

**Doing What Matters Together!**  
**A Journey of Learning & Discovery**  
**in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod**

**A Congregational Toolkit**



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**Do what *matters***

## Introduction

### **Doing What Matters Together! A Journey of Discovery & Learning in Northeastern Pennsylvania**

A new kind of conversation has started in Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod - a conversation about how we can make the shift to renewable ways of doing life, work and ministry together. At the heart of a renewable approach are these three principles:

Be who you are.  
See what you have.  
Do what matters.

These three principles help us remember that no matter who we are, where we come from, how much “stuff” we have or don’t have, how young or old we are, how big our buildings are or how many people worship in them on Sunday morning, or what the size of our budgets are – we can and are called to be useful to God.

In a renewable approach to doing church together, we learn to pay attention to what God is already doing – in our lives, our congregations and the community around us. We keep our eyes open for the assets God has given us to work with. We are on the lookout for those things happening in and around us that make us say “wow!” because it looks like God at work. We learn to see the needs that people have. And we are open to the possibility that God is at work, through those assets, “wows!” and needs, calling us to action.

When we are doing church together in renewable ways, we believe that God is alive and at work in the world. And, more than anything, we want to join in and be a part of what God is up to.

We want to join in God’s work – whatever that is and wherever that may lead us – more than we want bigger church buildings or a big choir or a balanced budget. We want that more than we want to be comfortable, more than we want security, more than we want everything to be “ok.”

More than anything else, we want to do what matters to God. And we’re willing to work together to try to discern what that is.

This toolkit includes several exercises to help you continue this conversation in your congregation.

The first piece is a guide for reading the Book of Acts together. This is the story of how those first Christians learned to join in God’s activity and do what matters – and an inspiration to those of us who are trying to do the same thing in the 21st century. Reading it together can be a way of learning how to listen together more closely to what God is saying. We can’t discern what God is up to “out there” in our communities unless we start here, with learning to discern what God is saying to us “in here” through the conversations we have with each other as we are encountered by God in the living Word.

The second piece suggests a fun way for people in your congregation to practice paying attention to what God is up to in their every lives – at home, at work, at school and in your neighborhoods – and encourage them to share those stories with each other.

The third piece of this toolkit will help you get outside the walls of your congregation, looking for ways – not just to “see” what God is up to – but to actually join in with what God is doing in your community and through your neighbors. It encourages you to partner with an organization beyond your walls – and even beyond the Church – to do what matters to God.

The fourth piece of our toolkit is a challenge to agree on some aspect of your ministry that you can STOP doing because it has stopped being fun or effective, it’s sucking the life out of you, and it isn’t really helping you do what matters to God anymore. Sometimes the thing that holds us back from doing what matters to God is all the stuff we’re doing that mattered once upon a time but doesn’t anymore because the context has changed. If we’re really going to begin working together in renewable ways, there are probably a few things we’re going to have to dare to let go of.

The fifth piece is a CHALLENGE EXERCISE. It suggests a new way of doing the “business” of the church that puts God’s agenda first. This exercise is not for the faint of heart! But it may be for you.

The final pieces will give you some guidelines for debriefing and learning from your experiences in this process – so that you can continue the journey.

This toolkit is here to help you continue the conversation we’ve started together. It isn’t something you “have” to do. You shouldn’t feel like you have to try all of these exercises. And you certainly don’t “have” to do any of them forever. But you are being encouraged to give it a try.

Consider doing these exercises for 6 months. That’s all. Just 6 months.

Think of it as an experiment in a new way of being and doing church together.

Pay attention to what you are discovering and what you are learning.

And see what happens.

Have fun!



## Dive In & Listen Up: A Congregational Bible Study



### Why the Book of Acts?

The Book of Acts is “part 2” of the story that began in the Gospel According to Luke. Both books were written by the same author. In Luke we hear the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Acts picks up the story as Jesus ascends into heaven, leaving his followers with a set of simple instructions and a promise (Acts 1:8).

The instructions: You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea & Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The promise: I am with you, always.

The rest of the story tells us about how those first Christians learned to do what matters to God, overcoming all kinds of challenges, in the midst of a quickly changing context, with what appeared to be a startling lack of resources. How did they do it? What can we learn from them as we take *this* journey together? What might God have to say to us, today, through their story?

You are invited to enter into this conversation together as a congregation.

### Ideas for Planning a Congregation-Wide Experience

You could do this in many different ways. Here are 5 different suggestions just to get your creative juices flowing. Come up with an idea for doing this that makes sense in your own context.

- Form small groups that meet for 6 two-hour sessions, every other week, for 3 months; or once a month for 6 months. Invite everyone to join a group. Ask them to read the whole book before the first meeting. Then talk about a few chapters at a time at each session.
- Ask every committee in your congregation, including the staff and council/board, to dedicate one hour of their meeting time each month to the Book of Acts for 6 months. Ask everyone to read the whole book before the first meeting. Then talk about a few chapters at a time at each meeting.
- Decide to read the book together as a congregation. Ask everyone to read a few chapters a week. Plan a 6-week sermon series on the story. But also make time during your worship time for people to actually talk with each other about what they’ve heard and read.
- Hold a half-day congregational retreat. Ask everyone to read the book ahead of time. Talk about it at the retreat.
- Ask everyone in the congregation to read the Book of Acts and share their reflections on a Book of Acts Facebook page you’ve created for your congregation.

### Tips for Reading the Book of Acts

Here are some tips for reading the Book of Acts (and anything in the Bible!) – whether you’re reading it together with a group or you’re reading it on your own.

- Pray before you start reading! Ask the Holy Spirit to open your ears, mind, heart so that God can speak to you through the words you're reading.
- Expect God to speak to you! The Bible is God's LIVING Word. This isn't just the story of something that happened long ago. God is still speaking today and has something to say to you. Listen for it through this story!
- Ask yourself the following questions about what you've read:



*What is God doing in this story?*

*What am I hearing God say to me through this story?*

*What am I hearing God say to US (as a group) through this story?*

*What is God calling me and/or us to DO through this story?*

### **Tips for Facilitating a Discussion**

- (Unless you're doing it all online...) Pay attention to your physical meeting space. Make sure everyone can see each other. Set up your space so that no one person is "in the spotlight." Arrange your seating so that everyone is able and encouraged to talk to one another.
- If your group is bigger than 8 people, consider splitting up into smaller groups to talk about at least some of the questions below. Ask each group to keep track of their conversation, taking notes that they'll be able to share with the bigger group later.
- When you come back together as a large group debrief the small group conversations, keeping track of what people are saying on flip chart paper. Use questions like:
  - So what did you learn?
  - What ah-ha moments have you had?
  - What uh-oh moments have you had?
  - What are we being called to do?

## Got God Sightings?!

At the heart of a renewable way of doing life, work and church together is a belief that God is on the loose in the world. As Christians, our job is simply this:

- Pay attention to what God is up to.
- Name it when you see it.
- Join in and be part of it!

This is a joy-filled way of living and working. No more focusing on the resources you don't have, wish you had or used to have to work with! Now, the possibilities for doing what matters are endless.



### The Challenge

Our congregations can help us learn to stay aware of God's activity in our lives and the world around us by inviting us to share stories about our God Sightings.

A God Sighting is a story about where and how you've experienced the presence and activity of God.

The challenge for most of us is to learn how to recognize God's activity when we see it. We may expect God to show up when we're at worship together, for example. But how many of us are prepared for an encounter with God at the grocery store?

It takes practice and intentionality for most of us to pay attention to what God is up to. And paying attention to what God is up to is an important first step in learning to live and work in renewable ways.

It's also helpful for us to have a few guidelines when we're trying to discern what God is up to. Is it God at work when all of a sudden a parking spot appears in the middle of a full lot? Maybe. But probably that was just you being lucky.

The Biblical story gives us a few clues. We can be pretty sure God is at work, for example, whenever we see evidence of what the apostle Paul called "the fruit of the Spirit." It doesn't matter where you are or who you're with, you can be pretty sure God is at work whenever you see love, patience, kindness, faithfulness, self-control, generosity.

Jesus told a lot of stories to help us recognize God's activity. His parables about the kingdom paint a vivid picture of what it looks like whenever God shows up. When you see somebody extending love and welcome to a prodigal son (or somebody just as undeserving), that's God at work. When you see folks sharing their banquet table with the poor, the sick and the forgotten, that's God at work.

The things we learn and experience "in here" within the community of faith teach us to recognize God's activity and presence everywhere.

## A Few Ideas

You can begin to introduce the idea of God Sightings just by remembering to ask the right questions.

Whenever you gather – for committee meetings, small group Bible studies, choir practice, Sunday School, worship services – get in the habit of making time to talk together about two simple questions:

Where have you seen God at work lately?  
How has God been at work in and through you lately?

The first question invites people to think about how they have seen God at work in and through their neighbors – where they have seen God on the loose where they live, work, play or go to school. The second question reminds people that God is at work in and through *them*, as well – they are God’s hands, voice, feet and ears – God is on the loose in the world and doing awesome stuff through them!

You might also want to consider gathering the stories of God Sightings in fun and creative ways. There is no end to the ways you could do this. Here are a few ideas to get your own creative juices flowing:

- Encourage people in your congregation to add their stories to the God Sightings Facebook page of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod and/or start a God Sightings Facebook page for your congregation. Ask people to sign on at least once a week to add a story that answers one of the questions above.
- Create a God Sightings Graffiti Board someplace in your church building. Make sure it’s in a really visible, highly trafficked part of the building. Make it fun and colorful. Make it easy for people to add their stories using bright paper and colorful markers (if it’s a bulletin board), brightly colored chalk (if it’s a chalk board) or brightly colored markers (if it’s a white board). Clear it off regularly - maybe weekly - so that people are encouraged to keep adding their stories on an ongoing basis.
- Experiment with adding a God Sightings moment to your worship service for a few months. During the Sharing of the Peace, as a part of the Offering time or after the sermon as a way of reflecting on the message, invite people to turn to someone sitting near them and answer one of those two questions above.
- Put up a God Sightings map. Post a map of your community on a wall in your church building – in a highly visible, trafficked part of the building – and encourage people to put a push pin on the map to indicate where they saw God on the loose that week. Ask them to fill out a 5x7 notecard, telling the story. Collect those stories in a basket and publish them in your congregation’s e-news or Sunday bulletin.



## What are we learning?

Be sure to take time, every once in awhile, to talk together about this experience. Ask questions like: What are we learning from each other? What are you noticing about the stories you hear? What is happening to you as a result of being on the lookout for God?

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## Howdy Partner: Collaborate, Collaborate, Collaborate

Competition is a core principle of the consumable way of doing life and work that has characterized the industrial era. That's because one of the basic, philosophical ideas that shapes this approach is the idea that resources are scarce. According to this view of the world, there is never enough to go around. There isn't enough money, energy, resources, etc. Your job, therefore, is to out-compete your neighbor for the limited resources. If you don't, your neighbor will win. And you will die.

This approach to life and work has sucked the life out of us and is wrecking the organizations and institutions we care about. It is killing the planet. It is breaking God's heart.

It's time to try something new.

In a renewable approach to life and work, we focus on the abundance of resources we all share and find ways of working together that maximizes the impact of those resources.

In the church, this means that we can stop viewing our neighbors – including other congregations, local sports leagues, local businesses etc. – as competitors. And we can start seeing them as potential partners in doing what matters to God.

### Try This

In a consumable way of doing church, leaders are always trying to come up with new programs that will compete with what other organizations in their community are offering in order to attract people and draw in new members. This is exhausting! In a lot of congregations – where membership has declined, folks are getting older, and money is tight – it's downright depressing.

If you want to keep doing ministry this way, knock yourself out.

But if you're ready to try working together in renewable ways, try remembering that God is on the loose out there! And start looking for ways to join in and be a part of it.

Here are two suggestions for you to consider:

- As a church council/board, committee, staff or congregation: Decide right now that you're not going to start one more new program...until you first join a program that somebody in your community has already started. Look for somebody doing great work, somebody through whom God is clearly at work. They may not even know it's God! They may not be connected to a church body. They may not express any faith commitments at all. But you can tell it's God because you see the fruit of the Spirit or you see God's kingdom at work in and through them. Go ask them how you can help. Join in. Make friends. Make a difference. And see what happens!
- As a church council/board, committee, staff or congregation: If there is a need in your community that is not being met well by anybody else...don't try to address that need on your own. Look for somebody in your community – an organization, a government agency, business leaders, etc. – who might have the resources and a good reason to work with you. Go start a conversation with them about it. Ask good questions. Listen. Be sure to talk to those who are in need, too. Find out what they have to bring to the table, what ideas they have, what resources they have to make a difference. Work together to do what matters.

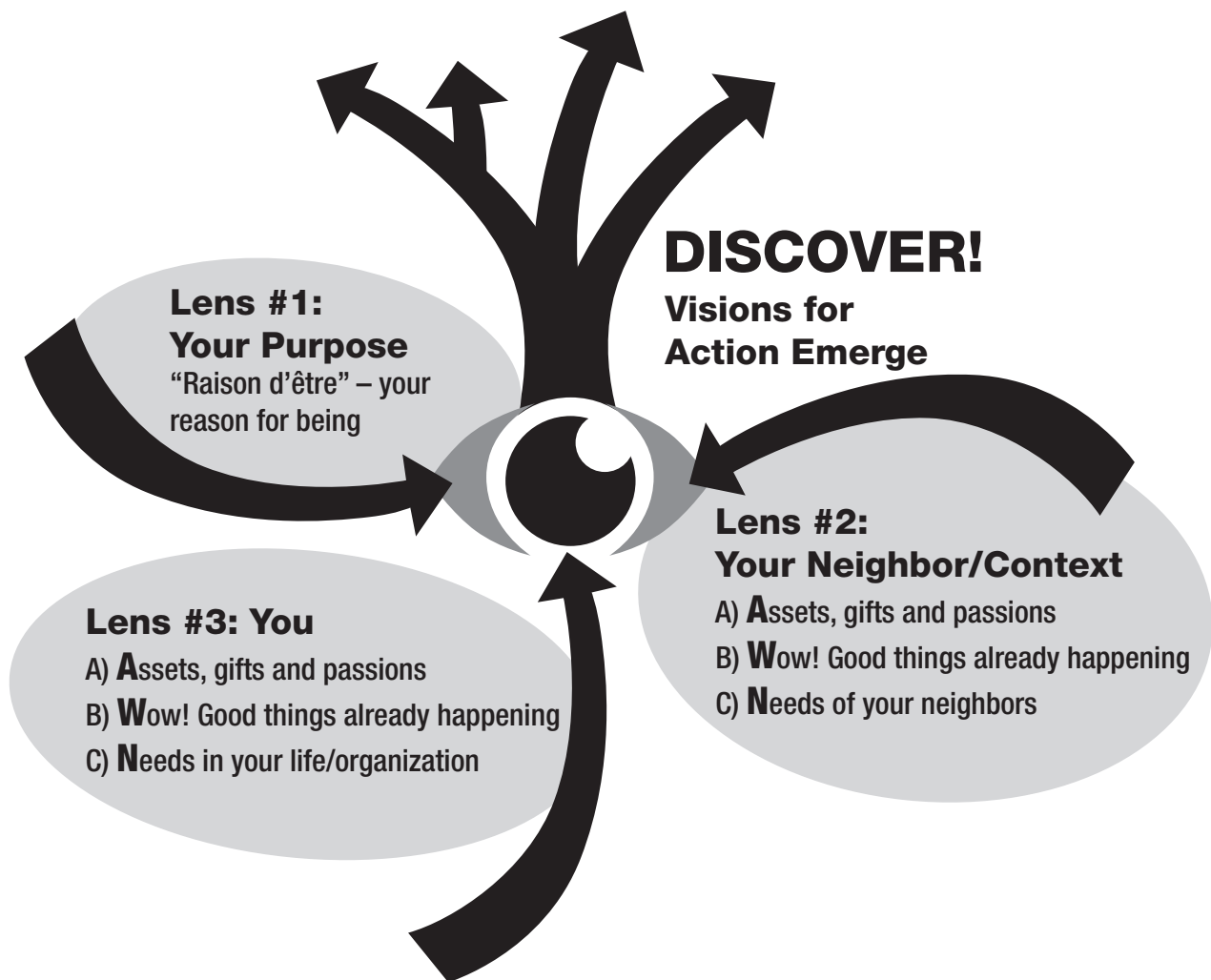
## A Helpful Process

The diagram below can help you think about how a partnership with your neighbor might work. Notice that, in a renewable way of thinking about things, you and your neighbor aren't in competition. Instead, you recognize that both you and your neighbor have things to offer. You both have assets and resources to share. You both have things you're good at – things you're already doing where it's clear God is at work, things that make you say "wow!" And you both have needs.

When you approach your neighbor, remember to pay attention to everything you BOTH bring. Look for areas where your assets, wows and needs overlap – and where they complement each other. Look for ways you can work together. Instead of thinking about each other as competitors, think of each other as collaborators and co-creators of something new. The possibilities when you work together are endless!

# The PAWN Process™

*Practicing a renewable way of seeing*



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## Stop it Already!: Dare to Do What Matters

“But we’ve always done it that way!” Does that sound familiar? Maybe you’ve said it yourself a time or two!

When you decide, as a congregation, to do what matters to God – to put God’s agenda ahead of anything else – you are set free from the “always done it” prison. You no longer have to do things in life, work or ministry just because:

- That’s how it’s always been done.
- The person with the biggest voice (or the fattest wallet or the highest degree or the squeakiest wheel) says so.
- The Smith family down the street (or their church) do it that way.
- Some book or keynote speaker told you it was THE way to do it.

### It’s Hard To Let Go

It can be really hard, though, to let go. It can be difficult to look at a program, a tradition, a practice, a group, or a service that has been a part of your life together and admit that it’s something you probably don’t need to do anymore. Maybe it was useful to God once upon a time. Maybe it changed lives. Maybe it made a difference in your community. Maybe it helped change the world! But, for whatever reason, that time has passed. And, if you’re really going to focus on doing what matters to God, you need to stop it.

That takes courage. It takes faith. And it takes practice!

### Try This

Challenge each leadership group in your congregation – your council/board, committees, education team, staff, altar guild, worship leaders, youth group (yes, youth get stuck, too!), etc. – to pick one thing they are going to STOP doing.

Assure them that this is an experiment. Ask them to try this for just 6 months. (You can do – or NOT do! – anything for 6 months, right?) Tell them that, at the end of 6 months, if they want to pick the thing up again and keep doing it, they can. Ask them to just give it a whirl and see what happens.

### Some Key Questions

How do you decide what not to do? Here are a few questions that might help them make that decision:

- Are we having FUN doing this thing? If not, that’s a good indication that it’s time to stop it.
- Do we have trouble finding people to lead this thing? Do we have trouble convincing people to be a part of it? If so, that’s a good clue that it might be time to end it.



- Are lives being changed by it? Are those of us who are doing it growing and changing, as a result of our participation and leadership in it? Is it having a positive impact on our congregation and/or our community? Would anybody miss it if it wasn't there anymore? If the answer is “no” to those questions, you've got to think that maybe – just maybe – it doesn't really matter.

Go ahead, dare to stop something. You have been set free to do what matters to God.

Embrace the freedom that is yours.



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## Challenge Exercise

Discovering together what God is saying to us through Scripture? Check.

Learning how to pay attention to what God is up to where we live, work, play and go to school? Check.

Partnering with our neighbors to do what matters to God? Check.

Daring to STOP doing things that don't matter so much anymore? Check.

Then maybe you're ready for this.

### Let God Set Your Agenda

You know how, before most meetings, somebody writes up an agenda. Then we get together and do the agenda? Maybe we say a prayer at the beginning of the meeting. Maybe we even do a little Bible study together? We ask God to bless us as we do our agenda. And then we go to work.

Well, imagine what might happen if we dared to set our agendas aside - just for a few, maybe 6 months, or so – and followed God's agenda for us, instead.

Here's what that might look like.

### An Agenda – If You Dare

- A week before your meeting, send out all the “reports” via email (or snail mail or have people pick them up at worship). Ask everyone to read them in advance so they know exactly what's going on – with your committees, your budget, etc.
- At the meeting, begin with prayer. Serious, real, honest prayer. Take turns praying out loud. Leave room for silent prayer. Ask God to let a Spirit of discernment and daring fill each of you. Spend as much time as you're able in prayer together.
- Then open up the Bible. Something from Acts would do but pick anything. Pick the text for the coming week's worship service. Take turns picking your favorite text. Use the “daily lectionary.” Work your way through a different book of the Bible.
- Read a passage out loud - make it long enough to give you something to chew on. A whole chapter, for example. Or a whole story. Have the best reader in your group read it. Or take turns reading a verse at a time.
- Then, ask people to write down their answers to these questions:
  - What is God doing in this passage?
  - What do you hear God saying to you in this passage?
  - What do you hear God saying to US in this passage?
- Share with each other what you wrote down. And talk about it together. And keep talking. Let the conversation go where the Spirit leads you. Learn from each other. Listen to what GOD is saying to you through the things you say to each other.
- After an hour or so of this, stop and pray again.



- Then answer this one question together: What do you hear God calling us to DO through this story?
- Expect your answers to that question and your conversation to be shaped, in part, by the “reports” you’ve read and the things that are going on in your congregation and your community. But expect to be surprised by God, too.
- Talk about that last question until it feels like you have heard an answer TOGETHER. And then, whatever it is you’ve heard God calling you to do... agree to DO IT! Don’t worry about doing the “right” thing or the most rational thing or the thing you think will get the best results – unless it is also the thing that everyone feels excited about doing. Decide to the thing that seems right to you and the Holy Spirit – the thing that will be the most fun and the most meaningful.
- Pray prayers of thanksgiving...and get to work doing what matters to God.



### **Are You Still With Us?!**

Now, some of you might be hyper-ventilating right now.

What about the budget?!

What about those reports?!

What about all the decisions we have to make, like about paving the parking lot and fixing the furnace and, and, and...?!?

Well, if those things are really important, odds are they’ll come up during your holy conversation and you’ll make a plan for dealing with them during the meeting.

But if you’ve got folks who insist on having at least part of the meeting be “business,” then go ahead and set aside one half hour at the end of your meeting to take care of whatever didn’t come up before but seems important. Putting “unfinished business” at the end of the agenda might help folks who are worried about this feel more comfortable and more willing to try this (crazy!) idea.

The important idea here is to trust that God is alive and at work in and through you. God has work for you to do!

Try putting God’s agenda first. And see what happens!

## Debrief It: A Reflection Guide

We are on a journey of learning and discovery together in Northeastern Pennsylvania. We are trying to figure out what it means to make a shift to a more renewable way of doing life, work and church. We are saying that, more than anything, we want to do what matters to God. But we aren't exactly sure where this whole adventure will lead!

So it's important, along the way, to stop and reflect on what's happening, what we're learning and where God seems to be leading us.



This toolkit contains 5 exercises. You and your congregation are being encouraged to do some or all of them, and to give it a try for at least 6 months as a sort of experiment. At that point, you'll be invited to put together a plan for "what's next" in this journey.

But it will be helpful if you take a break somewhere in the middle of it all – say every other month or after 3 months – and reflect together on what's happening. You can do this as a whole congregation, if that makes sense. Or do it as a smaller group – say the staff and council/board or your whole group of leaders.

Set aside an hour and ask yourselves the following questions. First, let each person write their answers. Then talk about what you've written together. Listen to each other. Don't debate or argue! Really listen:

- What are we learning from this experiment?
- What kinds of things have happened as a result of it?
- How are people being changed by it?
- How are WE being changed by it?
- What are we hearing God say to us through it?
- Is there something we should do differently?

After you've talked through these questions, ask a few more:

- What "ah ha" moments have you had in this conversation?
- What have you learned?
- What should we do next?

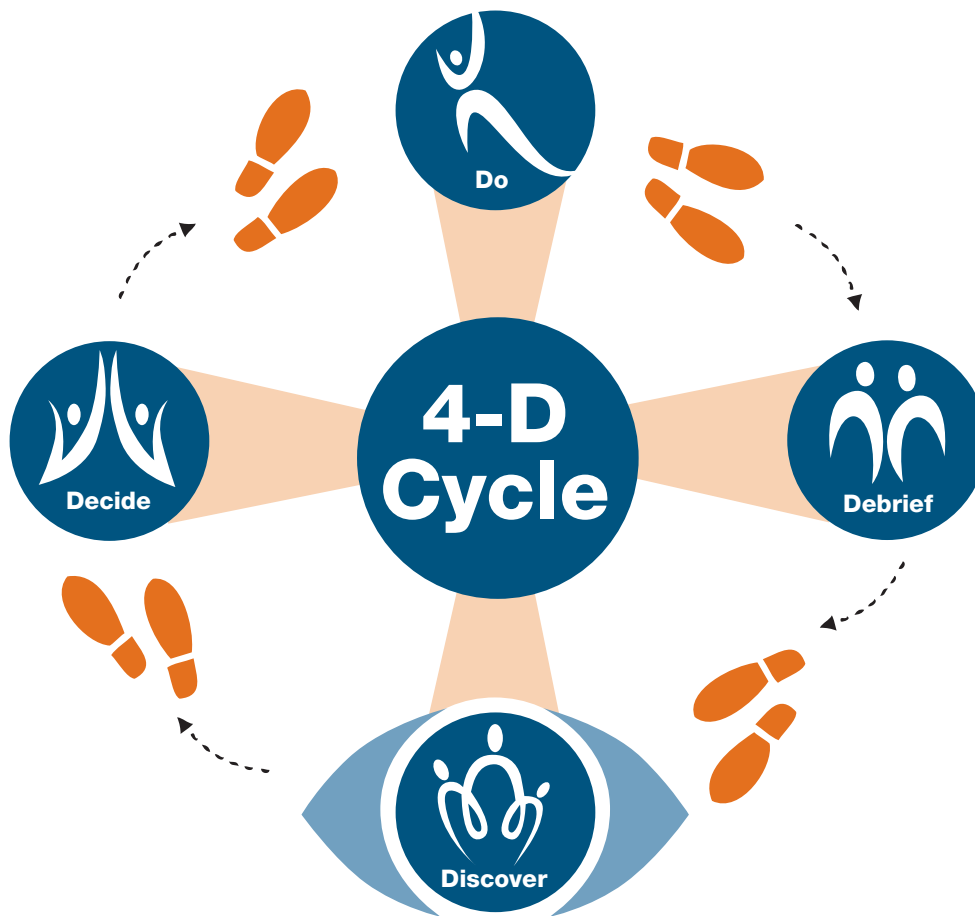
Consider making this kind of learning conversation a regular part of everything you do.

## A Planning Guide

The key to learning to work in renewable ways is being willing to follow where the Spirit leads. It's a little bit like dancing – with God as your partner. There are four basic steps in this dance:

- Discover - Pay attention to what God is up to!
- Decide - Pick something to do that will help you join in and be a part of what God is up to. Don't worry about picking the “right” thing. Pick the thing that seems right to you and the Holy Spirit. Pick the thing that people want to do because it will be fun and meaningful.
- Do - That's right. Actually DO the thing you've decided to do.
- Debrief - Stop and talk about what you've learned. And let that inform what you decide to do next.

Here's what it looks like:



After awhile, say 6 months, of doing these exercises together, it would be a good time to debrief the experience, learn from it and decide what you're going to do next.

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## Planning Questions



What have we learned during the past several months?

What could have made this experiment more effective and/or more fun?

What are the most positive things that happened as a result of what we've done?

In what way have we been changed?

What new people have come to be a part of what we're up to?

Who has been missing?

What new ideas have been popping? What new opportunities seem to be emerging? What new possibilities for learning, discovery or action are appearing?

What's next?! What can we do together that will matter to God?



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