



## **Reconciliation**

### ***The Merger of Congregations***

*One of the Ten “R” s for Plotting a New Congregational Course*

**Reconciliation** is one of at least ten choices available to congregations who need to engage in transitions and changes that could lead to transformation as they plot a new course for their congregation. This is when three or more congregations merge into a new congregation that expresses their unity in Christ and symbolizes reconciliation of congregations with one another.

When two congregations become one this is **Redemption**. The stronger of the two congregations generally takes the leadership, makes many of the decisions, and highly influences the core values and cultural of the congregation. It is a viable choice for many congregations, but it is not a merger.

When three or more congregations merge this is the creation of a new congregation that forms a greater synergy than present in the three congregations individually. Instead of compromising to pick and choose core values, cultural norms, and program practices from the various congregations, a merger—at its best—is truly the creation of a new congregation with new values, norms, and practices.

Often the coming together of two congregations is called a merger, but it is a binary joining together of congregations that often involves debates such as will things be done the way of Church A or the way of Church B. It is hard to form a truly new and united congregational fellowship if a little bit of this and a little bit of that is intended to form a new congregation. **Redemption** is a better understanding of when two congregations come together.

A merger of three or more congregations is more altruistic or compassionate. Rather than talking about how each congregation can get its way in the new relationship, conversations can be about how to form a new congregation with a new empowering vision from God. This vision should focus on identified target or affinity groups of people to whom God is sending the new congregation that they might be received.

### **Why Merge into a New Congregation?**

Here are seven reasons for merging into a new congregation. Perhaps you can think of more.

1. Because your congregation is at a point of decision about the viability of its future in its location, with its current attendance, leadership, finances, and the aging of the congregational participants.
2. Because your congregation does not at this point have the capacity to address the great opportunities and challenges of its context, and the synergy of three or more congregations coming together appears to be a better choice for you.
3. Because the overhead costs of facilities and staff is taking too high of a percentage of the tithes and offerings of your congregation, and in a new congregation where three congregations come together there can be a reallocation of resources to focus more on fulfilling God’s empowering vision for the new congregation.
4. Because the leadership base of your congregation is insufficient to address the opportunities and challenges of your community context, and a new leadership capacity could propel the congregation forward in mission.
5. Because God is calling your congregation into a forward thinking and active vision that requires greater capacity.
6. Because your congregation has developed a relationship with two or more congregations where the next step appears to be merger.
7. Because it is not about survival. It is about the new thing God could do through a newly formed congregation passionate about God’s empowering vision.

## How to Merge into a New Congregation?

The “how” of creating a new congregation through the merger of three or more congregations is straightforward, but it requires care and patient planning and spiritual discernment.

1. As with all the choices available to congregations who need to plot a new course, **Reconciliation** must be both a spiritual and strategic decision. Care and concern must be expressed for all people impacted, and a vision must be clear concerning the new congregation.
2. It is extremely important to deal with the “why” of merger for all the “prospective” congregations. It is not a positive motivation to say you desire to merge so that your congregation can survive. This type of motivation typically only delays death, and seldom provides new life.
3. It is a positive motivation for merger to believe that God could be up to something new and refreshing through the merger of three or more congregations. Begin early looking for signs of increased health and strength in the merger process.
4. It is extremely important to have common experiences among the three or more congregations considering merger. Worship together. Play together. Pray together. Talk together. Dream together. Plan together. Build community together.
5. It is also extremely important to lay all the “sacred cows” of each congregation on an altar for potential sacrifice. These “sacred cows” include, but are not limited to, (a) who is going to be pastor, (b) whose building—if any of them—you are going to use, (c) what style of worship services will we have, (d) who are going to be the key lay leaders, and many other issues.
6. It is important to do an asset analysis. What finances are available? What leadership is available? What are successful and significant programs, ministries, and activities that may need to be taken with the merged congregation on their new journey.
7. Lay out a timetable for the merger process, and work hard to meet deadlines. The timetable must be long enough for people to transition to the changes, but not so long that momentum is lost. Expect some interruptions or pauses in the living out the timetable.

## What is the Impact of Merging into a New Congregation?

Here are seven possible impacts. There will be others you can name.

1. It is highly possible there will be a great sense of excitement around the new thing God is doing through the merger. New experiences should be celebrated. New stories should be told and shared broadly. Key points of progress should be noted, and thanksgiving given to our Triune God.
2. A new understanding of God’s empowering vision for the merged congregation will provide focus and meaning to each Sunday and each season of the year. The new vision should be continually cast to where it creates new memories.
3. New people may be attracted to the newly merged congregation, so the opportunity will exist to practice radical hospitality and assimilation. New people should be involved in small group activities and leadership roles as soon as reasonably possible.
4. New, clean facilities or retrofitted facilities will create an atmosphere of joy and a new sense of self-esteem for the newly emerging congregation. It is all right for the congregation to take pride in their facilities and want to keep them in great condition.
5. New relationships will be established with God and with new friends in the congregation that will allow for dynamic spiritual formation, leadership development, and missional engagement. A spiritually maturing congregation will be a hallmark of the success of the merger.
6. Not everyone will go forward with the merged congregation. Some people from each congregation will take this as an opportunity to go to a different congregation. They cannot handle all the transitions and changes, or they were holding on with the former congregation and now that it is going to be fine, they feel free to leave.
7. One impact is that no congregational participants can go back to functioning like the former congregation. “Going back” is a negative emotion for a merged congregation. It is hoped that early in the merged congregation there will be fewer and fewer conversations about how things were done in a former congregation. Words and deeds should focus on going forward toward the new thing God is in the process of doing within the merged congregation.