create art.

Facilitate groups.

Mediate disagreements.

Navigate community services.

Provide hospitality.

Lead organizations.

Work with government.

Work with schools.

Work with nonprofits.

Run a business.

Raise funds.

Provide transportation.

Visit people.

Care for property.

Plan worship.

Pray with others.

Other:

Experience I Carry

My work or professional experience includes:

My volunteer or community experience includes:

Life experiences that have taught me something useful include:

Relationships and Knowledge

I know something about:

I have relationships with:

Something People Here May Not Know About Me

Important Boundary

Now ask separately:

Which of these gifts, if any, would I currently be willing to offer?

This question should not be assumed from the inventory.

A retired teacher may possess extraordinary educational gifts and have no desire to teach another class.

A carpenter may be physically unable to do construction work.

A caregiver may already be carrying more than enough responsibility.

A gift can exist without being available.

Respect the difference.

Create a Congregational Map

The Remembering Team can cluster responses under broad headings:

Teaching and Formation

Care and Relationships

Organization and Leadership

Creative Gifts

Practical Skills

Community Knowledge

Professional Experience

Hospitality

Communication

Other

Do not publish individuals' information without permission.

The goal is to recognize abundance, not create a congregational labor database.

FM-5.4 — Our Relational Wealth

Mapping the Relationships We Carry

Purpose

Some of a congregation's most significant resources exist between people and institutions.

Relationships are assets.

A congregation may have decades of trust with a school, nonprofit, neighborhood association, business, civic organization, or another congregation.

Those relationships may matter more for future ministry than another room in the church building.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Materials

Use a large sheet of paper.

Place the congregation in the center.

Draw several surrounding circles.

Begin Close to the Congregation

Ask:

With whom do we already have active relationships?

Perhaps:

Schools.

Food banks.

Shelters.

Hospitals.

Nonprofits.

Businesses.

Other churches.

Presbytery or denominational partners.

Neighborhood associations.

Scouting organizations.

Community groups.

Local government.

Arts organizations.

Counseling agencies.

Senior communities.

Colleges.

Libraries.

Put Each Relationship on the Map

Place stronger or more active relationships closer to the congregation.

Place weaker or occasional relationships farther away.

For Each Relationship, Ask

How did this relationship begin?

Who currently carries it?

What have we done together?

What trust exists?

Is the relationship mutual?

Do we mostly give?

Do we mostly receive?

Do we genuinely know one another?

Then Ask About Informal Relationships

Who in the congregation knows:

the mayor?

school principals?

nonprofit directors?

business owners?

social workers?

teachers?

community organizers?

neighborhood leaders?

people in other faith communities?

Do not record private contact information.

Simply notice the relational network.

Assess the Relationship

For each major relationship:

Active and strong

Active but dependent on one person

Occasional

Historical but no longer active

We need to learn more

The Bus-Factor Question

Ask:

If the one person who carries this relationship were no longer available tomorrow, would the congregation still have the relationship?

If the answer is no, the relationship may be real but fragile.

Final Reflection

Which relationships are part of our congregational wealth?

Which have we taken for granted?

Which depend too heavily on one person?

Which belong more to our history than our present?

Do not yet ask whom you should partner with next.

That belongs more naturally in Listening.

For now, map what already exists.

FM-5.5 — Is the Gift Available Now?

From Historical Capacity to Present Reality

Purpose

This may be the most important corrective in Chapter Five.

Remembering can produce excitement:

“Look at everything we know how to do!”

But historical capacity and present capacity are not the same thing.

This exercise tests the gifts discovered so far against present reality.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Preparation

Bring the lists generated by FM-5.1 through FM-5.4.

Create four columns:

GIFT	PRESENT?	AVAILABLE?	SUSTAINABLE?
-------------	-----------------	-------------------	---------------------

Define the Questions

Present?

Does this gift or capacity actually exist among us now?

Available?

Are the people, relationships, facilities, or resources involved genuinely available?

Sustainable?

Could this capacity be used without exhausting people or consuming resources the congregation cannot maintain?

Work Through the Gifts

For each significant gift ask:

The Gift

Evidence from Our History

Is It Present Today?

Yes

Partly

No

We need to find out

Who or What Carries It?

Is It Freely Available?

Yes

Maybe

No

We have not asked

What Limitations Need to Be Recognized?

Time?

Energy?

Age?

Health?

Money?

Building condition?

Staffing?

Technology?

Training?

Changing relationships?

Other?

Could This Gift Be Used Sustainably?

What Would Make It More Sustainable?

Avoid Wishful Asset Mapping

Do not write:

“We have lots of teachers.”

if what you mean is:

“Several retired teachers used to lead Christian education and are now tired.”

Do not write:

“We have a great relationship with the school.”

if the principal who created that relationship retired five years ago.

Do not write:

“We have excellent space.”

if the space requires substantial repair before anyone can safely use it.

Accuracy is not pessimism.

It is stewardship.

A More Faithful Statement

Instead of:

We have a building.

perhaps:

We have approximately 6,000 square feet of currently usable space available three days each week.

Instead of:

We have musicians.

perhaps:

We have four active musicians currently willing to participate beyond Sunday worship.

Specificity turns remembered abundance into usable knowledge.

FM-5.6 — The Resources We Rarely Count

Looking Beyond Money, Membership, and Buildings

Purpose

This exercise deliberately widens the congregation's understanding of resources.

It is particularly useful for congregations whose dominant story has become one of decline or scarcity.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Create Seven Stations

Place these headings around the room.

PEOPLE

What knowledge, experience, skills, leadership, creativity, and wisdom exist among us?

RELATIONSHIPS

Who knows us?

Whom do we know?

Where does trust already exist?

PLACE

What do we know about this neighborhood or community because we have lived here?

REPUTATION

What do people associate with this congregation?

Where have we earned trust?

Where might trust be weak?

EXPERIENCE

What have we done before that taught us something useful?

PHYSICAL RESOURCES

What property, rooms, equipment, land, kitchen facilities, parking, technology, vehicles, or other resources exist?

SPIRITUAL RESOURCES

What practices sustain us?

Prayer?

Worship?

Hospitality?

Scripture?

Music?

Care?

Discernment?

Service?

Walk the Stations

Participants add specific resources.

Avoid vague entries.

Instead of:

“Good people”

write:

“Three people with nonprofit board experience.”

Instead of:

“Community connections”

write:

“Twenty-year relationship with Jefferson Elementary.”

Add an Eighth Station

WHAT ARE WE FORGETTING TO COUNT?

Let participants identify categories the exercise missed.

Gather

Ask:

Which category surprised us?

Where do we have more than we realized?

Where do we have less than we assumed?

What resource have we historically undervalued?

Scarcity and Abundance

Do not replace one distortion with another.

A congregation can possess substantial gifts and still face real limitations.

Faithful asset mapping says:

This is what we have.

It does not say:

We have everything we need to do anything we can imagine.

FM-5.7 — What Has God Placed in Our Hands?

Creating the Congregational Gift Map

Purpose

This is the synthesis resource for Chapter Five.

It brings together the gifts discovered through the chapter and creates a realistic picture of the congregation's present assets.

This is not yet a ministry plan.

It is an inventory of what has been entrusted to this congregation now.

Preparation

Gather the results of:

- FM-5.1 Gifts Hidden in Our Stories;
- FM-5.2 Gifts That Outlived the Ministry;
- FM-5.3 Gifts Among Us;
- FM-5.4 Our Relational Wealth;
- FM-5.5 Is the Gift Available Now?;
- FM-5.6 The Resources We Rarely Count.

You do not need to have used all six resources.

Create the Map

1. Gifts Among Our People

What skills, experiences, capacities, and wisdom are genuinely present and available?

2. Relational Gifts

What relationships and networks are currently strong?

3. Community Knowledge

What do we know about this place because of our history here?

4. Congregational Capacities

What have we demonstrated that we know how to do?

5. Spiritual Gifts and Practices

What practices and qualities sustain our life with God and one another?

6. Physical Resources

What facilities, land, equipment, technology, or other tangible assets are actually usable?

7. Reputation and Trust

Where has the congregation earned credibility?

8. Financial Resources

What financial resources provide genuine capacity?

Do not conduct a full financial analysis here.

Record only what is relevant to understanding available assets.

Now Apply the Reality Test

For every major gift ask:

Is it present?

Is it available?

Is it sustainable?

Remove or qualify anything that fails the test.

Our Strongest Present Gifts

From the complete map, identify no more than ten gifts that appear particularly significant.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Do Not Rank Them by Prestige

A commercial kitchen is not necessarily more important than a relationship with the elementary school.

An endowment is not necessarily more important than people who know how to listen.

A retired executive is not necessarily more useful than the person who knows every family on the block.

The question is:

What has God placed in our hands?

FM-5.8 — Chapter Five Discernment Harvest

What Are We Carrying Forward?

Purpose

This short resource records the discoveries that need to travel into the remaining movements of Remembering and eventually into Listening.

Gifts Our History Has Developed

Gifts Hidden in Ministries That No Longer Exist

Gifts Among Our People

Relational Wealth We Carry

Community Knowledge We Carry

Spiritual Practices and Capacities That Sustain Us

Physical and Financial Resources Actually Available

Gifts We Thought We Had but Discovered Are No Longer Available

Gifts That Are Present but Not Currently Sustainable

Gifts We Have Consistently Undervalued

Something That Surprised Us

Complete This Sentence

When we look honestly at what God has placed in our hands today, we discover...

FM-5.9 — A Prayer for the Gifts We Carry

Leader

Generous God,
we have spent much of this journey remembering what has passed.

Today we give thanks for what remains.

People

Help us recognize what you have placed in our hands.

Leader

For gifts carried by people,
for wisdom learned through years of living,
for skills offered quietly,
for experience accumulated through work and service,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For relationships built over years,
for trust earned slowly,
for neighbors who know us
and partners who have walked beside us,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For ministries that ended
but left something behind—

knowledge,
friendship,
courage,
compassion,
experience,

People

Teach us to receive the gift without clinging to the form.

Leader

For buildings and land,
money and equipment,
rooms in which people have gathered
and tables around which strangers became friends,

People

Teach us to use what we have faithfully.

Leader

For gifts that once served us
but are no longer available,

People

Teach us to release them with gratitude.

Leader

For people who have carried much
and no longer have strength to carry what they once did,

People

Teach us not to confuse gratitude with obligation.

Leader

For places where our resources are limited,

People

Give us honesty without fear.

Leader

For places where scarcity has kept us from seeing what remains,

People

Open our eyes to abundance.

Leader

Keep us from believing that we have nothing.

Keep us also from pretending that we have everything.

People

Teach us faithful stewardship of what is actually ours to offer.

All

God of every good gift,
receive what we have.

Not what we once had.
Not what we wish we had.
Not what another congregation has.

Receive what you have placed in our hands now.

Give us gratitude to recognize it,
wisdom to understand it,
freedom to offer it,
and patience to wait
until we have listened for how it may be used.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

By the end of Chapter Five, the congregation should see its resources more fully than it did when Remembering began.

But there is one conclusion it should **not** draw:

“Now that we know our gifts, we know what our next ministry should be.”

Not yet.

A congregation may discover that it has teachers, a commercial kitchen, strong community relationships, available rooms, excellent organizers, and people who care deeply about children.

That does not automatically mean:

Start an after-school program.

The gifts tell us something about the people entering the future.

They do not yet tell us what faithfulness will require there.

There is more to remember first.

Hidden within the congregation's stories is another kind of gift:

its capacity to imagine.

At some point, someone asked:

What if we tried this?

What if we changed that?

What if we helped?

What if we partnered with them?

What if we used the building differently?

What if we did something we have never done before?

Some of those ideas succeeded.

Some failed.

Some lasted decades.

Some lasted six months.

Together, however, they reveal something important.

This congregation has adapted before.

It has experimented before.

It has taken risks before.

It has imagined before.

Recovering that memory may matter deeply in a pastoral transition.

That is the work of Chapter Six:

Remembering When We Were Most Alive — Recovering Our Capacity for Imagination.

REMEMBERING — FIELD MANUAL

Chapter Six Resources

Remembering When We Were Most Alive

Recovering Our Capacity for Imagination

By now, the congregation has remembered much.

It has gathered formative stories, discovered lived values, recognized God's faithfulness, received difficult parts of its history more truthfully, and identified gifts that remain available today.

Chapter Six returns to those stories with another question:

When have we been most alive?

Not necessarily when attendance was highest.

Not necessarily when the budget was largest.

Not necessarily when the church was busiest.

When was there energy?

Curiosity?

Courage?

A willingness to try?

When did someone see something others had not seen?

When did people ask:

What if...?

The Field Guide makes an important claim: congregations sometimes tell themselves, "*We aren't creative anymore.*" Their own histories often contradict that story. Nearly every established ministry was new once. Someone proposed it before anyone knew whether it would work.

This chapter is not yet an invitation to brainstorm the congregation's next ministries.

That would be premature.

The next movement, **Listening**, will ask the congregation to turn outward and pay attention to its community. Only then can the congregation begin bringing what it carries into conversation with what it hears.

For now, the task is simpler and more fundamental:

Remember that you have imagined before.

For most congregations, **FM-6.1, FM-6.3, FM-6.5, and FM-6.7** provide a complete core process.

FM-6.1 — When Were We Most Alive?

Remembering Energy, Engagement, and Purpose

Purpose

This exercise helps the congregation identify periods and experiences marked by unusual vitality.

The purpose is not to determine the congregation's "best years."

It is to discover what was happening when people experienced energy, engagement, purpose, and possibility.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Preparation

Return to the Chapter One timeline and the stories gathered throughout Remembering.

Do not begin by looking at membership statistics.

Begin with memory.

Individual Reflection

Ask participants:

When have you experienced this congregation as especially alive?

Write down one or two moments.

Then ask:

What was happening?

Who was involved?

What were people doing?

What made the experience feel alive?

What was at stake?

Tell the Stories

In groups of four to six, each person tells one story.

Listeners should pay particular attention to:

- energy;
- relationships;
- purpose;
- experimentation;
- community connection;
- participation;
- courage;
- learning;
- spiritual depth;
- surprise.

After Each Story, Ask

What gave this experience energy?

What were people responding to?

Was something new being attempted?

Were people working primarily for themselves or for others?

Did new people become involved?

What role did relationships play?

What role did faith play?

Look Across the Stories

Ask:

What conditions appear repeatedly?

Were we most alive when we were:

serving?

learning?

building?

responding to crisis?

creating?

worshiping?

working across generations?

partnering with others?

taking risks?

solving problems?

meeting people beyond the congregation?

A Critical Distinction

Ask:

Was the congregation alive because it was large, or was something happening that generated life?

Those are not necessarily the same thing.

A congregation may remember a period of high attendance with little imagination.

It may also remember a small ministry involving fifteen people that changed both the participants and the community.

Record

We seem to experience particular vitality when...

Do not turn the answer into a prescription yet.

Simply notice.

FM-6.2 — “What If We...?”

Remembering the Question Before the Ministry

Purpose

Established ministries often look inevitable in retrospect.

They were not.

Before the food pantry existed, someone had to suggest it.

Before worship changed, someone had to imagine another way.

Before the building was constructed, someone had to picture something that did not exist.

This exercise retrieves the moment **before** the familiar ministry became familiar.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Choose Several Ministries or Changes

Select ministries, decisions, or adaptations that eventually became significant.

For each ask:

What existed before this?

What changed?

Then Try to Recover the Beginning

Who first noticed the opportunity or problem?

What question was being asked?

What did someone propose?

What might the original “What if...?” have sounded like?

For Example

What if we opened the fellowship hall one night a week?

What if we partnered with the school instead of creating another church program?

What if children participated in worship instead of leaving for the whole service?

What if we bought the property next door?

What if we tried something we have never done before?

Ask

Did everyone immediately agree?

What concerns were raised?

What made people willing to try?

What happened next?

The Point

Do not allow the conversation to become:

“Was that ministry successful?”

The question is:

“How did an idea that did not yet exist become imaginable?”

Complete

One thing our history teaches us about how new ideas begin here is...

FM-6.3 — Remembering the Risk

What Made Experimentation Possible?

Purpose

Imagination is not merely having ideas.

Congregations have ideas all the time.

Imagination becomes consequential when people are willing to act without knowing exactly what will happen.

This exercise explores the conditions that have historically made faithful experimentation possible.

Time

60 minutes.

Select Three or Four Stories

Choose moments when the congregation:

- tried something new;
- changed a longstanding practice;
- entered a partnership;
- committed significant resources;
- responded creatively to a problem;
- ventured beyond familiar ministry.

For Each Story, Ask

What Was the Experiment?

What Was Uncertain?

What did people not know?

What Was at Risk?

Money?

Reputation?

Relationships?

Time?

Tradition?

Failure?

Embarrassment?

What Made People Willing to Try?

A trusted leader?

A clear need?

Prayer?

A crisis?

A small first step?

Outside encouragement?

Available resources?

Strong relationships?

A compelling opportunity?

Did We Start Big or Small?

Was Permission Needed?

How Did Leadership Respond?

What Happened When Problems Appeared?

Look for Conditions

Across the stories, ask:

What made experimentation easier here?

What made it harder?

Did people need certainty before acting?

Were small experiments easier than large commitments?

Did trusted relationships make risk possible?

Did outside partnerships reduce risk?

Did urgency sometimes free people to act?

Record

CONDITIONS THAT HAVE HELPED US EXPERIMENT

CONDITIONS THAT HAVE MADE EXPERIMENTATION HARDER

Do Not Judge the Present Yet

The purpose is not to say:

“We need to become risk-takers again.”

It is to understand the conditions under which this particular congregation has historically been able to imagine and experiment.

FM-6.4 — Faithful Experiments That Did Not Work

Remembering Without Calling Everything a Failure

Purpose

Congregations often remember successful innovations and quietly forget unsuccessful ones.

That can create a dangerous mythology:

Faithful ideas succeed.

They do not always.

Some experiments fail.

Some work briefly.

Some reveal that the original assumption was wrong.

Some produce an unexpected benefit.

Some simply end.

A congregation that cannot tolerate unsuccessful experiments will eventually stop experimenting.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Begin Carefully

Ask:

Can we remember something we tried that did not work as hoped?

Choose examples that can be discussed without blaming individuals.

For Each Experiment

What Did We Try?

What Were We Hoping Would Happen?

What Actually Happened?

Why Do We Think It Did Not Work?

Be cautious about certainty.

Was Anything Gained Anyway?

Did we:

learn something?

form a relationship?

discover a limitation?

develop a skill?

identify a need?

discover that the need was different from what we assumed?

Did We Stop at the Right Time?

How Did We Treat the People Who Took the Risk?

The Important Question

Did the experience make us more or less willing to experiment afterward?

Why?

Reframe

Instead of automatically calling the effort:

a failure

try:

an experiment that taught us...

Complete:

But Do Not Romanticize Failure

Some experiments are poorly designed.

Some ignore good advice.

Some waste resources.

Some hurt people.

Calling something an experiment does not remove accountability.

The question is whether the congregation can learn without requiring every faithful attempt to succeed.

FM-6.5 — We Have Adapted Before

Mapping Our History of Change

Purpose

Congregations experiencing transition often describe change as though it were an alien force arriving from outside.

Yet the congregation that exists today is itself the result of countless adaptations.

This exercise makes that history visible.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Create Several Categories

Place these headings around the room:

WORSHIP

LEADERSHIP

MISSION

BUILDINGS AND PROPERTY

CHRISTIAN FORMATION

STAFFING

COMMUNITY

TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

Invite Participants to Add Changes

Under Worship, perhaps:

Changed worship times.

Added instruments.

Changed hymnals.

Introduced screens.

Changed communion practices.

Created another service.

Under Mission:

Shifted from denominational giving to local partnerships.

Started community ministries.

Ended mission trips.

Created new partnerships.

For Each Significant Change, Ask

What changed?

Why?

Was the change chosen or forced?

How did people respond initially?

What helped the congregation adapt?

What was lost?

What was gained?

What eventually became normal?

Then Ask a Particularly Useful Question

Which things we now call “tradition” were once innovations?

List them.

That discovery can be powerful.

The congregation’s traditions may themselves be the residue of earlier imagination.

Look for the Pattern

When change came, did this congregation usually:

act quickly?

deliberate for a long time?

experiment first?

wait until change became unavoidable?

depend on pastoral leadership?

depend on lay champions?

seek outside help?

divide?

adapt quietly?

Complete

Our history suggests that we adapt most faithfully when...

Remember

The purpose is not to celebrate change for its own sake.

Some changes were wise.

Some were not.

Adaptability is not the same thing as chasing novelty.

Faithful adaptability means responding to changed circumstances without losing the deeper values and calling that give the congregation identity.

FM-6.6 — Our Imagination DNA

What Helps This Congregation Become Curious?

Purpose

By now, several patterns should be emerging.

This resource brings them together.

It asks:

Under what conditions has imagination tended to emerge in this congregation?

Time

45–60 minutes.

Review the Chapter

Look back at:

- times of vitality;
- “What if...?” moments;
- faithful risks;
- unsuccessful experiments;
- periods of adaptation.

Complete the Following

We Become More Imaginative When...

Check anything supported by your stories.

A clear need becomes visible.

Someone asks a different question.

A trusted leader gives permission.

Members know the people affected.

We begin with a small experiment.

We have a strong community partner.

Young people become involved.

New people bring another perspective.

A crisis disrupts our usual patterns.

We pray together.

We have enough resources to risk something.

We stop trying to protect an old program.

Someone champions the idea.

We see another congregation or organization doing something interesting.

We become curious rather than defensive.

Other:

We Become Less Imaginative When...

We are anxious about money.

We are afraid of conflict.

Every new idea must become permanent.

We expect certainty before acting.

People fear criticism if something fails.

A few people control decisions.

We are exhausted.

We confuse tradition with a particular form.

We try to solve everything at once.

We begin with a program rather than listening.

Other:

Ask

Which of these conclusions are genuinely supported by our history?

Which are assumptions?

What surprised us?

Write a Short Description

Complete:

When this congregation becomes imaginative, it usually happens because...

Do Not Turn This into a Formula

There is no congregational imagination gene.

“Imagination DNA” is simply a way of naming recurring conditions.

The Spirit remains free.

People remain surprising.

FM-6.7 — We Have Imagined Before

Creating an Evidence Wall

Purpose

This is the synthesis activity for Chapter Six.

It gives the congregation visible evidence that creativity, adaptation, curiosity, and experimentation are already part of its history.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Create Four Large Headings

WE NOTICED

WE ASKED

WE TRIED

WE LEARNED

Use Stories from the Congregation's History

For each significant example, complete four cards.

WE NOTICED

What need, opportunity, change, or problem did someone notice?

WE ASKED

What question opened possibility?

Perhaps:

What if...?

Why not...?

Who else could...?

What are we missing?

WE TRIED

What did people actually do?

WE LEARNED

What happened?

What did the congregation discover?

Put the Four Cards Together

Create a sequence across the wall.

For example:

WE NOTICED

Children in the neighborhood had nowhere safe to go after school.

→

WE ASKED

What if the church opened its building two afternoons a week?

→

WE TRIED

Members partnered with teachers and began a homework program.

→

WE LEARNED

The children needed relationships as much as tutoring, and the congregation developed strong connections with families.

Add Many Stories

Include:

successful experiments;

short-lived experiments;
adaptations;
responses to crisis;
changes in worship;
partnerships;
building decisions;
ministries people had forgotten were once new.

Stand Back

Read the wall.

Then ask:

What do you notice?

What patterns appear?

What kinds of things did we notice?

What kinds of questions opened possibility?

How did we usually begin?

What did unsuccessful efforts teach us?

Say It Together

Invite participants to complete:

We have imagined before when...

Then:

Therefore, we know that this congregation is capable of...

Do not finish with:

“So what should we do next?”

Not yet.

Instead:

“What might become possible if we bring this remembered capacity for imagination into genuine listening?”

That question points forward without prematurely answering it.

FM-6.8 — Chapter Six Discernment Harvest

What Have We Learned About Our Capacity to Imagine?

Purpose

This short resource preserves what the congregation needs to carry forward.

The Remembering Team can complete it from the work already done.

Times When We Remember Being Especially Alive

What Those Experiences Had in Common

Significant “What If...?” Moments in Our History

Risks We Were Willing to Take

What Made Those Risks Possible

Experiments That Did Not Work as Hoped but Taught Us Something

Ways We Have Adapted Over Time

Things We Now Call Traditions That Were Once Innovations

Conditions That Tend to Encourage Imagination Here

Conditions That Tend to Shut Imagination Down

Complete These Sentences

Our history contradicts the claim that we have never been able to change because...

When we are at our most imaginative, we tend to...

One thing our history gives us permission to believe about ourselves is...

FM-6.9 — A Prayer for Holy Imagination

Leader

Creating God,
before there was something,
you imagined.

You spoke into emptiness
and called forth possibility.

People

Awaken imagination among us.

Leader

We remember people who saw what did not yet exist,
people who noticed what others overlooked,
people who asked questions no one had asked,
people who tried something without knowing how it would end.

People

We give you thanks for their courage.

Leader

For ministries that began with:

“What if?”

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For changes that once felt unfamiliar
and later became part of our tradition,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For experiments that flourished,

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

For experiments that ended
but taught us something,

People

We give you thanks for what we learned.

Leader

Forgive us when fear convinces us
that faithfulness means repeating yesterday.

People

Make us curious again.

Leader

Forgive us when impatience convinces us
that every new idea must be God's answer.

People

Teach us to listen before we act.

Leader

Free us from the need to know the ending
before taking a faithful first step.

People

Give us courage to experiment.

Leader

Free us from the fear that an unsuccessful attempt
means we have failed you.

People

Teach us to learn.

Leader

And keep us from imagining merely for ourselves.

People

Turn our attention toward our neighbors.

Leader

We have remembered that we can imagine.

Now teach us not to ask first:

What would we like to do?

People

Teach us to ask what you are already doing around us.

Leader

Not first:

What program should we start?

People

Teach us to listen.

Leader

Not first:

How can we get people to come here?

People

Teach us to go near enough to hear them.

All

God of creation and new creation,
receive the imagination you have already planted among us.

Give us curiosity without restlessness,
courage without recklessness,
creativity without self-importance,
and patience enough to listen.

We have imagined before.

Prepare us to imagine faithfully again.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

Chapter Six has recovered something congregations easily forget:

The congregation you inherited was itself imagined.

Someone imagined the sanctuary.

Someone imagined the Sunday school.

Someone imagined the mission partnership.

Someone imagined the choir.

Someone imagined a new worship service.

Someone imagined using the building differently.

Someone imagined serving people the congregation did not yet know.

Even the traditions that now feel permanent were once acts of imagination.

Yet remembering that capacity brings a temptation.

The congregation may be ready to start generating ideas.

Resist it for now.

This is not yet the moment for:

What new ministry should we start?

How can we attract young families?

What should we do with the building?

How can we grow?

Those questions turn attention back toward the congregation before it has finished learning how to see.

Remembering has established:

We have imagined before.

It has not established:

We already know what needs imagining now.

Two important movements of Remembering still lie ahead.

First, the congregation must examine the story it tells about itself. A congregation can possess a history full of courage and still inhabit a narrative of helplessness. Or it can carry a complicated history while telling itself a flattering story that prevents learning.

So the next question becomes:

What story are we telling about who we are now?

That is the work of Chapter Seven:

The Story We Tell About Ourselves — Choosing a Faithful Narrative.

REMEMBERING — FIELD MANUAL

Chapter Seven Resources

The Story We Tell About Ourselves

Choosing a Faithful Narrative

Every congregation carries a story about itself.

Usually, it carries several at once.

We are a family.

We have always been a mission church.

We used to have a wonderful youth program.

We are the church that welcomes everyone.

We have been through a lot.

We don't handle conflict well.

We are getting older.

Young people don't come to church anymore.

Nobody knows we are here.

We tried that once.

These sentences may contain truth.

They may also contain memories hardened into conclusions.

The Field Guide makes an important distinction: the story a congregation tells about itself is never neutral. Stories can open possibilities or close them. A congregation that repeatedly says, "*We are dying*," may begin interpreting everything through decline. Another that insists, "*We are a welcoming church*," may become unable to hear people who did not experience it that way.

The purpose of this chapter is not to replace a negative story with a positive one.

It is not branding.

It is not public relations.

It is not writing the Ministry Discernment Profile.

The task is to develop a **faithful narrative**—a way of telling the congregation’s story that is honest about loss and limitation, grateful for gifts and faithfulness, and open enough to allow God to do something the congregation has not yet imagined.

This chapter gathers much of the work already done.

For most congregations, **FM-7.1, FM-7.3, FM-7.5, and FM-7.7** provide the core process.

FM-7.1 — “We Are the Church That...”

Hearing the Stories We Already Tell

Purpose

Before choosing a faithful narrative, a congregation needs to hear the narratives it already carries.

This exercise gathers them without immediately evaluating them.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Materials

Provide cards or sticky notes.

Create several large headings:

WE ARE...

WE USED TO...

WE HAVE ALWAYS...

WE NEVER...

PEOPLE KNOW US FOR...

THE PROBLEM IS...

Individual Reflection

Ask participants to complete as many of these sentences as they can.

Do not overthink them.

Write the phrases you actually hear around the congregation.

We are...

We used to...

We have always...

We never...

People know us for...

The problem is...

Post the Responses

Place each response beneath the appropriate heading.

Allow everyone to walk around and read.

Do not debate them yet.

Notice

Ask:

Which statements appear repeatedly?

Which seem to carry pride?

Which carry grief?

Which carry frustration?

Which sound hopeful?

Which sound resigned?

Which refer mostly to the past?

Which describe the present?

Which make claims about the future?

Listen for Absolute Language

Circle words such as:

always

never

everyone

nobody

can't

used to

anymore

These words are not necessarily wrong.

But they deserve examination.

Final Question

Ask:

If a stranger listened to the way we talk about ourselves, what kind of congregation would they imagine us to be?

Do not correct the story yet.

First, hear it.

FM-7.2 — The Sentences We Repeat

When Description Becomes Destiny

Purpose

Some congregational statements begin as descriptions and gradually become rules.

We are an older congregation.

may become:

Older congregations cannot begin anything new.

We do not have many children.

may become:

Ministry with families is no longer possible.

We tried that before.

may become:

There is no reason to try anything like it again.

This exercise helps distinguish observation from conclusion.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Select Several Repeated Statements

Use statements from FM-7.1.

For each, complete:

THE SENTENCE WE REPEAT

What Part of This Is Observable Fact?

What Part Is Interpretation?

What Conclusion Have We Attached to It?

Does the Conclusion Necessarily Follow?

Yes

No

We don't know

What Evidence Supports the Conclusion?

What Evidence Complicates It?

Example

Sentence:

“We are an older congregation.”

Observable reality:

The median age of active members is high.

Interpretation:

We lack the energy to do significant ministry.

Evidence complicating that interpretation:

Members provide hundreds of volunteer hours, several people have extensive community relationships, and older members have launched significant ministries before.

Another Example

Sentence:

“Young families don't come here.”

Observable reality may be:

Few young families currently worship here.

But:

Young families do not want anything we could offer

is a different claim.

The congregation does not yet know that.

Listening may help discover what is actually true.

Complete

A statement we have sometimes treated as destiny but may actually be a description is:

Remember

Truthful description is necessary.

Fatalism is not.

FM-7.3 — Is It Still True?

Testing Our Congregational Narratives Against the Evidence

Purpose

Congregational stories often outlive the circumstances that created them.

A church may still say:

“We are the congregation with all the children.”

twenty years after its demographics changed.

Another may say:

“We don’t have money.”

while possessing substantial financial assets.

Another may believe:

“We cannot handle change.”

despite a history full of adaptation.

This exercise tests familiar narratives against the evidence gathered throughout Remembering.

Time

60–75 minutes.

Preparation

Select ten to fifteen significant statements from FM-7.1 and FM-7.2.

Create five headings:

STILL TRUE

PARTLY TRUE

ONCE TRUE

NEVER THE WHOLE STORY

WE DON'T KNOW YET

Read Each Statement

Ask participants to place it under the heading they believe best fits.

Then discuss.

Require Evidence

For every placement ask:

What have we learned during Remembering that supports this?

Return to:

- Chapter One stories;
- Chapter Two lived values;
- Chapter Three Ebenezer stories;
- Chapter Four whole-story wisdom;
- Chapter Five gift map;
- Chapter Six imagination history.

STILL TRUE

What evidence shows this continues to describe us?

PARTLY TRUE

What part remains true?

What part does not?

ONCE TRUE

When was it true?

What changed?

NEVER THE WHOLE STORY

What has the statement left out?

WE DON'T KNOW YET

What would we need to learn before making this claim?

Pay Attention to “We Don’t Know Yet”

This may be one of the most important categories.

For example:

“The neighborhood isn’t interested in church.”

Do we know?

“Young adults aren’t interested in what we offer.”

Have we asked?

“The community needs a food ministry.”

How do we know?

These may be questions for **Listening**, not conclusions from Remembering.

Final Reflection

Ask:

Which stories about ourselves need to be retired?

Which need qualification?

Which have become more convincing?

Which questions need to travel with us into Listening?

FM-7.4 — Stories That Close the Future

Recognizing Problem-Saturated Narratives

Purpose

Some stories become so dominant that they absorb everything else.

A congregation may have experienced real decline, conflict, loss, aging, financial difficulty, or disappointment.

The problem begins when that experience becomes the only available story.

Time

45–60 minutes.

Identify a Dominant Problem Story

Complete:

A difficult story we often tell about ourselves is:

Perhaps:

We are dying.

We cannot change.

We never have enough people.

Nobody wants to volunteer.

The community has changed too much.

We always fight about everything.

We have never recovered from the last pastor.

Young people do not want church.

Do Not Argue with It

Instead ask:

What experiences gave this story credibility?

Honor those experiences.

Then Ask for Exceptions

When has this story **not** been completely true?

If:

“Nobody volunteers,”

when have people volunteered enthusiastically?

If:

“We cannot change,”

what changes documented in Chapter Six contradict that?

If:

“We are dying,”

where is life nevertheless visible?

If:

“The community does not care about us,”

what relationships from Chapter Five complicate that claim?

Ask

What does the dominant story help us notice?

What does it cause us to overlook?

How does it affect the way we interpret new possibilities?

How might someone behave differently if they believed this story was not the whole story?

A Crucial Distinction

The goal is not:

negative story → positive story

It is:

thin story → fuller story

A fuller story can say:

“Our congregation is smaller than it once was, and we grieve some things we can no longer sustain. We have also discovered significant gifts, relationships, and capacities that remain alive among us.”

Both truths belong.

FM-7.5 — Telling the Truth Without Closing the Story

Practicing Faithful Reframing

Purpose

This exercise teaches participants to describe present reality honestly without turning description into a verdict on the future.

Time

60 minutes.

Begin with a Familiar Statement

Write:

OUR CURRENT STORY

Ask Four Questions

1. What Truth Must We Preserve?

Do not sanitize reality.

2. What Does This Story Leave Out?

What gifts, exceptions, relationships, or evidence are missing?

3. What Does This Story Claim About the Future That We Cannot Actually Know?

4. How Could We Tell the Story More Fully?

Examples

Instead of:

“We are dying.”

Try:

“Our congregation has become significantly smaller, and some ministries we once sustained are no longer possible in their former form. At the same time, we continue to carry deep relationships, experienced leadership, and a strong history of adapting when circumstances change.”

Instead of:

“We don’t have young people.”

Try:

“Few children and young adults currently participate in congregational life. We do not yet understand how younger people in our community experience this congregation or what relationships with them might become possible.”

Instead of:

“We are stuck in the past.”

Try:

“We value traditions that have carried faith across generations. Our history also shows that many of those traditions were themselves created through earlier periods of adaptation.”

Test the Reframing

Ask:

Is it true?

Does it acknowledge loss?

Does it acknowledge gifts?

Does it avoid pretending everything is fine?

Does it avoid predicting failure?

Does it leave room for what we do not yet know?

Does it create curiosity?

Complete Several

The story we often tell:

A fuller, more faithful telling:

Repeat as needed.

Remember

Reframing is not spin.

If the new version merely sounds nicer, it has failed.

A faithful narrative should be **more truthful**, not merely more encouraging.

FM-7.6 — Who Else Might Tell This Story Differently?

Testing the Narrative Beyond the Usual Voices

Purpose

Before a congregation settles on a narrative about itself, it should ask whether that narrative can be recognized by people who experienced the congregation from different locations.

Time

This may be completed through several interviews rather than a congregational gathering.

Identify Several Perspectives

Consider:

- a newer member;
- a longtime member;
- a teenager or young adult;
- a former member;
- a community partner;
- a staff member;
- someone who participates but is not deeply involved in leadership.

Share Several Emerging Statements

For example:

“Hospitality has been one of our strongest lived values.”

Ask:

Does that sound like the congregation you know?

What experience supports it?

What experience complicates it?

What do you think we are missing?

Ask the Larger Question

If you were telling the story of this congregation in a few paragraphs, what would you make sure to include?

Listen Especially for Surprise

What do outsiders notice that insiders do not?

What do newcomers see that longtime members no longer see?

What do younger people experience differently?

What do former members remember?

Do Not Conduct a Referendum

You are not asking others to approve the congregation's narrative.

You are testing whether it is spacious enough to contain perspectives beyond those of the people who usually speak for the church.

FM-7.7 — Drafting Our Faithful Narrative

Who Have We Become?

Purpose

This is the central synthesis exercise of Chapter Seven.

It draws upon the entire Remembering process to create a short narrative describing the congregation as it understands itself **now**.

This is not a mission statement.

It is not a vision statement.

It is not website copy.

It is not yet the Ministry Discernment Profile.

It is an interpretive narrative.

Preparation

Gather the major harvests from Chapters One through Six.

Place them where participants can see them.

Part One — The Story That Formed Us

What stories and experiences have particularly shaped this congregation?

Choose only the most formative.

Part Two — The Values We Have Lived

What have we consistently cared about enough to act upon?

Part Three — The Faithfulness We Remember

Where do we recognize God's presence in our story?

Part Four — The Truth We Have Learned

What difficult wisdom belongs in the story?

Part Five — The Gifts We Carry

What has our history placed in our hands today?

Part Six — Our Capacity to Imagine

What evidence tells us that we can adapt, experiment, learn, and change?

Part Seven — What We Do Not Yet Know

What questions remain unanswered?

Now Draft

Write approximately **300–500 words**.

Begin perhaps:

We are a congregation shaped by...

Then tell the story.

Do not try to include everything.

The Narrative Should Be Able to Say

We are grateful for...

We have learned...

We regret...

We value...

We carry...

We have discovered...

We do not yet know...

Avoid

Promotional adjectives.

Generic church language.

Claims unsupported by stories.

Predictions about the future.

Defensiveness.

Excessive detail.

A list disguised as prose.

Remember the Purpose

The faithful narrative should help the congregation say:

This is the community that has arrived at this moment of transition.

Not:

This is everything we have ever been.

And not:

This is what we must become next.

FM-7.8 — Testing the Narrative

Is This Story Faithful Enough to Carry Forward?

Purpose

Before adopting the emerging narrative, test it.

A faithful narrative should be recognizable, truthful, humble, and open.

Read the Draft Aloud

Do not merely distribute it.

Stories sound different when heard.

Then ask participants to listen through several lenses.

Truth

Does this sound like us?

What evidence supports it?

Is anything exaggerated?

Is anything important missing?

Gratitude

Does it honor gifts and faithfulness without idealizing the past?

Honesty

Does it acknowledge difficulty and limitation without allowing those things to become the whole story?

Breadth

Can newer and longtime members recognize themselves in it?

Does it depend almost entirely on one era?

Does it represent only institutional leaders?

Theology

Does it recognize God's faithfulness without claiming to know God's hidden purposes?

Gifts

Does it describe what is actually present rather than what used to exist?

Imagination

Does it recognize our capacity to adapt without pretending change is easy?

Humility

Does it admit what we do not know?

Openness

Does the narrative leave room for the congregation to hear something unexpected during Listening?

The Most Important Test

Ask:

Does this story tell the truth without deciding the future in advance?

If not, revise it.

Final Draft

Do not polish the narrative into advertising language.

Preserve its honesty.

This document will become an important bridge into the next stages of pastoral transition.

FM-7.9 — Chapter Seven Discernment Harvest

The Story We Are Choosing to Carry

Purpose

This resource records the most important discoveries from Chapter Seven.

Stories About Ourselves That Remain True

Stories That Are Only Partly True

Stories That Were Once True but No Longer Describe Us

Stories We Have Allowed to Become Destiny

Claims We Discovered We Cannot Yet Make

Things We Need to Learn During Listening

A Truth About Our Losses or Limitations We Need to Carry

A Truth About Our Gifts We Need to Carry

A Truth About God's Faithfulness We Need to Carry

A Truth About Our Capacity to Imagine We Need to Carry

Complete

The story we are choosing to carry forward is one that...

FM-7.10 — A Prayer for the Story We Carry

Leader

God of memory and promise,
you have accompanied us through a story
larger than any one of us can remember.

People

Teach us to tell it truthfully.

Leader

We have stories we love to tell.

People

Receive our gratitude.

Leader

We have stories we would rather forget.

People

Give us courage to remember.

Leader

We have stories we remember differently.

People

Give us humility to listen.

Leader

We have stories of ministries that flourished
and ministries that ended.

People

Teach us to receive the gift without clinging to the form.

Leader

We have stories of courage
and stories of fear.

People

Hold them both in your grace.

Leader

We have stories of faithfulness
and stories of failure.

People

Keep us from making either the whole story.

Leader

When we are tempted to say,
“We have always been this way,”

People

Remind us of the ways we have changed.

Leader

When we are tempted to say,
“We cannot,”

People

Remind us of what we have already learned to do.

Leader

When we are tempted to say,
“Our best days are behind us,”

People

Remind us that the future has not yet been revealed.

Leader

When we are tempted to tell ourselves only what we want to hear,

People

Lead us into truth.

Leader

When we are tempted to tell ourselves only what we fear,

People

Lead us into hope.

Leader

Give us a story spacious enough for gratitude,
honest enough for repentance,
strong enough to carry grief,
humble enough to admit what we do not know,
and open enough for surprise.

All

Faithful God,
receive the story we carry.

Free us from stories that imprison us.
Protect us from stories that flatter us.
Give us courage to live inside the truth.

We know something now
about the people you have formed us to be.

Keep the story open.

For you are still at work,
and we have not yet heard
all that you may be calling us to hear.

Amen.

Carrying the Work Forward

By the end of Chapter Seven, the congregation has done something far more searching than write a congregational history.

It has begun to interpret its memory.

It has begun to understand:

These are the stories that formed us.

These are the values we have actually lived.

These are places where we recognize God’s faithfulness.

This is wisdom we carry from difficult chapters.

These are gifts genuinely available today.

This is evidence that we have imagined and adapted before.

These are stories about ourselves that remain true.

These are stories we need to release.

And perhaps most importantly:

These are things we still do not know.

That final discovery matters.

Remembering was never meant to answer every question.

It should make the congregation more capable of carrying faithful questions.

One final chapter remains.

Chapter Eight gathers the entire Remembering movement—not into another elaborate analysis, but into a concise Remembering Discernment Summary that can travel with the congregation into Listening.

The question is no longer simply:

Who have we been?

It becomes:

What from our story should we carry with us as we turn toward where God has placed us now?

That is the work of Chapter Eight:

REMEMBERING — FIELD MANUAL

Chapter Eight Resources

From Memory to Hope

Carrying the Story Forward

Remembering has carried the congregation a long way.

It began with stories.

People remembered events, relationships, ministries, conflicts, risks, losses, celebrations, and turning points. They listened beneath those stories for the values they had actually lived. They looked again for signs of God's faithfulness. They received difficult parts of the story with greater honesty. They recognized gifts their history had placed in their hands. They remembered that imagination and adaptation were not foreign to them. And they examined the narratives through which they interpret themselves.

Now the work of Remembering must come to an end.

That matters.

A congregation can linger in its history too long.

Remembering is not intended to produce a definitive congregational history, resolve every disagreement about the past, or determine the congregation's future. Its purpose is to help the congregation know what it is carrying as it turns toward the present.

The Field Guide describes memory as a bridge rather than a destination. The congregation does not ask, "*How do we get back there?*" It asks, "*What did God form in us there that we carry with us now?*"

Chapter Eight therefore should not generate another large body of material.

It gathers what has emerged.

It distills what matters.

It names what matters.

And then it turns the congregation outward again.

The core resources are **FM-8.1, FM-8.3, FM-8.5, and FM-8.7**. The others provide useful ways to broaden participation or conclude the movement.

FM-8.1 — Looking Back at Remembering

What Have We Rediscovered?

Purpose

This exercise helps participants step back from the individual activities and see what has emerged across the whole Remembering process.

It is not a detailed review of every chapter.

It asks:

What do we know now that we did not know—or had forgotten—when we began?

Time

60 minutes.

Preparation

Place the major chapter harvests around the room:

Chapter One — Stories and Turning Points

Chapter Two — Lived Values

Chapter Three — God’s Faithfulness

Chapter Four — Wisdom from the Whole Story

Chapter Five — Gifts We Carry

Chapter Six — Our Capacity to Imagine

Chapter Seven — The Story We Tell About Ourselves

Do not display every worksheet.

The goal is synthesis, not information overload.

Gallery Reflection

Invite participants to walk quietly through the displays.

Give each person several cards.

Ask them to complete:

I had forgotten...

I did not know...

I was surprised by...

I understand differently now...

I am grateful for...

I think we need to carry forward...

Share at Tables

Ask each person to share one or two responses.

Then have each table identify:

Three discoveries we believe matter most.

1.

2.

3.

Whole-Group Harvest

Collect the responses.

Look for recurring discoveries.

Do not attempt to include everything.

Ask:

What seems to have changed in the way we understand ourselves?

What did we rediscover?

What assumption became less certain?

What gift became more visible?

What story became more complicated?

What gives us courage?

Complete

Because we remembered together, we now understand that...

FM-8.2 — What Surprised Us?

Paying Attention to What We Did Not Expect to Find

Purpose

Surprise is often an important clue in discernment.

We are surprised when reality does not fit the story we expected.

Perhaps the congregation thought:

We have never changed.

Then discovered a history full of adaptation.

Perhaps it believed:

Our strongest years were when we were largest.

Then discovered that the stories people told with the greatest energy came from periods of challenge and experimentation.

Perhaps it assumed:

Our greatest resource is our building.

Then discovered that its deepest wealth may be relational.

This exercise pays attention to those disruptions.

Time

30–45 minutes.

Individual Reflection

Complete:

I expected us to discover...

Instead, I was surprised by...

At Tables, Ask

What surprised us about our history?

What surprised us about our values?

What surprised us about difficult periods?

What surprised us about our gifts?

What surprised us about our capacity to change?

What surprised us about the way other people experience this congregation?

Then Ask

Why was this surprising?

What assumption did it challenge?

Complete

Before Remembering, we tended to believe...

Now the story seems more complicated because...

Do Not Rush Past Surprise

A surprising discovery may deserve to remain unresolved.

You do not have to turn it immediately into a conclusion.

Sometimes discernment begins with:

“That isn’t what we expected to find.”

FM-8.3 — What Are We Carrying?

The Remembering Harvest Table

Purpose

This is the principal congregational synthesis exercise of Chapter Eight.

It gathers the essential discoveries of Remembering into one place.

Time

60–90 minutes.

Create Seven Stations

Use the work already completed.

Participants move among the stations, reviewing and refining what has emerged.

Station One — Stories That Formed Us

Which stories and turning points are essential to understanding this congregation?

Choose no more than five to seven.

Station Two — Values We Have Lived

Which values have substantial evidence behind them?

Station Three — God’s Faithfulness

Which Ebenezer stories help us remember:

Thus far the Lord has helped us?

Station Four — Wisdom We Have Earned

What have difficult seasons taught us?

Station Five — Gifts We Carry Now

Which gifts are present, available, and sustainable?

Station Six — Our Capacity to Imagine

What does our history demonstrate about our ability to adapt, experiment, and learn?

Station Seven — Our Faithful Narrative

What is the most important truth we now understand about the congregation we have become?

The Discipline of Distillation

At every station ask:

What absolutely needs to travel with us?

Not:

What did we learn?

You learned too much to carry all of it equally.

The goal is to distinguish important discoveries from the mass of material generated during the process.

When the Stations Are Complete

Read them aloud.

Then ask:

Does anything essential seem missing?

Does anything appear here simply because someone likes it rather than because the Remembering process supports it?

Does anything belong more properly in the archive than in discernment?

Revise.

FM-8.4 — What Are We Not Ready to Answer?

Protecting the Open Questions

Purpose

This may be one of the most important resources in the entire Remembering Field Manual.

Remembering can create a false sense of readiness.

The congregation has done substantial work.

People may now want answers.

What should our mission be?

What kind of pastor do we need?

What should we do with the building?

How do we attract younger people?

What ministry should we start?

What should we stop doing?

Some of those questions matter.

But Remembering alone cannot answer them.

Time

45 minutes.

Create Two Columns

WHAT REMEMBERING HAS HELPED US KNOW

and

WHAT WE DO NOT YET KNOW

Begin with What You Know

For example:

We know which values have consistently shaped us.

We know some of the gifts currently available.

We know that we have adapted before.

We know some stories we need to stop allowing to define us.

Now Name What You Do Not Know

Perhaps:

What do people in our community actually need?

How do our neighbors experience this congregation?

What has changed around us?

Where are people finding community?

What burdens are people carrying?

What community assets already exist?

Where are other organizations already doing good work?

How do younger adults experience church?

What might our neighbors teach us?

Where might God already be at work beyond our congregation?

Watch for Disguised Answers

Someone may say:

“We need to know how to attract young families.”

Pause.

That statement already assumes that attracting young families is the goal.

A more open question might be:

“What are younger adults and families in our community experiencing, valuing, and needing?”

Or even:

“Who actually lives around us, and what might we learn from them?”

Protect the Question

For each major unanswered question ask:

Can Remembering answer this?

If not:

Where might we need to listen?

Create a Listening Questions List

Choose no more than ten questions.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

These questions become part of the handoff to the next Field Guide and Field Manual.

FM-8.5 — Remembering Discernment Summary

What We Know About Ourselves Now

Purpose

This is the major final document produced by the Remembering process.

It should be concise.

The congregation may have generated hundreds of pages of notes, timelines, interviews, worksheets, and reflections.

Those materials can be preserved.

But the next stage of discernment does not need to carry all of them.

The **Remembering Discernment Summary** should normally be approximately **four to six pages**.

Its purpose is to answer:

What have we learned through Remembering that needs to inform what comes next?

1. Stories That Have Formed Us

Identify several formative stories or turning points.

For each, explain briefly why it matters.

Story One

Why it matters:

Story Two

Why it matters:

Story Three

Why it matters:

Story Four

Why it matters:

Story Five

Why it matters:

2. Values We Have Actually Lived

List approximately five to seven.

For each, include a short statement connecting the value to historical evidence.

Value:

We recognize this value because:

Repeat as needed.

3. Where We Remember God's Faithfulness

Identify the most significant Ebenezer stories.

Thus far the Lord has helped us through...

These stories have taught us to trust...

4. Wisdom from Difficult Chapters

Do not retell confidential or painful stories unnecessarily.

Record the wisdom.

Our history has taught us...

5. Gifts We Carry Today

Include only gifts reasonably assessed as **present, available, and sustainable**.

People and Capacities

Relationships

Community Knowledge

Spiritual Practices

Physical and Financial Resources

Other Significant Gifts

6. What We Have Learned About Imagination

Our history demonstrates that we are capable of...

We tend to become more imaginative when...

We tend to become less imaginative when...

7. The Faithful Narrative We Carry

Insert the final narrative developed in Chapter Seven.

8. What We Do Not Yet Know

9. Questions We Need to Carry into Listening

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

10. One Sentence We Want to Remember

Complete together:

As we turn from Remembering toward Listening, we want to remember that...

Approving the Summary

This is a discernment document, not a constitutional document.

Do not spend months wordsmithing it.

The appropriate leadership body should receive it and confirm that it fairly represents the work.

If a congregation begins debating individual adjectives for three meetings, the summary has become more important than the discernment it summarizes.

Keep moving.

FM-8.6 — Sharing What We Have Learned

Returning the Story to the Congregation

Purpose

If a smaller team has coordinated much of Remembering, the congregation needs an opportunity to receive what has emerged.

This should not be a two-hour report.

Tell the story.

Possible Settings

A congregational gathering.

A meal.

A retreat.

A Sunday after worship.

A Session meeting followed by broader congregational communication.

Suggested 60-Minute Gathering

Welcome and Prayer — 5 minutes

Remembering the Journey — 5 minutes

Briefly describe what the congregation did.

Stories That Formed Us — 10 minutes

Tell two or three stories rather than reading a list.

What We Discovered — 15 minutes

Share:

lived values;

gifts;

wisdom;

imagination;

faithful narrative.

What Surprised Us — 10 minutes

Name several genuine surprises.

What We Still Do Not Know — 10 minutes

Introduce the questions that will travel into Listening.

Prayer — 5 minutes

Invite Response

Ask:

What do you recognize?

What surprises you?

Is anything essential missing?

What are you grateful we remembered?

Do Not Reopen the Entire Process

This is not a final opportunity to relitigate every story.

If someone offers a significant correction, receive it.

If someone simply wants the group to redo three months of work because their favorite story was not included, remember:

The summary is not the archive.

Not everything can travel forward.

FM-8.7 — From Remembering to Listening

The Handoff

Purpose

This resource makes the transition between two distinct movements of pastoral transition.

Remembering has asked the congregation to look primarily backward and inward.

Listening turns attention outward.

The handoff needs to preserve what has been learned without allowing those discoveries to predetermine what the congregation expects to hear.

Bring Forward Five Things

1. This Is What We Understand About Ourselves

2. These Are the Gifts We Know We Carry

3. These Are the Assumptions We Need to Hold Lightly

4. These Are Questions We Want to Explore

5. These Are Things We Know We Do Not Yet Know

Now Ask the Handoff Question

WHAT DO WE NEED TO HEAR?

Do not answer it yet.

Let the question remain open.

A Discipline for Listening

Before entering the next movement, agree:

We will not listen merely for confirmation of what we already believe.

We will not ask the community to validate ministries we have already decided to create.

We will not assume that because we possess a gift, our neighbors need us to use it in a particular way.

We will not treat people as potential members or ministry consumers.

We will listen because they have something to teach us.

Complete

Remembering has taught us to bring these things with us:

Listening will require us to set aside these assumptions:

The question with which we now turn outward is:

FM-8.8 — What We Will Preserve

Closing the Working Archive

Purpose

Remembering generates a large amount of material.

Not all of it should travel into every subsequent stage of transition.

This short administrative resource helps the congregation preserve what matters without carrying boxes of unprocessed material into the future.

Preserve

Consider retaining:

- photographs of the congregational timeline;
- significant historical photographs;
- recorded oral histories, with permission;
- major story summaries;
- chapter discernment harvests;
- the Congregational Gift Map;
- the final Faithful Narrative;
- the Remembering Discernment Summary;
- the Listening Questions.

Protect

Materials containing:

- personal information;
- confidential stories;
- sensitive interview notes;
- information about misconduct or harm;
- material not intended for general distribution

should be handled according to appropriate congregational, denominational, legal, and safeguarding practices.

Release

You do not need to preserve:

every sticky note;

duplicate worksheets;

every table's rough notes;

every draft;

every brainstorming sheet.

Ask:

Does this material have continuing historical, pastoral, or discernment value?

If not, release it.

Identify a Keeper

Decide who will preserve the final materials and where.

Do not allow the only copy of the Remembering Discernment Summary to live on one committee member's laptop.

FM-8.9 — A Litany of Remembering and Hope

Closing the Remembering Movement

Leader

God of our mothers and fathers,
God of our children and grandchildren,
God of generations whose names we remember
and generations whose names have been lost to us,

People

You have accompanied your people through every age.

Leader

We have remembered.

Stories of beginnings.

Stories of change.

Stories of courage.

Stories of fear.

People

Receive the story we have carried.

Leader

We have remembered people who formed us.

Teachers.

Pastors.

Friends.

Leaders.

Servants.

Saints whose faithfulness was rarely noticed.

People

For the cloud of witnesses, we give you thanks.

Leader

We have remembered moments of joy.

People

We give you thanks.

Leader

We have remembered moments of pain.

People

Give us wisdom from what we have endured.

Leader

We have remembered things we did well.

People

Keep us grateful.

Leader

We have remembered things we wish we had done differently.

People

Keep us humble.

Leader

We have remembered ministries that flourished
and ministries that ended.

People

Teach us to carry the gift and release the form.

Leader

We have remembered times when we did not know what would happen next.

People

And still you were with us.

Leader

We have remembered people who asked:

“What if?”

People

Awaken holy imagination among us.

Leader

We have remembered gifts our history has placed in our hands.

People

Teach us to offer them freely and wisely.

Leader

We have remembered that our story is neither perfect nor finished.

People

Keep us from nostalgia.

Keep us from shame.

Keep us from fear.

Leader

We have remembered where we have been.

People

Now teach us to pay attention to where we are.

Leader

We have listened to the stories within these walls.

People

Now turn our ears toward our neighbors.

Leader

We have asked what our history has taught us.

People

Now teach us to ask what our community can teach us.

Leader

We have named what we know.

People

Give us humility before what we do not know.

Leader

We have recognized gifts we carry.

People

Keep us from deciding too quickly how they should be used.

Leader

We have remembered your faithfulness.

People

Give us courage to follow where you are already at work.

All

Faithful God,
we give thanks for the road behind us.

We do not ask you to take us backward.

We ask for wisdom to carry forward
what you have formed among us.

Receive our memories.
Receive our gratitude.
Receive our grief.
Receive our wisdom.
Receive our gifts.
Receive our questions.

We have remembered where we have been.

Now open our eyes,
open our ears,
open our hearts,

and teach us to listen.

Amen.

Closing the Remembering Field Manual

Remembering began with a simple conviction:

The stories of a congregation are more than records of what happened.

Like the sacred stories of Scripture, they become places of interpretation from which a community asks what its life means now.

But the congregation's story is not Scripture.

It is partial.

Human.

Sometimes beautiful.

Sometimes painful.

Always interpreted from particular perspectives.

That is why the work has required gratitude and humility.

The purpose was never merely to create a congregation that knows its history well.

The purpose was to become a congregation able to enter the future with a clearer understanding of what it carries.

You have remembered:

the stories that formed you;

the values you have lived;

the faithfulness of God;

the wisdom of difficult seasons;

the gifts still present among you;

the capacity to imagine and adapt;

the narrative through which you understand yourselves.

And you have named something equally important:

what you do not know.

That is where Remembering finds its proper end.

The congregation now stands on the threshold between memory and discovery.

Behind it are stories that help explain how it came to this place.

Around it is a community whose own story has continued to unfold.

The next faithful act is not to devise a plan.

It is to listen.

To walk.

To notice.

To ask questions.

To meet people.

To become curious about a place that kept changing while the congregation attended to its own life.

To discover gifts beyond the church as well as needs.

To hear hopes as well as pain.

To recognize that God has been at work in the neighborhood all along, without waiting for the congregation to arrive.

The Field Guide puts the transition simply:

We have remembered where we have been. Now let us pay attention to where we are.

And there the next movement begins:

LISTENING

Paying Attention to God, One Another, and the Community