

# Discernment and Clarification of Core Values

Five guided conversations and Bible studies  
For congregations facing change

Many of our churches are facing the necessity of making major changes in how they do mission and ministry due to the flood of economic and cultural changes surrounding us. Before a congregation is ready to consider major changes it needs to discern and clarify its core values – those values that identify the peculiar claims God has on this church. Clarity around core values enables a church to engage in conversations about significant and sometimes difficult changes in mission and ministry with a degree of consensus about what can be abandoned, compromised or held fast. This tool is designed to enable a congregation to fully engage with Scripture and with each other in the necessary conversations to discern and clarify these core values.

This experience is designed for small groups (3-8 people) to develop relationships of mutual trust and care while engaging in guided conversations and Bible studies over the course of five gatherings with the option of two different tracks: Bible Study or Guided Conversations. It is expected that individuals will self-select to participate in one track or the other. Each gathering is designed for about 1 ½ hours plus fellowship time. It is important that these gatherings not be rushed.

## **Bible Study:**

These experiences provide a clear biblical framework and structure for exploring God's claims upon this Church. On this track, groups will engage in observations about selected Biblical material and attempt to relate those observations to issues facing the church. These studies are designed to encourage Spirit-filled engagement with portions of Scripture and with each other in order to better understand some of their core values and their origins.

## **Guided Conversations:**

These experiences provide for less structured and more topical discussions about God's claims upon this Church. On this track, groups will engage in facilitated conversations designed to encourage individual storytelling, active listening and reflection. Their joint insights will inform the church's understanding of some of its core values and their origins.

So, imagine many small groups gathering at different times and in different venues over several weeks or months. Some will be following a series of Bible Studies, others will be engaging in a series of Guided Conversations. All will be exploring and articulating the core values that inform this church's individual identity in preparation for further engaging possible changes to the church's mission and ministry.

The act of engaging in the conversation is as important as the results obtained from the conversation. Therefore it will be helpful for organizers to consider several elements in preparation:

- I. Find ways to engage as many people as possible in these conversations. Offer them at multiple times and venues. Make it easy (comfortable) for people to participate. Some people will need personal invitations or a companion. Food, comfortable settings, and capable leadership all contribute to ease of participation
- II. Recruit and train leaders who are able to facilitate conversation rather than to solve problems or reach decisions. The primary task of leaders is to keep the group focused on listening to and understanding one another. A separate guide for leaders in each track is included with this tool.

- III. DO NOT SURVEY OR VOTE! These exercises are designed to facilitate a conversation, not to solicit opinion. In order for these exercises to yield better understanding of the church's core values, it is essential to encourage non-judgmental listening and exploration. Our experience is that surveys actually inhibit good conversation because they encourage folks to form opinions before listening to and thinking with others.
- IV. It will be helpful for someone in each group to write a brief summary of each conversation in order that insights may be effectively shared with others in the congregation. Sand Bur Consultants will also rely on these summaries as we assist your church in moving forward with your core values. Suggested outlines for these summaries are included in the leaders guide.
- V. Ask for help. We, at Sand Bur Consulting, are always eager to talk with organizers to help them design and facilitate the most helpful experience possible.

### **Follow-up Workshop**

One person from each group will be in contact with us at Sand Bur Consulting throughout the course of these experiences. We will review and provide suggestions to leadership and staff. After all five conversations and Bible studies are concluded, we will travel to your site and lead (in cooperation with local church leadership) a 2-3 hour workshop helping the congregation consolidate what has been learned and begin using those insights to guide its future in God's hands.

CORE VALUES

GUIDED CONVERSATIONS

## Guided conversations – Leader’s guide

These exercises are intended to be conversations, not decision-making discussions. The purpose of the conversations is to listen to and better understand each other and our relationships in the church. Select a comfortable space where you can talk without interruption. Allow enough time to thoroughly explore one another’s responses. Each conversation is structured around several leading questions. As you discuss these questions, be sure everyone has a chance to be heard but no one should be coerced into speaking. There are no correct answers, only honest answers and more questions.

***The act of engaging in the conversation is at least as important as the results obtained from the conversation.*** As a leader, your primary task is to keep the group focused on listening to and understanding one another. Make sure that each participant has an opportunity to be heard without putting any individual on the spot when they are not ready to speak. Remind those who would dominate the conversation that others also need to be heard. If a dominating participant persists, it may be helpful to invite him/her to summarize what the others are saying. If you use this technique, be sure to invite the group to verify or challenge the summary.

The fifth session of conversations may be particularly difficult for some participants in that it invites the group to imagine that the possible scenarios were already upon them. Be prepared for some extra anxiety and resistance in this session. Remind participants that this is a conversation, not a decision-making debate – that it is ok to be uncomfortable.

**DO NOT SURVEY OR VOTE!** These exercises are designed to facilitate a dialogue, not to solicit opinion. In order for these exercises to yield better understanding of the church’s core values, it is essential to encourage non-judgmental listening and exploration. Our experience is that surveys actually inhibit good conversation because they encourage folks to form opinions before listening to and thinking with others. Your role as leader is to cultivate helpful conversation, not to help the group reach a consensus.

Select someone in each group to write a brief summary of each conversation in order that insights may be effectively shared with others in the congregation. Outlines for these summaries are included with each discussion guide. Be sure to give the summary outline page to the person selected. Seek out someone who demonstrates the ability to hear the whole conversation without filtering it through their own perspectives. Sand Bur Consultants will also rely on these summaries as we assist your church in moving forward with your core values.

Prayer is an essential element of these conversations. Participants will have some anxiety about the motivation for these conversations. They will be stepping aside from busy lives with attendant worries and joys. Take some time, at the beginning of each session, to allow people to become spiritually centered and ready to participate fully. Welcome the presence of God’s Holy Spirit to enable these conversations to be valuable and insightful. Your organizing team may prepare prayers to be prayed in unison. You may invite participants in the conversations to offer opening and closing prayers, or ask your pastor for help in preparing suitable prayers for these conversations. A possible opening prayer might be: *(silence) Oh Lord, we are gathered today because we care about being your church in this place; because we want to share our stories and learn from one another what it means to be a church family; and because we trust that you will speak to us in the voices of our sisters and brothers in Christ. We ask your*

*presence and your blessing on our speaking and our listening to each other. Amen.* Praying the Lord's Prayer together or singing a doxology are also appropriate. The important part of opening and closing these sessions with prayer is that we invite God to be at the center of our conversation.

Finally, ask for help. Talk with your pastor and members of your organizing team. We, at Sand Bur Consulting, will also be offering assistance based on our reading of the summaries of your conversations.

## OPENING PRAYER

## GROUP DISCUSSION

These exercises are intended to be conversations, not decision-making discussions. That means that the purpose of the conversations is to listen to and better understand each other and our relationships in the church.

1. Tell your story about when and why you joined this church (*We are looking for personal stories that talk about individual's values, needs, fears and dreams.*)
  - a. What choices did you and/or your family make in order to do so? (*Travel distances, denomination, programs, expectations, friendships, etc.*)
  - b. Was your choice primarily about your personal faith and growth or more about belonging to a faith community? (*How do your individual wants and needs interact with the church's*)
  - c. Why do you stay? (*What makes it worth staying? Where are the obstacles/challenges? What have you learned in the process?*)
  
2. How does the church's worship, study, mission, and fellowship help you have a clearer understanding of what God is doing in your life and in the world? (*What aspects of church life help you understand what God is doing, not just what do you like.*)
  
3. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. Has anything changed for you as a result of this conversation? Any insights about what God might be up to in our church community?*)

## CLOSING PRAYER

**Guided Conversations I**  
**Summary Outline**  
(Forward to Sand Bur Consulting for review and comment)

Date, time and participants:

Values, needs, challenges and concerns that surfaced during conversations:

Aspects of church life that appear to be making a difference to participants:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

These exercises are intended to be conversations, not decision-making discussions. That means that the purpose of the conversations is to listen to and better understand each other and your relationship to the church. There are no correct answers, only honest answers and more questions.

#### OPENING PRAYER

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When was the last time you felt yourself to be in the presence of God?
2. In what ways has your understanding of your relationship with God changed since you first came to faith? What experiences have influenced those changes?
3. How has your understanding of God's claim on your life changed over the past few years? What experiences have influenced those changes?
4. What are some of the spiritual practices (prayer, bible study, meditation, etc.) that have helped to grow your understanding of God and God's work in your life?
5. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. Has anything changed for you as a result of this conversation? Any insights about what God might be up to on our church community?*)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

**Guided Conversations II**  
**Summary Outline**  
(Forward to Sand Bur Consulting for review and comment)

Date, time and participants:

Values, needs, challenges and concerns that surfaced during conversations:

Aspects of church life that appear to be making a difference to participants:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

These exercises are intended to be conversations, not decision-making discussions. That means that the purpose of the conversations is to listen to and better understand each other and your relationship to the church. There are no correct answers, only honest answers and more questions.

#### OPENING PRAYER

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. As you reflect on your recent conversation about God's claim on **your own life**, what insights do you gain about what God's claim might be on your church?
2. What are your greatest hopes and/or fears related to God's claims on **your church**?
3. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. Has anything changed for you as a result of this conversation: Any insights about what God might be up to on our church community?*)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

**Guided Conversations III**  
**Summary Outline**  
(Forward to Sand Bur Consulting for review and comment)

Date, time and participants:

Values, needs, challenges and concerns that surfaced during conversations:

Aspects of church life that appear to be making a difference to participants:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

These exercises are intended to be conversations, not decision-making discussions. That means that the purpose of the conversations is to listen to and better understand each other and your relationship to the church. There are no correct answers, only honest answers and more questions.

#### OPENING PRAYER

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Think about your experience as part of this church. Think about the building, the programs (including education, worship and mission) and the relationships you have experienced. What are some of your most precious memories? How do these memories relate to your relationship with God?
2. What kinds of things do you do within the church and beyond the church as a direct result of your faith and your understanding of your relationship with God?
3. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. Has anything changed for you as a result of this conversation: Any insights about what God might be up to on our church community?*)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

**Guided Conversations IV**  
**Summary Outline**  
(Forward to Sand Bur Consulting for review and comment)

Date, time and participants:

Values, needs, challenges and concerns that surfaced during conversations:

Aspects of church life that appear to be making a difference to participants:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

## GUIDED CONVERSATIONS V

These exercises are intended to be conversations, not decision-making discussions. That means that the purpose of the conversations is to listen to and better understand each other and your relationship to the church. There are no correct answers, only honest answers and more questions. (*Your conversation today is not about whether you like a particular category of options or which direction you desire within the category. Rather your conversation is to explore what a future built on these options might look like.*)

### OPENING PRAYER

### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. One category of options for the future of our church involves re-structuring at the current location. This might include such things as remodeling, major fund-raising, reducing staff or sharing staff with another church or organization. (*For this conversation, assume that the decision has been made to re-structure at the current location.*)
  - a. What would you change about the current property in order for the church to be more effective in mission and ministry to you? To others in the community and world?
  - b. Of all the things this church currently does, which are the most helpful to members? For others?
  - c. How would giving more (or less) of your time and income affect your faithful involvement in the life of this church?
2. Another category of options for the future of our church involves re-locating to another facility. This could involve merging with another congregation, renting space in another church or other building, or even building a new church somewhere else. (*For this conversation, assume that the decision has been made to re-locate the church.*)
  - a. What will you miss the most about this building and location?
  - b. How might re-location enhance effective mission and ministry?
3. Another category of options for the future of our church involves closing the church. This might be in order to leave some kind of legacy in the community, to avoid the embarrassment of dwindling into nothingness, or to prepare the way for the formation of a new congregation. (*For this conversation, assume that the decision has been made to close the church.*)
  - a. What will you miss the most about this church?
  - b. What about your experience as a member of this church will support you as you seek a new church home?
  - c. As you look for a new church to identify with, what will you be looking for?
4. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. Has anything changed for you as a result of this conversation: Any insights about what God might be up to on our church community?*)

### CLOSING PRAYER

Guided Conversations V  
Summary Outline  
(Forward to Sand Bur Consulting for review and comment)

Date, time and participants:

Values, needs, challenges and concerns that surfaced during conversations:

Aspects of church life that appear to be making a difference to participants:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

# CORE VALUES BIBLE STUDY

## Bible Study – Leader’s guide

The purpose of this series of Bible studies is to identify our church’s core values by exploring together what God has been doing among our predecessors in the Faith and continues to be doing among us. The role of the leader is not to be the expert or guardian of truth, but to be the facilitator of a common learning process that relies on the questions and reflections of participants. Participants do not need to all agree on interpretations. ***They do need to listen carefully to one another and reflect candidly on what they hear in light of the scripture.***

Select a comfortable space where you can talk without interruption. Allow enough time to thoroughly explore one another’s responses. This is a conversational style of Bible Study. Each conversation is structured around several leading questions. As you discuss these questions, be sure everyone has a chance to be heard. There are no correct answers, only honest answers and more questions.

The act of engaging in the conversation is as important as the results obtained from the conversation.

As a leader your primary task is to keep the group focused on listening and understanding one another. Make sure that each participant has an opportunity to be heard but resist putting any individual on the spot when they are not ready to speak. Remind those who would dominate the conversation that others also need to be heard. If a dominating participant persists it may be helpful to occasionally invite him/her to verbally summarize what the others are saying. If you use this technique, be sure to invite the group to verify or challenge the summary.

**DO NOT SURVEY OR VOTE!** These exercises are designed to facilitate a conversation, not to solicit opinion. In order for these exercises to yield better understanding of the church’s core values, it is essential to encourage non-judgmental listening and exploration. In our experience surveys actually inhibit good conversation because they encourage folks to form opinions before listening to and thinking with others. Your role as leader is to cultivate helpful conversation, not to help the group reach a consensus.

Select someone in each group to write a brief summary of each conversation in order that insights may be effectively shared with others in the congregation. Suggested outlines for these summaries are included with each discussion guide. Seek out someone who demonstrates the ability to hear the whole conversation without filtering it through their own perspectives. Sand Bur Consultants will also rely on these summaries as we assist your church in moving forward with your core values

Prayer is an essential element of these conversations. Participants will have some anxiety about the motivation for these conversations. They will be stepping aside from busy lives with attendant worries and joys. Take some time to allow people to become centered and ready to participate fully. Welcome the presence of God’s Holy Spirit to enable these conversations to be valuable and insightful. Your organizing team may prepare prayers to be prayed in unison. You may invite participants in the conversations to offer opening and closing prayers. Ask your pastor for help in preparing suitable prayers for these conversations. A possible opening prayer might be: *(silence)* *Oh Lord, we are gathered today because we care about being your church in this place; because we want to share our stories and learn from one another what it means to be a church family; and because we trust that you will speak to us in the voices of our sisters and brothers in Christ. So,*

*we ask your presence and your blessing on our speaking and our listening to each other. Amen.* Praying the Lord's Prayer together or singing a doxology are also appropriate. The important part of opening and closing these sessions with prayer is that we invite God to be at the center of our conversation.

Finally, ask for help. Talk with your pastor and members of your organizing team. We, at Sand Bur Consulting, will also be offering assistance based on our reading of the summaries of your conversations.

Bible Study - I  
Good news available to Gentiles  
Acts 10:1 - 11:18

*This passage is a story of a major turning point in the mission and ministry of the early church. Up to this time, the Christian movement was strictly a Jewish movement. Converts were expected to become Jewish in order to become Christian (circumcision, ritual washing, etc.). Peter's vision (dream) challenged these expectations and set the stage for ongoing controversy in the Church's about what it means to be faithful to God*

#### OPENING PRAYER

Read the passage aloud (since it's a long one, you may want to take turns). Read from the translation most commonly used in worship in your church. Participants may want to follow along with a variety of translations or paraphrases.

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Who is telling the story? To whom? And with what purpose? (*What is the context for this narrative?*)
2. Name the issues that are being addressed in this passage. (*Look for major themes, images, phrases. What issues in the church of that time may have prompted this narrative?*)
3. What similarities do you find between questions addressed in this passage and questions you face in your church? (*This is not a time for complaints or analysis of church programs or leadership. Try to focus on what people in your church are concerned about. What does it mean to be faithful to God?*)
4. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. The common temptation here is to focus on what others in the church need to be doing. Keep the focus on what God might be calling the members of the group themselves to do. Has anything changed for you as a result of this study? Have you discovered any insights about what God might be up to in your church community? Are attitudinal or behavioral changes required?*)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Summary Outline  
Bible Study - I  
Good news available to Gentiles  
Acts 10:1 - 11:18

Date, time and participants:

Local church issues surfaced during the study:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

Bible Study II  
We Belong to God  
Isaiah 40: 27-31 & 43:1-3

*The job of the prophet was not to predict the future but rather to remind God's people of the consequences of their relationship with God. In so doing the prophet often spoke as if the voice of God. The people of Israel were living in Babylon as captives – the spoils of war. In these times most cultures identified gods with particular locations. The Israelites had little hope of ever seeing their beloved homeland again. Enslaved in Babylon and depressed by thoughts of a future becoming ever more bleak, they felt geographically separated from their God.*

#### OPENING PRAYER

Read passage aloud. Read from the translation most commonly used in worship in your church. Participants may want to follow along with a variety of translations or paraphrases.

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. As we think of the future uncertainties for our church, what challenges might be the equivalent of “waters, rivers, fire and flame”? (*What exactly scares us?*)
2. To the extent that these uncertainties unsettle us, why might that be? (*What is the source of our depressive concerns?*)
3. What encouragement does the prophet Isaiah offer us as we look to the future of our church? (*Where do we find confidence as we move forward?*)
4. What might help with or stand in the way of our trusting God more?
5. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. The common temptation here is to focus on what others in the church need to be doing. Keep the focus on what God might be calling the members of the group themselves to do. Has anything changed for you as a result of this study? Have you discovered any insights about what God might be up to in your church community? Are attitudinal or behavioral changes required?*)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Summary Outline  
Bible Study – II  
We Belong to God  
Isaiah 40: 27-31 & 43:1-3

Date, time and participants:

Local church issues surfaced during the study:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

Bible Study III  
Life in the Earliest Church  
Acts 2:37-47

*At the time of Pentecost, the Christian Church was just a small band of frightened followers. The gift of the Holy Spirit changed all that. As the Church grew, it developed certain signature practices and activities as summarized here by the historian, Luke.*

#### OPENING PRAYER

Read passage aloud. Read from the translation most commonly used in worship in your church. Participants may want to follow along with a variety of translations or paraphrases.

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What were some of the signature practices of the early church? (**What did they spend their time and energy doing? In what ways did these practices distinguish the Christian community from other groups?**)
2. Which of these signature practices do we continue in our church today? (**Do we have other practices that distinguish us today?**)
3. How might we recognize God's blessing of our church in these practices? (**How do we measure God's approval of our practices?**)
4. Where do you experience God's spirit moving powerfully in your church today?
5. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (***We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. The common temptation here is to focus on what others in the church need to be doing. Keep the focus on what God might be calling the members of the group themselves to do. Has anything changed for you as a result of this study? Have you discovered any insights about what God might be up to in your church community? Are attitudinal or behavioral changes required?***)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Summary Outline  
Bible Study – III  
Life in the Earliest Church  
Acts 2:37-47

Date, time and participants:

Local church issues surfaced during the study:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

Bible Study IV  
We are the body of Christ  
I Corinthians 12: 1-31

*Corinth was the capital of the Roman Province of Achaia and the seat of the Roman governor. It was also an important commercial center populated by people from a wide variety of lands and social stations, all competing for economic and social success. The church at Corinth included a fair representation of this variety and competition. Some had more influence and experience than others. Many factions existed in the Corinthian church. Each valued and benefited from a different aspect of the gifts of the Spirit. Paul wrote to remind them of their essential unity because of their combined gifts. The purpose of their unity was to collectively represent the presence of Christ in their community.*

#### OPENING PRAYER

Read passage aloud. Read from the translation most commonly used in worship in your church. Participants may want to follow along with a variety of translations or paraphrases.

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to you to represent the presence of Christ here in this community?
2. What are some of the tools or gifts God has given your church to help it be the Body of Christ in this place?
3. How might you as an individual help make this church a more faithful representation of Christ's presence in this community?
4. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today. (*We are not looking for evaluation or judgment. The common temptation here is to focus on what others in the church need to be doing. Keep the focus on what God might be calling the members of the group themselves to do. Has anything changed for you as a result of this study? Have you discovered any insights about what God might be up to in your church community? Are attitudinal or behavioral changes required?*)

#### CLOSING PRAYER

Summary Outline  
Bible Study – IV  
We are the body of Christ  
I Corinthians 12: 1-31

Date, time and participants:

Local church issues surfaced during the study:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_

*Jesus' parables were designed to illustrate the great themes of His proclamation. These illustrate the great value of the kingdom of heaven whether found by accident or after a long search. In these parables, the "kingdom of heaven" refers, not to a heavenly place, but to a present, down to earth communal relationship with God.*

## OPENING PRAYER

Read passage aloud. Read from the translation most commonly used in worship in your church. Participants may want to follow along with a variety of translations or paraphrases.

## GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What do you think of when you think of a relationship with God that might be understood as the "kingdom of heaven"? (*What does it mean to you to be a part of this relationship? How is being part of a communal relationship different from just being a "good person"?*)
2. Think of our church community as representing the kingdom of heaven. What about it is of such value as to enable you to sacrifice everything just to be part of it?
3. How might our church more faithfully represent the kingdom of heaven in this community? (*What might this require of us as individuals?*)
4. This concludes our Bible study series. Describe your insights about what you have discussed today and throughout the series. (*Has anything changed for you as a result of this study? Have you discovered any insights about what God might be up to in your church community? Are attitudinal or behavioral changes required?*)

## CLOSING PRAYER

Summary Outline  
Bible Study – V  
Priceless treasure  
Matthew 13:44-45

Date, time and participants:

Local church issues surfaced during the study:

Insights claimed by the group:

Any personal observations from you:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information (phone or e-mail) \_\_\_\_\_