



South-Central Synod of Wisconsin
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Faithful Innovation During COVID-19

Wondering what God is up to in your community right now? Struggling to adapt in these unprecedented circumstances? Not sure where to go from here?

Don't worry—you aren't alone! God wants to tell a story through your congregation, but social distancing can make it hard to know what that story is. We believe that all congregations can learn simple techniques to reconnect with each other and their neighborhood while maintaining safe social distancing.

It starts with learning how to LISTEN, ACT, and SHARE

The process is simple: first, *listen* for God's voice; next, design *action learning experiments* to explore what God is doing in your community; finally, *share and reflect* on what you learned about God and your neighbors. Then repeat! Each innovation cycle will lead to new possibilities to connect with God and each other.

► **Step 1: LISTEN**

All innovation work starts with learning how to listen to what God is saying to your congregation. Read scripture out loud together (consider Exodus 16 or Luke 10) and ask one another "What do you notice? What questions do you have? How might the Holy Spirit be speaking to you through this text?" Invite members of your congregation to share stories of where they have seen God at work and make those stories available for listening. Encourage members to take prayer walks in their neighborhood and share what they noticed along the way.

Instead of focusing on everything you are now restricted from doing or wishing for a return to normalcy, practice asking "God questions" like "What new opportunity is God inviting us to?" "Who is God directing us to care for right now?" "What is God already doing in our neighborhood and how can we join God in the process?" The questions we ask shape the way we think about God, our congregations, each other, and our neighborhoods.

► **Step 2: ACT**

Building on the stories you heard about where your congregation is already encountering God in their lives at this time, design an experiment to reconnect with your community. Keep it simple and invite the whole congregation to participate! Your experiment should be easy, fun, and cost little to nothing. Some ideas to try are:

- Make chalk art on the sidewalk or parking lot of your local community spaces, such as library, park, or care facility. Be sure to leave chalk behind so the art can grow!

- Set up a prayer station with fabric scraps and markers on which people from your community can write prayers, messages, or pictures to tie up in a public space.
- Make thank you cards for local first responders, healthcare workers, or community providers. Ask for what they need to feel supported right now, then make a plan to give that support.
- Spend time in your front yard. Set up lawn chairs or picnic blankets and plan to spend one or two hours a week outside in front of your home. Greet people as they go by and be present in your neighborhood.
- Make blessing bags to deliver to your neighbors. Have each household in your congregation fill one or two small bags with small, inexpensive care items to provide cheer to the elderly or lonely in your neighborhood.

Remember, not every experiment will go the way you expected—and that’s okay! There are no failures when doing faithful innovations work, only opportunities to learn something new.

► **Step 3: SHARE**

Once you have completed your experiment, it is important to reflect on what you have learned. It is through your reflections that you will uncover what your next actions might be. Share your experience with each other. Tell the story of what you did and what you learned. What went as you expected? What didn’t go as you expected? Why? What surprised and delighted you? What clues might God be giving you? Is there something you’d like to explore more deeply? What are you curious about and what does God want you to learn? Remember to share your experience of God’s activity in your neighborhood with your congregation for inspiration!

Continue to tell the story of God’s activity in your neighborhood

Repeat the innovation cycle as often as needed and be open to new learning each time. Consider how you might incorporate your new insights into your plans to be present in your community during and after the pandemic. As your congregation begins to adapt and reopen, draw on what you learned to help your congregation connect more deeply to each other and the wider neighborhood. Use this time of change as an opportunity to nurture new and old relationships in your community.

Want to learn more?

If you are interested in taking part in the full Faithful Innovation learning community beginning January 2021, please contact Rev. Walter Baires, Assistant to the Bishop for Evangelical Mission at walterb@scsw-elca.org. Faithful Innovation is a 9-month learning process which will teach your congregation how to trace God’s story in your community and experiment with reaching out to your neighbors in new and exciting ways. Each congregation will be fully supported with coaches, trained facilitators, learning teams, and synod support. Cost is \$250 per congregation. Arrangements may be made if cost is a barrier for your congregation.