

**Congregational Self Study**  
**Committee on Ministry Guidelines**  
**10/10/2017**

A Congregational Self Study process is required by all congregations before they can get Committee on Ministry approval to proceed with the congregational election of a PNC or APNC. This self study process is meant to aid and assist the church and its leaders as they continue to discern who they are and where God might be leading them. While there is no set program *per se*, the following suggestions and guidelines should help guide the process and help move it forward.

First, this should be a session-led process. The session is responsible for the overall life of the congregation and should be directly involved in the self study process, too. This does not mean that only session members should be involved, however. The team/committee/taskforce responsible for the self study should be comprised of a broad representation of the congregation.

Next, hard data collected from the congregation is important to lay a foundation of where you have been and where you are now. Such data should include church membership, worship attendance, church education attendance, member giving, budget and other financial information, a breakdown of member ages, etc. It would be helpful to have historical data - five to ten years worth of numbers should suffice, but the history of each church might influence how far back to go for the numbers. Other data, like a breakdown of ages, should reflect where the church is currently. Charting this information can often provide a visual representation of the trends impacting the church.

Some sort of congregational survey is often helpful to gauge thoughts, feelings and opinions of members and visitors (and sometimes even those outside the congregation). Many congregations have sought professional help in formulating and administering the survey (one example, *Holy Cow Consulting*, has been used by several congregations within our presbytery). Other churches have come up with their own surveys. Whatever the case, care should be taken to ask the right kinds of questions so that the information gathered can be helpful.

Some congregations have used small group gatherings to provide further opportunities to gather information from the congregation (and beyond). Sometimes people feel more open to talk about their church experiences rather than respond to an impersonal survey, and often this information can provide specifics that a survey might miss. A good facilitator, and a good recorder, will help ensure that all voices are heard and information retained.

Demographic information about the community can also provide helpful information for a church as it takes a look at itself. What are the trends in the town/city/county? What kind of people are moving into and out of the community? What are their needs? What are the other churches in the area and how are they impacting the congregation? Have there been significant events in the community (i.e. the closing of a major employer) that have had an effect on the community and the church? This information can inform outreach, evangelism and mission efforts.

With all this data – congregational data, survey data, community demographic data – it is time to organize a report. Some sort of historical narrative is often helpful to put where you are now in a context of where you have been, but it is important not to get bogged down in who you once were. The focus should be on where the church is now and where God might be leading the church to go in the future.

Many churches have found it helpful to organize the report around a SWOT analysis – what are the church's:

- **S**trengths
- **W**eaknesses
- **O**pportunities for Mission/Ministry
- **T**hreats to Mission/Ministry

There are certainly other ways to organize and analyze the data; feel free to find and use other tools that might be helpful.

Overall, the self study process should provide useful information to help the church leaders to address questions like the following:

- Where is the church now and where might God be leading it to go?
- What are the strengths to build upon and the growing edges that need to be addressed?
- How is the church perceived by the wider community and what does it have to offer?
- What are the priorities the church should focus on to make it a stronger, more faithful church?

The report should be shared first with the session to get their comments. The session might have some valuable feedback that will help ensure the report is helpful and useful to them and to church as it moves forward. It is suggested that the report also be shared with the wider congregation. Providing opportunities to present the report and its findings and gather feedback will help the congregation buy into its conclusions.

Some final thoughts:

- Don't rush things. A good process should help ensure a good result.
- Getting the right people involved up front will also help ensure a good result.
- The self study process is not to be done merely to meet the Committee on Ministry requirement. Instead, it should provide the kind of information that will help the congregation know who it is and where God might be calling it to go.
- If done well, the information gleaned should help the church leadership chart a course and establish priorities both in the short-term and longer-term.
- The data gathered and conclusions drawn should help aid the PNC/APNC as they begin their work, especially as they begin to write their Ministry Information Form (MIF) and define their church and the kind of pastor they are looking for who will best be able to help the church move forward in faith. Again good work done up front should help others down the road.
- Keep prayer at the forefront of the process.

The Committee on Ministry is available to answer any questions and to assist in the process.