

# *Values-based Discussion Guide for PTCA Churches*

making decisions about in-person meeting  
(worship, Bible study, pastoral care, etc.) in the coming months

Some congregations are already meeting for in-person events or worship. Other congregations have already chosen not to hold in-person events until at least 2021. Those represent the difficult decisions that sessions must make during the time of COVID-19. How do you know? Is it simply a matter of metrics—of good-enough cleaning and taped-off pews? What's most important? And how do you talk about that?

The PURPOSE of this discussion guide is not to serve as your "go-or-no-go" for determining *when or how* to do in person events (we've linked to several of these types of resources on our PTCA homepage, and will supply alongside this study guide a sample policy for your congregation). Rather, it is an opportunity to *focus your conversation* ...

- ... *away* from moving quickly to specific, technical solutions ("how?"), and
- ... *toward* an articulation of Christian values that might guide the *adaptive* changes ("why?") we are being called to make.

The decisions we make, and the practices we choose, will have important consequences for our health, but also for the vitality of our communities, and *for the gospel we serve*. Focusing on our Christian values *first* is the best way to clear the air for a faithful conversation. Focusing on our values as Christian communities allows us to *remember who we are called to be* as congregations, so that we can engage with *how* we can do that in the long-term context of COVID-19.

Values are essential in shaping our actions. Values can also conflict with one another, even deeply held values. For example, in this time of COVID-19, living out the value of doing all we can to keep everyone healthy and the value of everyone being together in community might conflict. And then, we have to make hard choices. That's why this work is important.

This discussion guide can be used in a single session, or over multiple discussions. It can be used before final decisions are made on returning to in-person use of the church building, or to reflect on and review some of the technical decisions already made. It is intended as a deep reflection on the Christian values we hold and which shape us, not as a means for argumentation. Come, let us reason together.

## Opening Prayer:

*Creator God, Ever-present Spirit, Christ our Savior, there is much uncertainty around us. So many people who need prayers. Today, we pray...*

- *For those whose health is compromised by the coronavirus or other health issues.*
- *For those who suffer from the economic impact of the virus, in travel, manufacturing, hospitality, energy or so many other industries.*
- *For health care workers and first responders, and other public servants who put themselves in harm's way for us.*
- *For our leaders of the world, our countries, states, and cities, as they seek to help manage this challenge.*
- *And for our own work on behalf of this community of faith.*

*It can be overwhelming, O God. But you tell us over and over again not to be afraid. Show us how to trust in you. Help us to turn away from my concern with self, and turn my heart, hands, and prayers toward the concerns of others. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen*

## Opening Focus Text: Galatians 5:22-23

*“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”*

1. Have one person read the text out loud.
2. First take time (perhaps 3-4 minutes) for personal reflection in silence; then invite the group to pick the one “fruit” each hopes to see/feel/live in her/his own life in the coming week.

*Reminder: as with any out-loud discussion, especially one of a personal nature, it is always okay to simply say, “Pass,” and not to speak aloud.*

## Discussion #1: Gathering Around Values

→ **Before the session: Share page 5, Values Activity & Discussion #1** (via copies, distribute to all attendees via email or “share screen” so all can easily read via Zoom)

1. Start by inviting individual reflection on the top three “personally held” Christian values.

*Optional: Pair & share. (If you're meeting on Zoom, use the “meeting rooms” feature to have 2-3 person groups share their lists together.) If time allows, allow small groups to share as a larger group. This is especially important for groups with more disagreement or tension, and for groups with a high focus on buy-in and everyone's voice being honored.*

2. Next, have participants collaborate to make a “top three” list that represents that represents your congregation or group.

3. Discuss, using some, or all, of the following questions:
- Are we clear (with each other and our members) about what our congregational or group values are?
  - What have these “top three” values been historically, or in the last few years? How have you seen those lived out? Where has it been *most difficult* to live those out?
  - Have any values changed (or changed *emphasis*) now that we are in a time of COVID? Do your values still feel like a “good fit” for this moment?

## Discussion #2: Deepening the Conversation

Based on the top three value(s) the group chooses, here is a set of follow up questions for discussion that are informed or guided by this core value. Use a selection of these questions as time allows, and revisit these questions in later conversations as needed.

### Scripture:

- What are examples you can think of in Scripture where the primary values you chose are named or lived out (maybe in Jesus life)?
- What are some examples you can think of in Scripture where God moved to call the church or community to re-examine its held values, or where values other than the one you chose are named and upheld?

### Personal Insights:

- What are you *missing or grieving* in this time of physical distancing and being away from your church facility?
- What are you *learning*, or what *new insights* have you discovered, about the way that God works beyond what we have typically experienced?

### Imagining Together:

- *Context: indoor church events, even with safety precautions, are still considered one of the highest levels of risk.* When we picture a “safe” way to get back together (including, masks, 6 feet of distance even before and after events and in hallways, etc.), **will this satisfy the deeply-held value we wish to live out? And is it asking us to set aside a different value?**
- Are we willing to ask more from \_\_\_\_\_, as far as time or risk, to make in-person gatherings again possible? (consider: pastoral staff, cleaning staff or volunteers, musical staff, the elderly, vulnerable, or immunocompromised.)
  - How will we make our choices just and fair, and not just add additional obligations or risks for some? Can we be fair?
- What will we *gain* being together in this new way with safety precautions?
- What might we *lose or compromise* that doesn’t feel worth it (including the risks we will take on)?
- What is our *desired impact* for making choices or changes to how we do ministry in this time? How will we know we are having the impact we hope to have, or how will we be open to other feedback?

- What is God asking of us right now? If this value we share is informed by the Gospel, what might God be inviting us to *imagine or do* in this time? How can we remain open and flexible?

## Takeaway Questions:

*Finally, here are some questions to help shape your ongoing conversations:*

- How has this values conversation *changed or re-framed* my own understanding of the call to our church/congregation in this time?
- What have I heard *from others* today that I hadn't heard before and which helped me?
- Now that we've considered our values, what other *information* do we need? For example, if we are ready to move forward with returning to the building, do we have a clear policy and set of practices in place? (There are questions and a sample policy on the PTCA website.)
- *What will it feel like* to find a "good fit" between our values and our practices? (How will we know we are in a good place?)

## Closing Prayer:

Teach me to listen, O God, to those *nearest* to me:

my family, my friends, my siblings in Christ and co-workers.

Help me to be aware that no matter what words I hear, the message is

"Accept the person I am. Listen to me."

Teach me to listen, Caring God, to others—

the whisper of the care-worn,  
the voices of the marginalized,  
the cry of the anguished.

Teach me to listen, O God, to myself.

Help me to be ready  
to trust the voice inside —  
in the deepest part of me.

Teach me to listen, O God, for your voice—

in worry and in boredom,  
in certainty and in doubt,  
in noise and in silence.

Teach me, Lord, to listen. Amen.

## Values Activity & Discussion #1: Gathering around Values

When we talk about values, we focus less on a specific set of beliefs or practices, and rather on the bedrock principles on which beliefs and practices are based and from which they are lived. Most values originate from Scripture. For example, one of the most important Christian values is that all people are made in the image of God and all members of the faith are said to be united in the Body of Christ (Romans 12:5). We urge our congregations to follow the example of Jesus Christ in loving our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31) and to focus attention on the gifts and needs of the most vulnerable (1 Cor 12:21-22). We say we should not mistake what is "permissible" for what is good (1 Cor 8:9); and to be patient in times of challenge (Romans 12:12).

We invite you, as a session, to take this time articulate values: first for yourself, individually; and then for the “congregation” as a whole. Here’s a beginning list from which you can choose—ten values that are often associated with our individual lives or our lives as a congregation. You needn’t limit yourself to this list; in fact, dig deep inside for what you value most, adding to the list those Scriptural values you see and hold.

- First, develop a list of your top three **personal Christian values**. *Note: does the text we read on fruits of the Spirit influence that list in any way? Should it?*
- Next, think of the top three values you think are held **by your congregation/community**

<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Wholeness &amp; Inclusion</b> (“I want us all to be together,” accessibility, genuine welcome, interconnectedness, protecting the most vulnerable in our congregation.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Embodied Presence / Body of Christ</b> (communal song, touch, *physical* closeness or warmth)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Spiritual Connection</b> (deep shared practices of discernment, Sabbath, prayer, ritual etc. as a community)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Pastoral Care</b> (directly offering caring for those in the church who need extra support through grief, change, loss, etc.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other</b> _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other</b> _____</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Justice/Community Mission</b> (serving the vulnerable in the community through the church spaces or people)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Courage for Change</b> (moving with the Holy Spirit toward bold new forms and ways of being for the world today)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Tradition &amp; Memory</b> (focus on key traditions, rituals, routines and practices unique to our particular church or context)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Influencing Others for Jesus</b> (by being public and doing public events)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other</b> _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Other</b> _____</p>
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