

Chapters Exercise—Naming God’s Presence and Activity Over Time

The point of the “chapters exercise” is to use a narrative framework for reflecting back on the history of a particular congregation in order to name ways God might have been present and active over the course of its history. This helps build up capacity for naming God’s action in the midst of the congregation’s current life.¹

Exercise Steps

Introduction

Imagine that the history of this congregation is going to be made into a book. You are going to reflect on the history and create an outline of the life story of this congregation. Our outline will be made up of chapters that begin and end and have chapter titles. Do your best to remember as far back as you can.

Step 1: Determine what year the congregation began.

Step 2: Describe, to the best of your ability, what the early life of the church was like (i.e. who was there, why did they start, where did they meet, who were the key leaders, etc.).

Step 3: When do you think this “first chapter” of the church’s life came to an end?

Step 4: What would you call the first chapter?

Step 5: What happened in the second chapter of the church’s life?

Step 6: When did that chapter end?

Step 7: What would you call that chapter?

Repeat steps 5-7 until you reach the present day.

Now go back over your description of the life of this church. In each chapter, how do you think God was particularly active or present? What was God’s role in each chapter? What might God have been up to during each chapter? Go through and write down a sentence or two about what you think God might have been up to during each chapter.

Final Step

In light of the history of this church and God’s presence during that time, what do you think the next chapter in the life of this church looks like? What do you think God might be up to in the next chapter of the life of this church?

¹ This exercise was developed by Dr. Craig Van Gelder, Professor Emeritus of Congregational Mission at Luther Seminary.