

# Coaching Plumb Line Teams

## **What is a *plumb line*?**

a line with a plumb (a weight) attached to it, used for finding the depth of water or determining the vertical on an upright surface.

This is what he let me see: and I saw the Lord stationed by a wall made straight by a weighted line, and he had a weighted line in his hand. (Amos 7.7, Basic English Version)

## **What is a Plumb Line Study in the Presbytery of Long Island?**

A self-study of a congregation usually facilitated by an elected or appointed team made up of members of the congregation. Although such a study can be used as a tool for discernment at any time there are moments in the life of a congregation where such a study is an important step in moving forward. These include:

- Departure of a Pastor – Seeking New Pastoral Leadership
- Moments of Crisis – Fire, Natural Disaster, Tragedy, re-Formation, Financial, Major Structural Changes
- Discernment – Stuck in Place, Membership Growth, Sustainability
- During tenure of a Designated Pastor

Note that the Plumb Line Study is not the same as the Mission Information Form (MIF) used when seeking a Pastor. However, a well done Study reduces the work and time needed to complete the MIF

Three baseline questions are used to structure the work of Plumb Line Teams. The questions are both comprehensive and flexible. They are:

- Who Are We (Today)?
- Who Are Our Neighbors?
- Who/What is God Calling us to Do/Be?

## **A Closer Look at the Questions**

### Who are we (today)?

Scripture: What story in the Bible speaks to who 'we' are today? Are we on the ark with Noah, Entering the Promised Land, a faithful remnant, . . .

Listening to the Congregation: a wide range of possible approaches. The Plumb Line Team draws on its knowledge of the congregation in selecting what tools they will use. There are two basic approaches here:

Static: Surveys, statistical information

Interactive: Conversations, Retreats

Common Pitfalls: “We are a welcoming church?” Haven’t met a church that doesn’t say this. It frequently shows up front and center in early drafts of Plumb Line reports. Doesn’t tell a stranger anything that makes this congregation distinctive.

### Who are our neighbors?

This is about where God has placed the congregation. It is often the most challenging question for a team as it asks them to step outside of the ‘church doors and take a good look around them. What does the congregation know about the community their church is in?

Here the team looks to community leaders (Government, Public Safety, Education, Community Organizations, other religious communities) to find out what they know about the church, what they see as major issues in the community, are there areas where the church is/could be partnering with the community?

Another approach is to get out and walk the neighborhood. Does the team know what is happening around them throughout the day?

In addition, demographic is easily available online that will provide a basic profile of the community.

Common Pitfalls: Equating ministry programs (food pantry, nursery school. . .) to knowing the community. Holding to an outdated image of the community, usually their impression of the community when they joined the church. Not believing that community leaders have something useful to say about the church.

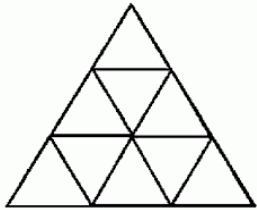
### Who/What is God Calling us to Do/Be?

The ‘so what’ question. What to do with what has been learned through the first two questions? This is a time for the team to wrestle with what they have learned from the Bible story they claimed as speaking to them today and what they learned from all the various information gathered in exploring the first two question.

### Some Practical Stuff?

### *The Triangle Exercise*

Uses a simple graphic to help a team grasp the idea that just because you all have the same image (information) in front of you doesn't mean that you all see the same thing.



### *Writing a Plumb Line Report?*

The report should tell a story, provide a snapshot, that engages the imagination of someone who does not know the congregation. It is not a 'book' or a 'statistical report.'

It should be three to seven pages in length.

One process that works well with many teams is to have them individually write answers to each of the three questions and then work together to create a single narrative.

Sample documents are to be avoided as they have a tendency to become the new document.

Pitfalls in the writing process: Tripping over the 'welcoming rock.' Many of the first drafts of Plumb Line documents lead with "we are a welcoming church." But that doesn't say anything distinctive about who the church is. No church wants to be the 'unwelcoming' church.

### Sample Introductory Outline

Talking points for a first meeting with a team or introducing the Plumb Line to a Session.

## **Plumb Line Study – Introduction Baldwin Presbyterian Church May 2, 2018**

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Three questions structure the work of Plumb Line/Mission Study Teams. The questions are both comprehensive and flexible. They are:

- Who Are We (Today)?
- Who Are Our Neighbors?
- Who/What is God Calling us to Do/Be?

### **Seeing the Same Things Differently – Triangle Exercise**

#### **A Closer Look at the Questions**

##### Who are we (today)?

*Scripture:* What story in the Bible speaks to who ‘we’ are today? Are we on the ark with Noah, Entering the Promised Land, a faithful remnant, . . .

*Listening to the Congregation:* There is a wide range of possible approaches your team can take here. The Plumb Line Team draws on its own knowledge of the congregation to select what tools you decide to use. There are two basic approaches here:

- Static: Surveys, statistical information
- Interactive: Conversations, Retreats

These might include:

- A Brief Historical Sketch – as it speaks to where the congregation is today
- Congregational Timeline – as it speaks to where the congregation is today
- Member Networks
- Various types of Surveys
- In-home conversations

##### Who are our neighbors?

This is about where God has placed your congregation. It is often the most challenging question as it requires you to step outside of the 'church doors and take a good look around your neighborhood. What do you understand about the community the church is in?

There are three basic approaches here:

Interviews with Community Leaders ( Government, Public Safety, Schools, Community Organizations, Libraries) and other churches, synagogues, mosques, etc. The goal is to listen and discover what these leaders know about your church. what they see as major issues in the community. Discover if there are areas where the church is/could be partnering with the community?

Walking the neighborhood. Do you know what is happening around them throughout the day night, week, weekends. This can be done by observation or talking to people in the neighborhood?

General Demographics: Thanks to the internet it is fairly easy to access a range of demographic information

### Who/What is God Calling us to Do/Be?

This is the 'so what' question. How does what you have learned through exploring the first two question help you to answer this final question?

### *Writing a Plumb Line Report?*

The report should tell a story, provide a snapshot, that engages the imagination of someone who does not know the congregation. It is not a 'book' or a 'statistical report.'

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One process that works well with many teams is to have them individually write answers to each of the three questions and then work together to create a single narrative.

### *A Small Sampling of Resources*

*Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*, Gil Rendle and Alice Mann

*Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*, Alan Roxburgh

*Portable Faith: How to Take Your Congregation to the Community*, Sarah Cunningham

*Transitional Ministry Today: Successful Strategies for Churches and Pastors*, Ed. Norman Bendroth

<http://www.presbyteryofli.com/file-cabinet/> - a variety of models and "Research Strategies for Congregations" (PC(USA) Research Services

