

TALKING TOGETHER ABOUT CHURCH LIFE

This guide is designed to assist a group of leaders to talk together about the life and mission of their church. It might be used on a planning retreat or could be extended into a congregational forum. The guide enables the sharing of perceptions of how a church is going and of ideas about how it might develop its life and mission.

The guide is designed to be self-administered by the church's leadership group or Pastor. However, members of the Baptist Union of Victoria's Church Health and Capacity Building Team can be called upon to serve as facilitators of the process or to assist church leaders in acting on matters arising from the conversation.

LISTENING TO SCRIPTURE TOGETHER

Read aloud around the group – Acts 2:42-47.

Pause to allow silent reflection on these two questions: 1) is our church something like this? and 2) Could our church become like this?

Read Acts 2:42-47 again, pausing at the end of each verse. Invite participants to note the features of the church's life Luke highlights. At the end of the reading, list these features on a chart or whiteboard.

LOOKING AT TODAY'S CHURCH TOGETHER

Ask: Should we expect all of the features you have listed to be present in local churches today? Each participant to put a tick (yes), cross (no) or question mark (unsure) next to each feature.

Invite participants to explain any crosses or question marks.

This is an opportunity for the group to reflect together on their beliefs and expectations of Church. The facilitator might prompt the group to talk together about questions such as:

- To what extent should members of local churches hold everything in common?
- Should we expect to see signs and wonders among us?
- Should we expect all churches to grow?
- What does breaking bread together mean? Etc

The aim here is to come to shared understanding of what you expect from church. You may not be able to reach agreement on all matters, but it is at least instructive to hear the range of expectations within your group. This understanding helps leaders and congregations to work together on things they agree on and extend charity on the rest.

LOOKING AT YOUR CHURCH TOGETHER

The question here is: To what extent is your church like the one described in Acts 2?

First, ask participants if there are other important aspects of church life not included in this list. Add any that the majority of participants indicate should be included. For each feature on your list, invite participants to give your church a score from 1-10, with 10 being "just like the church in Acts 2".

Share the scores and record them on the chart or whiteboard.

What are the three highest scores? Take a short time to give thanks for these strengths of your church.

Looking at all of the features on your list, compared to 3 years ago, is your church stronger, weaker or the same in each feature? Each participant's assessment is noted.

Look at the features in which most of the group think the church has grown stronger. Invite the group to suggest some of the reasons for this growth?

Look at the features in which most of the group think the church has grown weaker. Invite the group to suggest some of the reasons for this?

These questions help you to identify what is happening in the life of your church. **Are there trends here, positive, or negative, that the church leaders need to be aware of and attend to?**

LOOKING FORWARD TOGETHER

Read Acts 2:42-47 again and sit quietly allowing time for it to sink in. Invite people to pray silently for God's direction for the church.

This is a time for sharing ideas about how the church might develop its life and mission. It is important here to be realistic, yet also to encourage some ideas that may appear to be "out of the box" or a bit of a stretch. Try to encourage participants to offer concrete and specific ideas rather than "motherhood" or cliché principles or generalities. The key question is: What might we DO?

Looking at the features you have identified as being strong or growing, what are some ways in which the church could build on this? Record these ideas on a chart. At this point you are not seeking to discuss or vote on the ideas – just collect and display them.

Looking at the features you have identified as declining or as weak in your church, what are some ways in which the church could change this? Write up these ideas.

DISCERNING TOGETHER

You will have a number of good ideas on display. Your church cannot do all of them. You need to choose some ideas to work on. To make this choice, **give each participant 6 stickers. Invite them to put a sticker on the ideas they believe the church should give top priority to implementing.**

When everyone has voted with their stickers, **identify the Top 5 ideas.**

Delegate one or a few people to take away each of the Top 5 ideas and prepare a short briefing paper for presentation to a later meeting of the leadership group (preferably within a month). The papers should provide a fuller description of the idea and outline what will be needed to implement it. Within 3 months of "Talking Together About Church Life" the leadership group should reconvene the participants and report on proposals to implement initiatives.

PRAYING TOGETHER

Close your time together thanking God for what he has done and is doing in your church and committing its future to him.