

A photograph of a church with a prominent steeple, situated on a grassy bank next to a pond. The scene is captured during autumn, with trees displaying vibrant orange, yellow, and red foliage. The church's reflection is clearly visible in the calm water of the pond. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

WHAT ARE CHURCHES FOR?

A Conversation Sponsored by
The Westmont Center for Thriving Communities
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Deliberation & Discernment

(adapted from “The Church’s Role in a Divided Society,” Baylor Public Deliberation Initiative)

Today’s conversation is not a debate. It’s not about reaching agreement or seeing eye to eye. It’s about looking for a shared direction, guided by our faith in God and what we, as God’s children, most value. It’s about examining the costs and consequences of possible solutions to daunting problems and finding out what we, as a society—faithful followers and citizens—would or would not accept as a solution. Deliberation can be considered a good first step in bringing people together to talk about an important issue or community problem of common concern.

What are we going to do and not do?

Forums deepen understanding by helping people consider a problem’s nuances and gray areas. Small groups offer everyone a chance to weigh in and listen carefully to others, some of whom will have very different, even opposing ideas. Facilitators cultivate a civil, respectful atmosphere and encourage participants to identify some areas of agreement or common ground that could be used to move forward. Sometimes people suggest next steps to pursue an issue. The cumulative results of multiple forum groups often provide what the public values and therefore can be helpful for elected officials and community leaders.

Deliberation does not significantly change peoples’ minds nor attempt to reach consensus. Forums are not designed to produce outcomes that include action plans. While some people might be interested in moving forward, others value the forum for deepening their understanding.

How will we engage?

We will:

- Prayerfully understand the potential assets and trade-offs of each option.
- Move beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life.
- Weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable.
- Work through the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.
- Rely on our faith and the Holy Spirit to guide our time together.

Note to Participants

This deliberative guide outlines five potential models for church life. In offering these approaches for deliberation, we acknowledge that individuals, congregations, and communities have not always had a choice in how they have responded. Some voices have historically been marginalized more than others, within the church and within society, and some have had more freedom and power to speak and to be heard than others. We encourage participants to remember this as they discuss, and consciously listen harder to the quieter or absent voices at their tables.



Introduction

Churches serve many functions. They are houses of worship and sites of neighborhood cohesion. They cultivate Christian disciples and facilitate social connection. They care for congregants in need and reach out to communities beyond their walls. Churches can be and do many things, but which are most important? How might God be calling your church, right now?

These are important questions because they draw attention to Christians' radically different visions of the church, not only in the twenty-first century but across history. Some churches have coalesced around doctrinal reform, as Martin Luther did when he broke from the Catholic practice of indulgences in 1517. Some churches have reimaged the boundaries of their congregations, as in John Wesley's case when he brought revival to the streets of eighteenth-century London. Others viewed the church as the community from which to pursue prophetic resistance to injustices, such as the wealth of Black church traditions (some congregationalist, some Baptist, and others AME Zion) during the Civil Rights Movement.

Such visions resound in our current moment where Christian churches, like much of U.S. society, has faced polarization, communication stalemates, and discouragement. Denominational fractures and church splits over ideology and praxis continue to accentuate such differences. Along with these fissures, there are claims that church is less relevant than ever, unequipped to engage with broader conversations about politics, gender and sexuality, and racism, leading some to herald the decline of the American church.¹

On the Central Coast, the church's accessibility and relevance is a pressing concern. Although slightly over half of the population identifies as Christian, of that group, only a quarter attend church weekly and nearly two-thirds don't attend church regularly.² In the

¹Dr. Timothy Keller, "The Decline and the Renewal of the American Church," Parts 1 & 2, *Life in the Gospel*, 2021, <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/the-decline-of-evangelicalism/>.

² The data in this section comes from a 2021 poll done by The Barna Group. In Barna's definition, the Central Coast includes the cities of Santa Barbara, Santa Maria, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, and Salinas.

midst of declining church affiliation, it's crucial that we think together about the "why" and the "how" of our faith communities.

Christians generally agree that church is ultimately about worshipping and serving God. In the words of Catholic theologian Avery Cardinal Dulles, "To the Christian believer, the Church is not a purely human thing; it is not simply of this creation or of this world; rather, it is the work of God, who is present and operative in the Church through the Holy Spirit, in who Christ continues his saving presence." As an entity subject to the work of God and presence of the Spirit, churches aren't subject to the finite understanding of people.

And yet, in spite of churches' transcendent qualities, they still operate amid human culture and society. As British theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbigin articulates, "The church is a visible community among other human communities." This means that churches are bound in time, place, and culture, composed of individuals also navigating particular contexts. Because of this reality, there is no essence of church that can be captured; instead, it is a constantly changing entity textured by the options available to particular people in particular places and times. In this way, it's important to heed Dulles's call to humility, recognizing "that our own favorite paradigms, however excellent, do not solve all questions. Much harm is done by imperialistically seeking to impose one model as the definitive one."³



As you consider the five options presented below, know that this guide is not intended for the church to choose one option over another. Indeed, many of these options will exist together as overlapping visions. And yet, each option brings with it its own rhetoric, values, certitudes, commitments, and priorities. Each option will also foster the willingness to tackle certain problems and not others. We recommend the following uses for the guide:

- As an assessment tool for congregational life. The church can use the guide to explore where different members of a congregation, including the pastoral leadership, find themselves among the options.
- As a way to build shared understanding in your community about the relationships among various approaches to church.

Opening Reflection

Speaking from your personal experience, what does your church offer to you, your family, and/or your community?

³ Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., *The Five Models of the Church*, New York: Image, 2014, 24.

Option 1: Churches connect us to one another



This model fosters a communion of saints characterized by mutual dependence, concern, and union. This accentuates both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with others. The church as the Body of Christ is introduced by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12. The emphasis in this approach is a union among members in which individual, external expressions of

faith (e.g. worship, Bible study) gesture back to fellowship in the Spirit of God. This model values Christian love and unity.

This option might highlight...	This option might miss...
Continuity with the community-centered ethos of the early church, reinforced by prominent theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas	Possibilities for church life beyond fellowship opportunities
Warm personal relationships among the faithful, which can produce other bonds of connection and spiritual goods	The full humanity and dignity of people who don't "fit the mold," or who threaten the relational harmony of churches
A church's unique ability to meet the human need for connection and belonging	The importance, beyond connection and belonging, of clear church governance and procedure

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What is appealing about this function of a church?
2. What would you say is most important to those who are attracted to this approach?
3. Where have we seen this option work well? Where have we seen it work less well?
4. Where do we see this approach overlapping with other options?

Option 2: Churches make visible God’s work in the world

This option sees churches as associations of people who encounter and bear witness to the visible presence of Christ. In this approach, a church itself functions as a “sacrament,” or tangible evidence of God's grace. Sacraments, as Dulles articulates, “take place in a mutual interaction that permits the people together to achieve a spiritual breakthrough that they could not achieve in isolation.” (59)



Other such sacraments might include communion or the Eucharist, baptism, etc. Through the practice of such sacraments together, congregants draw nearer to Christ and one another. This option values transcendence and faith.

This option might highlight...	This option might miss...
The transcendent, divine nature of the unified Body of Christ	The human nature of real, embodied churches
God’s grace as the motivation for prayer, worship, confession, and witness	God’s care for the world as the motivation for practical service to our neighbors
The continuity of religious mystery proceeding from Christ, through the historical church, to our own congregation	People for whom ritual feels like superstition, or going through the motions

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Option 3: Churches proclaim the gospel



This option sees churches as dedicated to proclaiming the word of God through faith. Unlike the other models, these churches point away from themselves and direct their congregants to Christ and the coming Kingdom of God. This approach focuses on God’s sovereignty and people’s dependence on him. Churches in this model are typically congregational in structure

and not dependent on any worldwide network to congregate or proclaim. This approach values truth and faith.

This option might highlight...	This option might miss...
A clear mission and identity for churches in spreading Christ’s gospel	God’s desire to reconcile “all things” (Col 1), which extends beyond “saving souls”
The adaptability and translatability of a church’s clear, simple task	The historical and cultural contexts that inform how a church can and should do its work
The importance of the Bible as a source of authority and teaching	The importance of practice, as well as belief, for Christian discipleship

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Option 4: Churches serve the world

Those who join together in Christian service to the world embody a common missional purpose. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 203-204). Theologically, this model might stress Christ's incarnation—that is to say, God’s becoming fully human in the person of Jesus. As Christ lived, walked, ate, healed, and served among real human



communities, so churches are called to embody God’s love to their own neighbors and neighborhoods. This approach values justice and compassion, especially to those who are marginalized in society.

This option might highlight...	This option might miss...
The relevance of churches as they respond to the world around them	The biblical and historical purposes of the church that exceed current local problems
The ability of a church to engage with people whose needs have gone unmet by other communities	A church’s call to serve <i>God</i> as well as neighbor
Opportunities for people with resources and privilege to directly serve others	Humble service rather than using service as a marker of virtue

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Option 5: Churches connect us to Christ through time and space

All Christian churches are connected historically: and not just historically, but also in the person of Jesus Christ, through whom they have their life and to whom they point. Whatever churches possess—teaching, authority, governance, mission, or anything else—proceeds from and is authorized by Christ. In light of this, churches should pay special attention to their status as a unique, sacred institution. Among other things, they should carefully guard their traditions and creeds, maintain consistent leadership structures, ensure continuity from one generation and place to the next, and clearly define their membership. This model values order, clarity, and respect for authority. It’s important to note that institution doesn’t mean institutionalism, which emphasizes the organization over all other factors. Instead, it offers structure so that a church can fulfill its mission in the world.



This option might highlight...	This option might miss...
Continuity with the historical church	Where God is calling a church in the present and future
Stable, time-tested models for professional leadership	New possibilities for leadership that don't fit the historical model
A strong sense of church identity and membership	The importance of people who aren't tied by membership to the institutional church

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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Connecting Questions

1. Has this conversation changed your thinking about the purposes of the church?
2. Were there particular areas of agreement, shared values, or common ground that resulted from the conversation?
3. To what extent did your group identify overlaps and connections among the options?
4. Are there other aims or functions of the church not presented here?
5. What voices were missing from our conversation?
6. What do we still need to talk about?

Credits

The five options represented in this issue guide have been adapted from Avery Cardinal Dulles' classic work *Five Models of the Church* (1978). Dulles was a Catholic theologian, scholar, and teacher whose research on ecclesiology has influenced both Catholic and Protestant thought. Aaron Sizer, Associate Director of the Gaede Institute for the Liberal Arts and a specialist in church history, also provided rich historical and theological insight.

This guide has relied on deliberative framing from the Baylor University Public Deliberation Initiative (PDI) used in their recent issue guide "The Church's Role in a Divided Society." For more on PDI's work with Faith and Deliberation, visit <https://sites.baylor.edu/baylorpdi>. For further information about applying a deliberative approach to a range of current issues, we encourage you to explore the work of the Kettering Foundation (www.kettering.org) and the National Issues Forum (www.nifi.org).

Special thanks to Lilly Endowment, Inc., which supports the work of The Westmont Center for Thriving Communities. To learn more about Thriving Communities and explore how you can become involved, visit www.westmont.edu/thriving.