



Discerning Purpose

Do you know how many types of fishing hooks there are? A couple of years ago my father-in-law asked for a very specific lure and hook for Christmas. I was traveling near a Bass Pro Shop in between meetings, so I thought I had just run in and grab it. First mistake, one does not just “pop in” to a Bass Pro Shop. After 15 minutes trying to find the fishing section, I finally turned down the lure aisle. Or should I say “aisles.” Before I stood row upon row every type of lure and hook imaginable. After 45 minutes, I still had not found him the right lure, and decided it would be easier to just get him one of the actual fish from the big fish tank at the front.

I tell this story because we live in a world oversaturated with choices. Not just in lures and hooks, but in every area of life we are bombarded with so many options that it is hard to know what to do. There is so much information coming at us, that it can be impossible to know what is the “right” decision.

We face this in the church as well. Unlike previous eras when the decisions facing churches were anodyne, now churches need to make numerous weighty decisions. What style of music, technology, and liturgy do we use? How do we position ourselves in our local and national contexts? How do we decide what programs to keep and which to let go of given limited resources? It can all be overwhelming.

That is why discerning purpose is crucial. As I wrote last month, the Foundation is developing a discernment program called C3: Courageous Congregation Collaborative. The program equips congregations to strengthen five essential “muscles” for ministry today: grieving well, discerning purpose, walking alongside, tending power, and expanding imagination.

Discerning purpose is the core of who we are and what we are doing in a particular place. It answers the questions of why we exist and how we will live in this time and place. It is important because in a time of unprecedented change, discerning our purpose helps us make some of those weighty decisions mentioned above.

If we are clear on what our purpose is, then deciding what kind of worship to have, what to do with our building, where we should focus our energy becomes easier to answer. Instead of fighting over each individual decision over personal preference, we can lean back on our purpose to help guide our decision making. Purpose becomes a common language and signpost for how we as a community decide what to do.

Discerning purpose can be hard though. It often means taking a clear-eyed look at ourselves, our contexts, and making some tough decisions. That is where the United Methodist Foundation of Michigan comes in. We can help lead consultations and sessions on discerning purpose, providing some structure around these conversations. We would also invite you to explore if the C3 process might be right for your congregation. Reach out to learn more.

Books I'm Reading: [*Reimagining and Remapping the Religious Landscape: Chaos Before a New Ordering*](#) by Gil Rendle. This short online book, which can be found at the link above, delves into the changing reality of religion in America. Rendle, always on the cutting edge of where the church is going, presents a new framework for how to think about religion and church: not just limiting ourselves to traditional congregations, but thinking more about where people are finding meaning. Look for a deeper dive into Rendle's work in a future UMF of Michigan Newsletter.

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