

New Beginnings Assessment Service

Program Details for Presbyteries

What is the New Beginnings Assessment Service?

New Beginnings is a service offered by the Office of Church Growth and Transformation of the Presbyterian Mission Agency in partnership with the Church Extension office of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It assesses the strengths and challenges for congregations as they seek to engage in significant ministry in their communities. The assessment service, along with follow-up strategic interpretation with congregational leaders, enables congregations who have experienced decline to envision a new path for their future. In most cases, congregations in decline struggle not only with a ministry plan that fits their neighborhood, but also with deferred building maintenance, use of space, and other architectural or location issues as well. The assessment and follow-up training intend to help congregations gain a realistic picture of their resources for ministry, their demographic strengths, their potential for change, and their potential for vital ministry in order to put them on the road to sustainable Christian witness and action in their communities. The New Beginnings Assessment Service seeks answers to the question, "What is God calling your congregation to do and to be in this time and in this place?"

While originally designed for churches in decline, this process can also be helpful to congregations that are not necessarily in numerical decline but are looking for new energy, direction and focus.

This assessment and focused interpretation process helps in many ways. Each congregation will:

- Receive a comprehensive report of its current strengths and challenges as well as a description of possible directions for the future.
- Receive training on how to engage in a discernment process in order to discern a new direction for the future.
- Discover ministry opportunities available in the community.
- Learn to make a compelling case for change based on realistic options for the future.
- Discover how to discuss change opportunities in a healthy, open manner.
- Learn how to set a course for strategic and visionary ministry planning.

New Beginnings **does not**:

- Force change on a congregation: The choice for a New Beginning is always the congregation's choice.
- Develop the long-term ministry plan for the congregation: strategic visioning and planning must come after the assessment and discernment process and is best done with regional/area partners or other ministry planning groups.
- Settle conflict in the congregation. (A moderate amount of conflict is a natural part of organizational life and must be engaged in any process of change.)

How do presbyteries facilitate a cluster of New Beginnings congregations?

Step One: Exploration of New Beginnings

Presbyteries have differing individuals or groups tasked with congregational transformation, and these people are among the first to be educated about the process before individual congregations are introduced to it. A representative of the PC(USA) Office of Church Growth and Transformation can be made available to meet with these persons/groups in order to explain the theory and process of the program at no charge to the presbytery. It is important that these groups take time to engage the ideas

that drive the New Beginnings program in order for them to serve as guides for the congregations that will take part.

Step Two: Commitment to New Beginnings

While the PC(USA) Office of Church Growth and Transformation is responsible for providing program support for New Beginnings, the Presbytery must assume the responsibility for providing support to their congregations as they engage the various steps of the process. This requires a commitment from the Presbytery to be the supportive agent to the clustered congregations, both through the persons or bodies tasked with congregational care and in the whole structure of the presbytery. This commitment to action creates a supportive network both for and between New Beginnings congregations that is necessary for the program's success.

Step Three: "Come and See" for Potential Congregations

Once the necessary people/groups in the Presbytery are familiar with and committed to the process, a "Come and See" event is arranged for potential congregations. Planning for this event begins with promoting the program to congregations and inviting them to come hear more about what is involved. Experience shows that the more time and care spent on this aspect of the process leads to a better response rate by congregations. A representative of the PC(USA) Office of Church Growth and Transformation will lead this event at no expense to the Presbytery. Program processes, ideals, and commitments are presented to potential congregations in a way that congregational representatives can further discuss their potential involvement. No commitment is necessary at this event, but a deadline for congregational commitments is set for three weeks later.

Step Four: Congregational Process

New Beginnings takes place in the congregation in four phases:

Phase I: At a mutually agreed time, a New Beginnings assessor meet with individual churches for an on-site assessment. Prior to the visit, congregations send in profile information of its current participants. The congregation is also asked to submit financial reports for the last three years, calendar information, and insurance information. The visit entails a complete building inspection, financial review with the financial officer, a calendar review with a knowledgeable person, a windshield tour of the community, meeting with the moderator and pastor, and an Appreciative Inquiry session with congregational members that seek to understand each church's programmatic and missional strengths. Presbytery is responsible for providing facilitators for the evening session with the congregation.

Congregations will receive a 45 to 60 page report of this visit, including:

- ❖ Congregational demographics
- ❖ Community demographics
- ❖ Tenure of participants
- ❖ A pin map showing location of membership
- ❖ Financial history
- ❖ Building condition
- ❖ Congregational appetite for change
- ❖ Congregational energy level
- ❖ Congregational relational levels
- ❖ Evaluation of administrative, programmatic, and building resources
- ❖ Potential future stories for the congregation

Before the final report is given, there is an opportunity for the pastor or a key leader to review the report for accuracy.

Phase II: Within a month or two of the assessment, follow-up leadership training will occur for all New Beginnings congregations in the presbytery. This event, called the Cluster Leader Event, enables congregational leaders to analyze their report, discover options, begin to develop a compelling vision for the congregation's future, and strategize for how to best engage the congregation in a decision-making process. In most cases, 5-8 key leaders from each New Beginnings congregation attend this event. This gathering also enables each congregation's lay or professional clergy to participate in a short course entitled "leading change in congregations."

Phase III: The key leaders will lead the congregation through the discernment process in a series of six small group meetings. This process will generate the conversation, prayer and idea sharing needed to explore all the options available to the congregation.

Phase IV: The congregation makes a "big-picture" decision about what it believes God is calling the church to do and be into the future. After this decision for a New Beginning is adopted, The Office of Church Growth and Transformation will work with the Presbytery to refer the pastor and key leaders to available mission planning resources.

Phase V: Feedback

While a congregation's *new beginning* is usually not decided upon for several months after the end of the small group meetings, there are several opportunities for feedback to be given. Follow-up conversations with presbyteries and congregations allow the New Beginnings program to be further customized to individual congregations and improved for future projects. While these conversations may take place intermittently throughout the process, scheduled discussions are normally planned for six and twelve months after the church's assessment.

Frequently Asked Questions

1.) What is a congregation's basic output after participation in this service?

Churches will come to a decision about the particular witness they can make in their communities that will start them on a path to renewal and sustainable ministry.

2.) What is required from each congregation?

- A complete list of participants, addresses, approximate ages, and attendance tenure
- Financial records from the past 3 years
- a completed calendar worksheet
- 5-8 leaders who would commit to attending the Cluster event and sponsor the Cottage meeting(s)
- A commitment to follow the process

3.) What is the cost?

The fee for congregations engaged in Assessment and Cluster Event Training is \$2800 (if done with a group of churches from one presbytery) or \$3800 if done by one church alone. This cost covers consultant travel, time and overhead for the on-site assessment and phone follow-up, 10 printed reports, and the program expense of your participation at the cluster event (led by one or two Office of Church Growth and Transformation representatives and hosted by the Presbytery) which includes the

Clergy workshop. Also included are the Home (small group) Leader Manuals for the leaders of each small group – a process that leaders will be taught to engage at the Cluster Event Training.

4.) **Who is the Office of Church Growth and Transformation?**

The Office of Church Growth and Transformation is a part of the Office of Worship, Formation, and Evangelism ministry area of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. Contact in this office:

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Some New Beginnings successes...(from the Disciples of Christ experience)

RESTART: A congregation averaged just 30 in worship every other Sunday. After developing a compelling new vision for ministry, the congregation agreed to close and commit to a plan of restarting the church. Historical documents were removed from the church, officers agreed to resign, the church was closed and reopened a month later with a new name. That congregation now worships with more than 300 in services each Sunday

RELOCATION: A congregation with a building four times larger than their congregation needed sold their building and relocated with a new, full-time pastor. This right-sized congregation is growing again with a passion for ministry in their community, no longer saddled with large building payments.

MORPH: A good congregation was located in a community that had changed its racial/ethnic population radically. The congregation restarted as a church appropriate for the dominant culture, and moved from an average worship attendance of 11 to more than 5,000 each Sunday.

MISSIONAL RE-VISION: A congregation with good people and resources was able to reconsider what God had called it to do. After intentional reflection, and the development of a strong vision for the future, it moved from being a church that focused primarily on itself to a church focused on serving its community.

These are just a few sketches of congregations that chose new beginnings that made a difference in their congregational life, the lives of the new people who now participate in their congregations, and their larger communities.