

Preparing for the Leadership Retreat



Preparation Part 1: Prayer, Short Video and Reflection (About 50 Minutes)

Prayer and Scripture – 5 minutes

Video and Questions – 15 minutes

Reflection – 30 minutes

Preparation Part 2: Reading and Thinking (about 60 minutes)

Last Year's Notes – 5 minutes

Your Sphere – 10 minutes

America Is Not Ready For the Coming Wave of Grief – 15 minutes

What is God Up To – 15 minutes

Communication Habits – 15 minutes

Preparation Part 1: Prayer and Reflection

Start by centering yourself with prayer and scripture, becoming aware of where you are in your relationship with God.

A Prayer of Martin Luther

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen.

Colossians 3:12-17

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Consider: This passage names several characteristics of Christians, including compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, and wisdom. What is their source? Which are most evident in you? Which do you most hope to embody?

Take some time to ponder how and where you are in your relationship with God.

Watch this 8 minute video called "Living the Way of Love." It features the high-energy preaching of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry. Notice the ELCA minister in the video. Here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4u2RKude5mY>

Answer the questions posed at the end of the video.

Take a break if you need it.

With a lens of gratitude, use this guided reflection to consider how God has been present to our congregation through the pandemic months. (30 minutes)

Invite God to be with you and enlighten you as you look back at the past sixteen months.

As you consider the year, where do you recognize God's presence and provision for Mount Cross?
List as many specific examples as you can.

What people, experiences, and moments related to Mount Cross left you feeling hopeful, uplifted, and/or more connected to others and to God?

Of these moments, did any of them lead you to an increase of faith, hope, and love? (This is spiritual consolation). Take a moment to notice these and give thanks to God for these moments.

Now turn, with God's help, to notice if there were moments of desolation related to Mount Cross.

What people, experiences, disappointments, and other moments at Mount Cross left you feeling less hopeful, more isolated, and less connected to others and to God?

Did any of these moments lead to a decrease of your faith, hope, or love? (This is spiritual desolation). Pause to acknowledge these moments, mindful of God's mercy and compassion.

As you consider these moments of desolation, are you moved to pray for healing or forgiveness for yourself or others?

Looking ahead to the future, do you sense any invitation from God as we move forward as a congregation?

Do you sense God inviting you to make a change – or to commit more fully to something – after this experience of pandemic?

What hopes are in your heart for our congregation going forward?

Ask God what God's hopes are for us.

Ask God for whatever help you might need to respond to God's invitations.

When you are ready, close with your favorite prayer.

Preparation Part 2: Reading and Thinking

5 minutes: Read the Notes from Last Year's Leadership Retreat

Notes from the Feb. 1, 2021 Church Leadership Retreat

From the 15 statements offered by the Annual Church Report, we think these really describe Mount Cross:

There is excitement about the future here; there is a clear sense of mission here; this congregation is a positive force in the community; this congregation helps people deepen their relationship with God; and worship nurtures people's faith.

From the 15 statements, we hope to see more of these moving forward: this congregation is a positive force in the community and interacting/partnering with the local community; addressing social concerns; willingness to try something new; building strong, healthy relationships among members; managing disagreements in a healthy, respectful manner; welcoming/incorporating new members into the congregation's life; equipping members to share their faith with others.

Discussion about mission statement, core values, identify statements, charter for the next 50 years: these still resonate as descriptive and aspirational; they still speak to us; consensus to change formatting of the mission statement to: Rooted in God's grace, we joyfully witness and serve.

Looking at the Met Report:

Opportunity 1: Learning about the neighborhood

Partner with other churches

Stay connected to and build connections with Interfaith community

**More connection to the CDC/Strengthen relationship to the CDC

Booths at Fairs

Publicity/Advertising Presence in the Acorn, Facebook, Instagram

VBS

Outreach to actual neighbors

Know the demographics of Camarillo and the neighborhood

**Signage

**Need a new, current pamphlet and have ways to use it (distribute in community, put it in the kiosk, etc.)

Opportunity 2: Intentionally Partner

Publicize how we already partner with organizations (e.g. Friends of Fieldworkers)

Need a Communications Team: focus on Easter Sunday in newspapers, fliers, yard signs; postcards, door hangars; use front and back fences for signage

Love your neighbor weekend March 13-15

Opportunity 3: Re-invigorate Foundation

**Need for new leaders on foundational support committees

Incorporate worship elements into Wednesday night because this may be the only worship opportunity for some people

Need for refreshed website and possibly incorporate it into other aspects of church life

Improve internal and external technology

**Turn the spotlight on the cross again

Improve Welcoming and Incorporating efforts

Follow up on time and talent forms

**=Hope to accomplish soon

10 Minutes: Reflecting On Your Committees and Spheres

What Committees, Teams, Groups, or Tasks are you involved with at Mount Cross?

What is working well in those spheres?

What are the short-term and pressing needs in those spheres?

What needs are on the longer-term horizon?

15 minutes Read “America Isn’t Ready for the Coming Wave of Grief” by David Perry

America isn't ready for the coming wave of grief

By David M. Perry

February 11, 2021

David M. Perry is a journalist and historian. He is senior academic adviser in the history department of the University of Minnesota. Follow him on [Twitter](#). The views expressed here are those of the author. View [more opinion articles on CNN](#).

My father-in-law died last week. He didn't have Covid. He had terminal lung cancer that spread through his body, and at the end experienced severe delirium and fluid in his lungs.

He was one of eight kids and because we knew his death was coming, the family wanted to do what they always do at difficult times like this: descend on the hospital en masse, raucous and sad, and most of all together. In the past, when mourning, they would hold big Lutheran funerals (with hotdish, meatballs, and yes, funeral potatoes). My family is smaller and not-at-all Lutheran, but when my mother was dying a few years ago, people traveled from around the country and we gathered around her in the hospice as her final weeks passed. Even the day after she slipped from consciousness, two more friends flew in from the East Coast, and we sat close, crying, but together. Those memories carry me today as I still wrestle with her loss.

On Thursday, ten of us get to stand outside in sub-zero weather for 15 minutes at a military graveyard as soldiers fire a salute and play taps. Then we'll scatter back into the Minnesota winter.

We are left with the cold fact of imminent death surging throughout this brutal winter, without access to any of the rituals that might make it more bearable.

For obvious reasons, all of us have been focused on the direct human cost of the pandemic, with more than 470,000 dead in the United States alone. But that number, even as it rises, drastically underestimates the scale of the disaster when it comes to mortality and grief. That's because the experience of pretty much every person touched by any single death for any cause -- in the US that's over 3 million last year -- has also been shaped by Covid. The pandemic forces us to sever the connections that can enable us to endure grief. What it takes to stay safe is to close off the pathways that lead to healing.

The crisis of the pandemic operates on a titanic scale. It's nearly impossible for me to get my mind around the numbers of people dying, those suffering from long-haul Covid effects, the sweeping malign economic consequences, the widening inequalities that will linger for years. There's just so much weight from month after month of strangeness and fear.

But if anything, even this scope is looking too small, somehow underselling the true breadth of the catastrophe. We're now just over a year since the first confirmed Covid-19 death in America, but nowhere near the end of the pandemic. My family is reeling from our loss, one death reverberating among dozens of friends and family members. But communal grieving, and hopefully healing, may not really be possible until this summer or even next year. The road ahead is still grim and too solitary.

One analysis from last summer found that for each death from Covid, nine people experienced bereavement (which comes with associated mental and physical health problems). The ways in which Covid keeps us from the rituals of mourning nearly every death, no matter how expected or peaceful, means that each loss potentially likewise multiplies bereavement. If one expands that lens to include not only those who perished from Covid but anyone whose grieving process has been altered by it, and that number explodes to over 460,000 times nine; it becomes unfathomable.

Too many people have died alone, accompanied only by a view screen, or at most one or two family members. Zoom funerals do not replace hotdish, potatoes and laughter.

There's a reason that societies develop rituals to help us process the loss of life and, of course, there have always been reasons that funerals and memorials get delayed or canceled all together. But certainly during my lifetime, there's never been such a relatively total shutdown of our rituals, secular and sacred, formal and informal, somber and filled with whiskey-fueled revelry. That level of trauma will not pass soon for most of us, certainly not without recognizing it and doing the work to address the pain, even if we do manage to gather for memorials and funerals in the (hopefully) post-Covid years ahead.

Our mental health systems aren't ready. Our spiritual leaders may not be ready either. We'll have to be proactive both in building capacity to support mourning and encouraging people to take care of themselves in an era of post-Covid trauma.

It's not just about health and guidance though; there's also bureaucracy. The shape of most of our lives does not permit a long and retroactive wave of memorials and wakes and funeral masses and the other rituals that soothe the pain of loss. We already struggle in our work-life culture to gain time away for bereavement, operating in managed human resource systems that measure our minutes and grudgingly yield a day or two of paid leave in the immediate aftermath of a death, and then only for an immediate family member. These bureaucratic systems are not ready for the coming cycles of delayed mourning.

And a similar problem will take place in our educational systems, where still too many teachers demand documentation of recent passing of a close relative to permit excused absences or extensions on assigned work. Some professors even joke about the "dead grandmother" excuse, not reckoning with the fact that grandparents do die. We're going to have to shift our burdens of proof and timeliness.

Bereavement and excused-absence policies aren't as deep a need as the spiritual and psychological burdens of delayed mourning, but it's in these pragmatic policy spaces where inequalities emerge. My boss has made it clear that I can take as much time away as I want, and there's no question that when we have our memorial in August, or November, or a year from now, my boss will let me go to that too. But having a good boss is not a system.

Preachers and teachers, HR executives, parents, coaches, friends, we all need to think about how we can build more space in our work, families and communities to make space for a long process of grieving. It's not just about policy. Everyone you meet -- and you too, even if you aren't quite ready to face the trauma yet (I don't blame you!) is waiting to properly mourn all the things we've lost this last year. That we're still losing. We're going to need to engage each other without demanding that people prove they are still struggling. Assume that everyone is struggling with the trauma of living through a year of mass death, faced mostly alone.

As we crest into, hopefully, someday, a post-Covid world, the traumas of this past year will be slow to fade. I hope we can face them as communities, building pathways for mutual support, flexibility and healing.

END OF ARTICLE

Consider: What is needed at Mount Cross in the next six months to support members and the wider community in grieving? One proposal is dedicating All Saint's Sunday (November 7) as a memorial service for all Mount Cross members and loved ones who have died since the pandemic began and who we weren't able to mourn in traditional ways because we could not gather together.

15 minutes Read “What is God Up To?” by Bishop Eaton

WHAT IS GOD UP TO?

By ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton

February 1, 2019

What is to be done? Our congregations are growing older and smaller. At least 40 percent of our congregations have an average weekly worship attendance of 50 or less. ELCA membership decreases by 70,000 people a year, or roughly the loss of a synod per year. Clergy retirements outnumber new candidates for ministry. Financial pressures and building maintenance create stress. There is a dearth of people in their 20s and 30s in our pews. How do we change this? How do we reverse the trends?

These are anxious questions that come from anxious people across this church. We aren't the only ones asking them—just about every mainline denomination, including the non-Latino population of the Roman Catholic Church, is in the same boat. Even some megachurches are showing signs of plateau or decline. And this is not exclusive to the Christian community. I once attended a national conference of Muslims where one workshop was titled “Un-Mosqued to Mosqued: How to Get the Young Muslim Back to the Masjid.”

Some now see the decline of the church in general, and the ELCA in particular, as inevitable. The response can be to turn our churches into bunkers with our congregations sheltering within the walls or to try every new program that breathlessly promises to attract people to our congregations. Neither is an effective or faithful long-term strategy.

I think we are asking the wrong questions.

The questions we are asking have to do about us: “What can we do?” They express loss and grief and fear—loss and grief for what we were and fear about what we will become. Not only do these questions not lead to productive answers, they also don't point to hope. It's as if the church's one foundation rests on us and our efforts.

I think we need to ask: “What is God up to?”

It's clear to me that we are living in a time of transition, especially for the Western church. I don't know how long this transition will last nor do I have a clear vision of what the church is becoming.

I think we are asking the wrong questions. ... I think we need to ask:
“What is God up to?”

The good news is that you and I don't have to have a clear vision because God does. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” ([Isaiah 43:18-19](#)). These words of hope were spoken to the Jews who were stuck in exile. They had lost their land, their temple and their king—the pillars of their identity. Likewise, the church has lost social status and relevance in 21st-century American culture.

For Israel and the church this would be a hopeless situation, except that God is faithful. When the Lord admonished, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,” this wasn't a command to forget God's past saving work, but to believe that God was still acting. This is true for us today. When we stop asking what we can do to fix the church and start asking what God is up to, we open ourselves up to the life-giving promise of God's future.

Then we are also open to more questions: How is the Spirit reshaping the church? How will Christ use us as Christ's living body in the world?

If we want to attract people to our congregations to rebuild a memory, God will not bless our efforts. But if we—grabbed by the Spirit in baptism, changed by the word, intimately and lovingly connected to Jesus and each other in communion, and set free by grace to serve the neighbor—invite all people into true life, then we shall become part of the answer.

This takes attention and devotion. Worship, prayer, Scripture study, generosity and service—not in order to save the church, but in response to the new life God has given us in Christ.

And one more thing: in God's inscrutable wisdom, God has chosen human hands and voices to tell and welcome. Let's adopt the [Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod](#)'s mission to get more people to know more about Jesus.

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

What are your hunches about what God might be up to with Mount Cross?

List at least 3.

1.

2.

3.

15 minutes: Striving for Healthy Communication

Please read the below article on “Cleaning up Bad Communication Habits” and reflect on how we can improve our ways of communicating with each other.

Cleaning Up Bad Communication Habits by the Alban Institute

Of the several negative communication patterns congregations practice, three habits are particularly problematic: triangulation, pass-through communication, and anonymous feedback. While these three may be strategies for getting needs met, they all block rather than help healthy communication. Even if well intentioned, they are deadly habits that in the long run allow people to dodge accountability, gain power, and alienate others. Once everyone understands how to break these habits, those who persist will eventually have to stop or they will become so uncomfortable and isolated that they will leave the congregation. To clean up bad communication habits, congregations can do three things: reduce the triangulation, eliminate pass-through communication, and reject anonymous feedback.

Reducing Triangulation

While people often suggest that venting is good for the soul, it is actually not very productive. Venting to someone about a third person is simply an avoidance technique that creates what is known in counseling theory as a relationship triangle, or triangulation. Triangulation is talking about feelings, opinions, or personal issues regarding some person or group with a third party instead of with the person or group actually concerned. Relationship triangles usually involve three people who each take one of three roles: victim, persecutor, and rescuer. Once in a triangle, people change places among its three points. The only way to stop the triangulation is for each person to communicate his or her feelings, concerns, or opinions directly to the other.

Of course, the best communication strategy is to avoid being recruited into a triangle in the first place. But so often well-intentioned faith leaders and congregants listen to another person’s concerns, feelings, or opinions, then realize they inadvertently let themselves be co-opted into involvement, sometimes even taking sides. Once in a triangle, escape may take some courage and clarity but is possible. The triangulated person can redirect the other person straight to the appropriate individual or committee—the one actually involved in the personal issues or the one that can address the concern or mend the relationship. A three-way conversation sometimes helps, but only if the third party facilitates without taking sides or having an agenda, without speaking for one of the other parties, and without adding to the emotional drama.

Eliminating Pass-through Communication

Some congregations get in the habit of pass-through communication. To get a message to someone, you tell someone else. Like triangulation, pass-through information also involves three parties, but the content of the information is less emotional and personal—sometimes as simple as the expected outcomes of a meeting.

With both triangulation and pass-through communication, few people take responsibility for what is accurate and few people speak directly to each other. Informal channels of pass-through communication lead to misunderstandings down the road. Like the children’s telephone game, the content usually becomes distorted and often the necessary action delayed. Miscommunication may occur unintentionally, but individuals or groups also can use pass-through communication to divide congregations and stir up conflict. Giving the message to whomever is close by and expecting him or her to pass it on may seem expedient, but there is no substitute for the direct message. And like triangulation, pass-through communication must be stopped for healthy congregational functioning.

Again, the individual being asked to pass something on has the power to stop the pattern. A simple statement such as “I’m not comfortable carrying that message” or “I might mix up what you’ve said, so perhaps you could call him yourself” is very helpful. The intended messenger needs to clarify why that person is talking to him or

her instead of the individual who needs the information. If he or she is dodging responsibility for direct communication, the intended messenger should be all the more determined to stop the pass-through effort.

Rejecting Anonymous Feedback

Why would someone give feedback anonymously? There are several reasons. Anonymity allows people to avoid accountability for the content. The individual with the complaint or accusation may also fear reprisals. Sometimes the individual simply doesn't know whom to talk to about a concern. At other times the individual is trying to get his or her way in a conflicted situation, but stays underground to maintain the appearance of being in a harmonious relationship with other congregants.

Personnel committees and other groups that oversee pastoral ministry must be clear in their policies and practices that they will neither receive nor take seriously anonymous complaints—letters, phone messages, e-mails, or pass-through communication. Slandering comments in particular should not be disseminated by the recipient, not even to the clergy person or any others on a committee, unless the content contains serious threats or requires a legal response. Congregations can waste a lot of energy on slanderous static that interferes with their listening to and addressing real issues. If e-mails are sent from unknown sources, they can be stopped by a trusted leader sending a letter to the congregation asking everyone to block the anonymous sender of the “junk” information and to ignore the content.

Anonymous communication is damaging to everyone in the congregation because feelings are often expressed but cannot be resolved. Wounds are named but cannot be healed. Criticism is offered without the chance to explore the possibility of healing. To stop anonymous feedback, clergy and lay leaders need to agree that it is counterproductive. You can't apologize to anonymous. Anonymous will remain angry or sad until he or she comes forward with the truth. Anonymous others cannot and should not be considered when making leadership decisions or resolving conflicts.

A congregation can greatly reduce negative criticism and unresolved hard feelings with these simple and clear boundaries: no triangulation, no pass-through information, and no anonymous communication. When recruited into a communication triangle or to pass information on to another person, leaders need the mantra, “Please tell the person (or committee) directly yourself.” When asked to respond to anonymously obtained information, leaders need to simply refuse to consider it substantive until the anonymous person is willing to more clearly own his or her concern. Congregational communication can sometimes hide secrets, agendas, and conflict. While clearer boundaries and transparency in communication may cause negative aspects of congregational life to come into the light, they also reveal the strength, commitment, and love that bind the congregation together—ultimately giving more courage to faith leaders to address any negative dynamics that hinder their faith journey as a community.

How to Clean Up Bad Communication Habits

- Speak directly to the person or committee that the issue concerns.
- Refuse to carry a message from one person or group to another.
- If two people talk with you about each other, offer to meet with both of them together or to find them a mediator.
- If a person complains to you about someone else but refuses to directly talk with the person to resolve the problem, ask him or her to stop talking to you or others about it.
- Reduce venting by first listening and then asking what action the person will undertake to resolve the problem.
- Refuse to take nonspecific or anonymous feedback seriously.

Adapted from Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communication Quandaries in Congregations, copyright © 2007, the Alban Institute. All rights reserved.

From Pastor Julie: I hope we can leave our Leadership Retreat pledging to not engage in or tolerate anonymous communication. We want to promote a culture at Mount Cross that encourages mature and open conversation where it is safe for people to own their thoughts and opinions. We want to be a community where people trust they will be heard and respected by congregational leaders. What communication patterns do you think we should commit to as congregational leaders?

Here is my proposed framework for the Listening Post for us to discuss on our retreat.

Church Council Listening Post: Our leaders want to hear from you. The Listening Post is an opportunity for conversation with a member of the Church Council. What are your hopes for Mount Cross? Where do you see the Holy Spirit moving and guiding us as a congregation? How would you like to be more involved in the congregation? What needs do you see in the wider community that Mount Cross may help address? Do you have any questions or concerns? Church Council members will listen carefully and respectfully to anything you want to share and do their best to answer any questions you may have. If you want others to know about your ideas, opinions, complaints, or compliments, they will suggest appropriate individuals or committees you can speak with directly. Church Council members will not pass along anonymous communication.

Thank you for your time preparing for our Leadership Retreat. See you July 11!

Tentative Retreat Schedule (pending approval by the Executive Committee July 8)

9:30 a.m.	Sunday Worship with Mount Cross
1:00 – 1:30 p.m.	Welcome, Prayer, and Community Building
1:30 - 2:30 p.m.	Sharing the Harvest of our Reflections
2:30 – 3:00 p.m.	Determining Priorities
3:00 – 3:15 p.m.	Break
3:15 – 4:15 p.m.	How Shall we Lead? Crafting a Common Mindset
4:15 – 4:45 p.m.	Listening Post
4:45 – 5:00 p.m.	Closing Prayer and Sending