

# St. Martin's Ev. Lutheran Church Strategic Task Force

## Final Report Submitted Sept 28, 2023

### From the Task Force Contributors

It has been a gift to join in community to discern what God is calling St. Martin's into for the next 5 years. We are grateful for the Holy Spirit's activity in this work. Many surprising twists, turns, and backtracks came as we reflected and prayed on the rich body of congregational feedback from the June Vacation Bible School sessions and August sermon series. Thank you.

What we discerned could be well summarized by the FAA-mandated airplane safety briefing: we need to put on our own oxygen mask first to be able to help others with theirs.

As a congregation, we have become lukewarm. To be robustly alive, our most important work at this time is to reground ourselves and live daily in two Biblical practices:

- Commit to cultivating spiritual depth by becoming disciples of Jesus. Disciples are people who live Jesus' daily rhythms as our own. These rhythms include: study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community.
- Commit to cultivating spiritual depth in our interactions by practicing Holy Listening modeled by Jesus. Holy Listening focuses on jointly discerning the wisdom and will of God. Through listening and speaking, we share both holy invitation into deeper relationship and holy challenge to turn away from wrong and destructive behaviors.

Does this imply we will stop inviting and serving the broader community? By no means! It recognizes that deepening our own daily spiritual practices is foundational to expanding our ability to serve others.

We have been individually and collectively re-invigorated by this work. We hope that you, too, take personal and communal action to incorporate these practices into your daily life. No church program can make you a disciple. Only you can choose whether to live daily what Jesus invites us to do.

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# Summary of Recommendations

## 1. ***Confess and absolve*** as part of embarking on implementing this strategic plan.

We confess that Jesus drew individuals to Him by asking them to follow Him and become disciples.

We confess that a disciple of Jesus is a person who lives Jesus' daily rhythms as their own, including study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community.

We confess that the gospels describe the transformation of everyday individuals into the Church by becoming disciples.

We confess that as the world grew more frenetic, instead of reminding congregants to become more Christ-like by clinging to Jesus' daily rhythms, we accommodated the world and asked for less and less from congregants. We allowed the rhythms of the world to dominate our daily lives.

We confess that St. Martin's congregants tend to be accepting, curious, thoughtful, and service-oriented.

We confess that we have not consistently asked, "What is worth wanting in life?" and listened to God.

We confess that St. Martin's approach tends to be thought-provoking and thought-inviting. We often focus on thought and not action.

We confess that a disciple's relationship to the Church is that of a producer - producing a life rooted in Jesus' daily rhythms.

We confess that our relationship to the Church is sometimes that of a consumer - consuming professional religious services and paying for works of service.

We confess that in our congregation and in our broader community, we have experienced polarization, division, and tension. We have struggled to interact with each other in a holy manner when facing complex challenges. We have rushed into abrupt answers and dramatic changes. We have spoken without listening and decided without discerning, causing harm and hurt to each other.

We confess that throughout history, the Church has changed how it has expressed the Christian faith so that the never-changing gospel can be heard by changing people. To be the Church in a changing world, we, too, must change while steadfastly clinging to the gospel.

**We confess our desire to change our daily rhythms and, with God's help, live as disciples, practicing Jesus' daily rhythms as our own. These rhythms include: study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community.**

**We confess our desire to change how we interact with others and, with God's help, practice Holy Listening modeled by Jesus. Holy Listening focuses on jointly discerning the wisdom and will of God. Through listening and speaking, we share both holy invitation into deeper relationship and holy challenge to turn away from wrong and destructive behaviors.**

2. **Maintain** St. Martin's current mission and purpose statement **and adopt** a 5-year vision.

Our mission statement adopted in 2014 is just as relevant today:

**Love, share, and serve boldly**

As we consider how to live into this mission statement for 2024-2028, we propose adopting the following vision statement:

**We invite each other to become disciples of Jesus by living His daily rhythms as our own, including study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community. We will replace busyness with intention, loneliness with connection, and contesting with Holy Listening.**

3. **Commit to cultivating spiritual depth by becoming disciples of Jesus.** *Disciples are people who live Jesus' daily rhythms as their own. These rhythms include: study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community.*

*"If you make disciples, you always get the church. But if you make a church, you rarely get disciples." – Mike Breen, Building a Discipling Culture*

At St. Martin's we have spent more energy making a church than making disciples.

Vibrancy comes from being disciples. Without this, we are lukewarm at best. Living as disciples provides a context in which to make spiritual sense of our longings and losses. Busyness, loneliness, and a weak sense of individual and collective purpose are longings and losses that have become particularly common in our time and place. Jesus invites us to become his disciples by following His way - a way that makes life in a broken world bearable by providing us a shared story of hope.

**Commit to cultivating personal spiritual depth in daily living:**

- Increase our awareness of the need to change our daily rhythms
- Strengthen our intention and humbly root each day in the rhythms of Jesus' life: study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community
- Ask and pursue God's answers to the question: "What is worth wanting in life?"

**Commit to cultivating community spiritual depth in daily living:**

- Progressively add support for the congregation's growing interest in cultivating spiritual depth. (See explanation in "Building an Appetite for the Daily Rhythms" section)
- Jointly in community seek out how God would have us meaningfully journey together in making spiritual sense of our longings and losses and transforming them into a shared story of hope
- Advise the Nominating Committee and Church Council to seek out candidates for appointed and elected positions who are willing to commit to expanding their personal daily living of these rhythms
- See specific Sunday timing recommendations in "Worship and Faith Formation Times" section
- See specific staffing recommendations in "Staffing" section

4. **Commit to cultivating spiritual depth in our interactions by practicing Holy Listening modeled by Jesus.** Holy Listening focuses on jointly discerning the wisdom and will of God. Through listening and speaking, we share both holy invitation into deeper relationship and holy challenge to turn away from wrong and destructive behaviors.

*“The first service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together*

How we interact with each other presents the critical contextual spiritual challenge of our day. It requires a meaningful response. (More in “Building an Appetite for the Holy Listening” section)

Jesus’ way of interacting progressively invites others into deeper relationship *and* progressively challenges them to turn away from wrong and destructive behaviors. Interacting in this holy fashion starts from a willingness and intention to be open, alert, reverent, and compassionate. Holy Listening focuses on joint discernment in relationship. Neither contesting nor conquering is the purpose in Holy Listening. Like Jesus’s interaction with the Syrophenician woman who speaks of the dogs under the table eating the children’s crumbs, the parties jointly listen to each other and to God. (Mark 7:24-30)

**Commit to cultivating personal spiritual depth in interactions:**

- Reflect on God’s Grace to me and learning to reprocess my pain into Grace
- Reflect on how I process information and understand my own strengths, weaknesses and limitations, while appreciating God’s limitlessness
- Reflect on God’s patience with me, modeled by Jesus’ patience with his disciples

**Commit to cultivating community spiritual depth in interactions:**

- Listen to each other honestly, seeking to understand rather than to conquest or contest
- Speak concerns directly with those involved when possible, or with the responsible leader
- Hold each other in love, jointly discerning God’s wisdom and will. Share in a way that invites deeper relationship.
- Positions are surface statements of what a person wants or believes is right. They rarely provide insight into underlying motivations or values. Interests are underlying motivations or values that explain why someone takes a certain position. Begin by understanding each others’ interests.
- Develop the ability to speak about our own hurts and hear when others approach us about the hurt we have caused
- THINK before speaking: Are my words Thoughtful, Honest, Inspiring, Necessary, and Kind?
- Questions to ask:
  - How do we work together on this challenge?
  - How can this pain be reprocessed into Grace?
  - Where are confession and forgiveness needed?
  - How can we learn from this experience?
- Refrain from entertaining negative comments or concerns about a person who is not present, instead asking whether it has been discussed with the subject. If not, offer to go together.
- Recognize that the Holy Spirit may reveal additional insights over time. Continue to listen.
- Intentionally go back to close the loop on what was learned, making sure to include everyone involved so that we can all grow

# BUILDING OUR SPIRITUAL DEPTH ST. MARTIN'S 2023-25



## Further Discussion of Conclusions

### Bringing the Vision To Life - Building an Appetite for the Daily Rhythms

Shifting to living vibrantly as disciples - practicing Jesus' daily rhythms of study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community - will be a journey.

#### Recommendation

**Establish a phased plan for supporting congregants in expanding and deepening their appetites for Jesus' daily practices.** A recommended starting point is shown on the previous page. These timelines and specific implementation may be adjusted as time goes on.

### Bringing the Vision To Life - Building an Appetite for Holy Listening

We live in a culture of polarization - left vs. right, conservative vs. liberal - which has found its way into the life of the Church, including our congregation. This "politicization" of the Church leads people, both inside and outside the Church, to view each denomination and local congregation through a political lens. Instead of being the prophetic voice that calls all people to become disciples, the Church has engaged in fights over whose truth is correct and attempts to offer political solutions to cultural and theological problems. Such "politicization" of the Church has happened repeatedly in history when the Church forgot to follow the way Jesus interacted with others and instead favored declaring simple answers to complex questions.

Similarly, at St. Martin's we have experienced political and other forms of polarization, division, and tension. We have struggled with how to engage with each other when facing complex challenges.

People respond to polarization in varying ways.

Some respond by buying into the polarization - choosing the way of insulation and **separation**. By surrounding themselves with people who think and believe like they do, they feel safe and secure in the belief of being "right." Instead of being places of faithlife, grace, peace, and hope, churches adopting this response are viewed as places to reaffirm that "my worldview is right and their worldview is wrong." But being Jesus' disciple calls for a different way.

Others respond by seeking an engagement based on "not offending" - **compromise** over commitment. A false peace of silence is created in which people simply agree not to discuss the issues that might divide but which are also very meaningful. Instead of being places that call people to turn to God, churches adopting this response are viewed as lacking values, principles, or meaning. But again, being Jesus' disciple calls for a different way.

Others respond by seeking meaning and purpose through other organizations, both spiritual and secular - choosing to **avoid or abandon the Church**. Oftentimes, people adopting this response find some meaning in these activities, but they don't find answers to many of their deep spiritual longings. But again, being Jesus' disciple calls for a different way.

Jesus calls his disciples to follow him. This call is to intentional, meaningful engagement with the world around us, based on a mutual submission to following the way of Jesus. We are called to be in the world, but

not of the world. We are called to engage the challenging issues of our day, but not in the separatist, compromising, or avoidant ways of our day. This is Jesus' better way.

Disciples follow Jesus' approach to interaction: listening, holding the other in love, jointly discerning what God has to say, and sharing in a way that invites each other into deeper relationship while challenging each other to be better. As Peter experienced with the vision of the sheet of unclean animals (Acts 10), the Holy Spirit reveals additional insights over time so we continue to listen and stay in relationship.

As disciples, we seek to discern God's wisdom and will, not to prove that "we're right." We seek peace rooted in mutual forgiveness won by Christ, not the false peace of silence. We seek engagement that creates community, not fights to conquer the world.

## Bringing the Vision To Life - Worship and Faith Formation Times

Recognizing that

- We are a geographically dispersed congregation
- An "excitement hurdle" must be cleared for congregants to decide that driving to church during the week is worth the impracticality and hassle
- Many congregants feel trapped in busyness, lacking time to drive to church in the middle of the week
- Online program options can be supportive but leave many people longing for more
- Living the daily rhythms of a disciple will bear fruit in the form of increased congregant excitement. However, mid-week programs for employed congregants will not become mainstream until these rhythms are well established and the excitement level is raised.

Therefore, accomplishing the goals laid out in this plan requires acknowledging that our primary opportunity for community interaction is on Sundays. This requires creating additional opportunities for Sunday Faith Formation, especially for:

1. Adults who also want to participate in choir
2. Adults who also want to teach youth or adult faith formation classes
3. Enabling deeper scripture studies
4. Fostering communal prayer practices
5. Fostering additional community connection

### Recommendations

- **2024 and 2025: Plan most programming on Sundays**
- **Starting in January or September 2024: Council creates at least 1.5 hours of Faith Formation opportunity between services on Sundays by changing service time(s).** Input on *how* to do this would need to be gathered from various committees. One possibility brainstormed by the Task Force:
  - 8:30-9:15 Family Worship
  - 9:15-11 Between Service Time
    - 9:20-10:50 Long form adult, confirmation, and high school classes
    - 9:20-9:55 Short form adult classes
    - 9:20-9:55 Children's music opening and sharing/creativity time
    - 10:00-10:50 Fellowship and "living discipleship" informal discussions
    - 10:00-10:50 Children's Faith Formation Classes by age
    - 10:15-11 Choir

- 11:00 Traditional worship
- **Fall 2024 or 2025: As interest in moving deeper into discipleship builds expand programming through and after Sunday lunch**
  - Establish an at-cost prepared lunch opportunity after late worship, a natural format for building community and connection among existing and new congregants.
  - Offer additional post-lunch opportunities for scripture and theology study, prayer, service, exercise, and rest.
- **2026+: Consider viability of adding mid-week programming**

## Bringing the Vision To Life - Staffing

For any staffing direction, explore whether outsourcing payroll and bookkeeping would be a good option for St. Martin's.

### Recommendations

#### **1. Budget for and form a call committee for a second called clergy position in 2024**

The task force recommends that the call committee consider the following for the search:

- Minimum 5 years experience as a pastor
- Likely has a business or technical degree or comparable experience
- Well established patterns of a disciple - living Jesus' daily rhythms of scripture study, prayer, rest, and community
- Well established patterns of holy listening in interactions - jointly discerning the wisdom and will of God, sharing both holy invitation into deeper relationship and holy challenge to turn away from wrong and destructive behaviors
- Problem-solver, goal-oriented, passionate about developing people as part of the ministry
- Strong preaching skills and interest
- Honor St. Martin's long-standing focus on balancing male and female voices in leadership
- Recommended primary clergy responsibilities:
  - Pastor Ellen
    - Faith formation
    - Family life
    - Pastoral care for the congregation
    - Supervises and coaches clergy staff
    - Regular preaching
  - Associate Pastor
    - "Pastor to the staff" - supervises and coaches all non-clergy staff
    - Ensures "all trains run on time" - oversees all day-to-day execution, directly or through other staff
    - Regular preaching

Some congregations call this role an Executive Pastor because it focuses on execution. However, the role is junior to the Senior Pastor. The council or call committee could consider whether to title this role Associate Pastor, Executive Pastor, Associate Pastor for Administration, etc.

Day to day execution matters include but are not limited to ensuring the following is handled in timely and accurate fashion:



- Regulatory compliance
- Written job descriptions for all non-clergy staff
- Written standard operating procedures
- Financial reporting
- Budgeting input from staff
- Facilities management and building use
- IT systems and data integrity of church management software
- Communications and marketing
- Staffing, including coverage during absences
- Contractor oversight
- School operations support
- Addressing surprises (e.g. bees taking up residence in building walls)

Common backgrounds of Executive Pastors:

1. Pastors who realized in their first or second call that some portions of pastoral work, such as funerals, counseling, and taking flak from congregants, weigh too heavily for them to sustainably serve as solo pastors. Unless called into a more tailored role such as an Executive Pastor, these pastors often leave rostered ministry and go to work in non-profits.
2. Pastors who aspire to work in synod or church-wide administrative roles. A subsequent role for an Executive Pastor might be Bishop.
3. Second career pastors who previously gained extensive skills in administration outside the Church and enjoy supporting staff and congregants in personal and leadership growth

**2. In late 2025 or 2026 once funds from property transaction(s) are available, budget for and call a deacon.**

- Deacon for Community Engagement - Charged with engaging both internal and external community. As more congregants take up the call to become disciples by living Jesus' daily rhythms, we will increase our capacity to meaningfully address longings and losses of others in the broader community.

In 2025 we would want to have a plan for congregational growth that identifies specific groups that we think could join current congregants in comprising the congregation in the future. At this time, the task force identified groups particularly hurt by COVID, especially doctors, nurses, and teachers, as having longings and losses that St. Martin's could be particularly well positioned to address.

For example, multiple major health centers are located within 20 blocks of St. Martin's and are growing. Many doctors and nurses face challenges getting childcare that matches their shift patterns. Offering such care could be a potential ministry focus for our school. After working a 12 hour shift, being able to pick up an affordable, healthy meal for the family with their child would be an evening game-changer. We have a commercial kitchen. Doctors and nurses from time to time have very difficult shifts and would benefit from a caring listener for 20 or 30 minutes. Such listening already has a foothold in our community via Stephen Ministry. The burnout that many doctors and nurses are experiencing has many searching for something more. We could share a long tradition of Christian practices that address this need.

Additional evaluation of potential groups and definitive selection would be needed to prepare for the call of this deacon.

Like pastors, deacons are called and ordained clergy. Deacons are ordained to a Ministry of Word and Service, while pastors are ordained to a Ministry of Word and Sacrament. The ministry of deacons is recognized by churches throughout history and around the world. Early deacons in the Bible include Stephen of the Seven Deacons (Acts 6:1-6) and Phoebe (Romans 16:1).

Deacons have as wide a range of interests and skills as pastors. They generally have a master of divinity degree. Deacons regularly preach. They commonly lead faith formation and service or outreach programs. Some deacons focus on pastoral care or spiritual direction.

Deacons do not perform sacraments, but they otherwise lead worship. They wear their stoles across rather than down. In Austin, Triumphant Love Lutheran Church is currently staffed by two pastors and two deacons.

### **3. In spring 2026, either hire a Youth Minister into a permanent staff role or consider another student.**

Our current Youth Minister, Austin Shortes will complete his program at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in spring 2026. At that time, we will need to decide our next step in this area.

#### Alternative Staffing

The vision of the 2019 Call Committee was that after that call (extended to Pastor Ellen Williams), the congregation's next hire would be a full time lay administrator, followed by a half time Visitation Pastor on contract (not call).

The purpose of the lay administrator role would be to free up clergy capacity to focus on activities unique to the clergy. The role also has the potential to maintain execution continuity between pastors if the role were sufficiently well compensated and incentivized to overcome the significant uncertainty associated with such changes. Responsibilities would be similar to those outlined for the Executive Pastor role described above. Exceptions are preaching and expectations for "pastor to the staff." The lay version of this role would be closer to a traditional supervisory relationship.

The 2019 Call Committee expected that after filling the (then) open pastor position and a lay administrator position, the congregation could only afford a part time visitation pastor on contract, not a called second pastor.

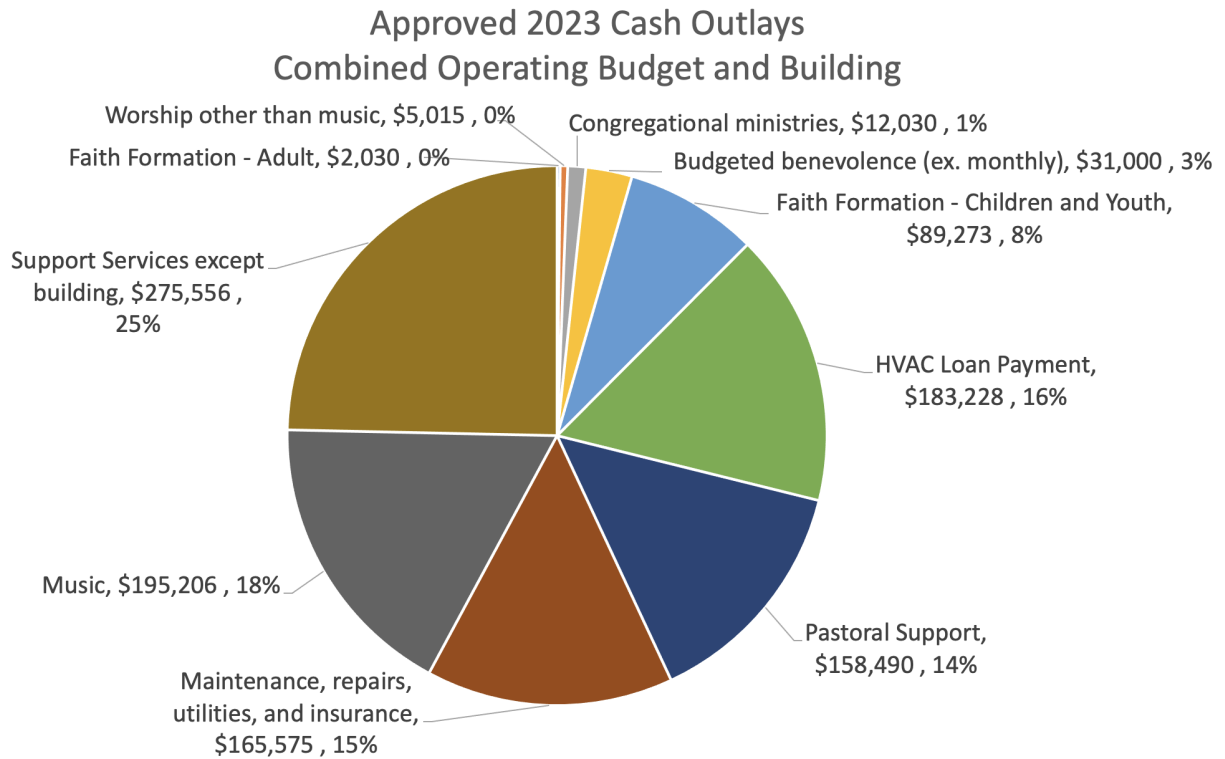
This work of the 2019 call committee preceded the congregation's further assessment of its financial situation in 2022-23. Early on in that process, the congregation rejected the option of remaining a solo pastor congregation. The congregation ultimately decided to 1) sell property on West Avenue to retire the HVAC debt and 2) lease property on 15th Street to fund congregational growth. This alternative envisioned in 2019 therefore does not reflect the current will of the congregation.

Additionally, the task force noted that having such an influential and highly paid lay role comes with drawbacks, including putting any associate pastor in an awkward position, both financially and with respect to influence. Furthermore, given the changed labor market, it is unlikely to find someone who would take this role and stay with it for 10+ years through pastoral transitions as could have been expected 30 years ago. The Task Force concluded that by filling this role with clergy, the staff and congregation would benefit from pastoral experience and numerous execution decisions will be better rooted in the mission of the Church.

## Current Status - Resource Allocations

During this work, the task force realized that we do not have any written statement that explains *why* we currently allocate our monetary or volunteer resources the way we do.

The following visual depiction shows categories of approved 2023 monetary spending for operating and building funds. As such, it is a statement of our priorities.



## Bringing the Vision To Life - Resources Required

### Staffing (phased in)

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Estimated total annual cost, including benefits (2023 rates)</b>	<b>Source</b>
2024 Recommended	Executive Pastor	\$95,000 to \$117,000	Synod guidelines for 5-15 year pastor for this type of role, current benefit costs
2024 Alternative	Lay Administrator	<i>High end of Executive Pastor range</i>	<i>Market rates</i>
2025 or 2026	Deacon	\$64,000 to \$82,000	Synod guidelines for 0-15 year deacon for this type of role, current benefit costs

### Programming (phased in)

Detailed costs for the recommended programs activities have not been prepared as specific practices to enact these recommendations could take varying forms. Some concepts could include:

<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Estimated annual cost</b>	<b>Source</b>
2024 before second pastor is called	Seminarian to teach Bible Study	\$5,000	28 weeks of instruction at \$150 each
2025-2028	Theology guest lectures	\$3,300	3 local lectures at \$300 each 3 travel lectures at \$800 each
2025-2028	Class materials, books, etc. subsidy	\$2,025	Paid materials 10@\$20 10@\$25 15@\$105
2026-2028	Spiritual Direction sliding scale	\$9,600	Typically \$75 hourly 4 * 40 weeks @ \$35 subsidy 2 * 40 weeks @ \$50 subsidy

# Appendix A: Task Force Charter

Strategy Task Force Charter  
Saint Martin's Lutheran Church  
5 January 2023

“Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

– Matthew 9:17

“Strategy is about making choices, trade-offs; It's about deliberately choosing to be different.”

– Michael E. Porter

## Purpose

Recognizing that St. Martin's is called to minister to the world in a particular place and time, this task force will identify a plan for growing congregational size, engagement, and community impact for the next 5 to 10 years in Austin, Texas.

## Goal

Establish where and how to focus our energy and resources to win hearts for God.

Starting from the identified congregational core values, guide the congregation in answering: “If there is one thing in Austin that St. Martin's will have an impact on, it will be (target idea).” This is how we want to draw people in.

This plan will focus on navigating challenges and opportunities that have changed church-going from an overwhelming default choice to one choice among many vying for our attention. This will involve leading congregational discernment of internal and external strategic targets where we can focus our energy to “move the needle” in the Austin community. To support this work, the plan will also identify the steps and internal and external resources to drive these impacts in the Austin community and determine how to secure and best deploy our resources, including finances, property, staffing, and volunteers in support of these targets.

## Members

Approximately 6-7 members appointed by the Council, including one Council member.

## Timeline

Complete and report out to the congregation by mid-May 2023. Report to Council monthly.

## Definitions

- Mission - Why we exist
- Vision - What we are trying to achieve at a specific point in the future
- Values - Enduring, deeply held convictions and assumptions that influence our attitudes and behaviors
- Differentiator - Unique advantage that makes this church more attractive to some individuals than other churches or non-church alternatives for spending our attention and resources
- Strategy - How we will use our differentiators to take advantage of opportunities in support of our vision and mission

## Appendix B: Congregational Values

In its January, 2023 annual congregational meeting, the congregation adopted the following set of values:

We **Worship** God and deepen relationships with one another through Lutheran faith traditions, including engaging liturgy, inspiring music, and lifelong faith formation.

We **Extend** God's inclusive gift of welcome to all people, especially those historically excluded from traditional church communities.

We **Advocate** for justice, righteousness, and mercy with our time, property, and power.

We **Rally** everyone to use our God-given gifts and talents to love, share, and serve all of God's creation boldly.

**WEAR** reminds us to wear the full armor of God.

## Appendix C: Strategy Background

### What is a Strategy?

A purpose (or mission) statement explains an organization's reasons for being and why it works the way it does.

A strategy describes a *plan for pursuing the organization's purpose in a particular context*.

The context of this proposed strategy is downtown Austin, Texas for the years 2024-2028.

### What is Strategy Development?

The task force has worked from two common definitions of strategy development.

Definition #1: The process of creating and sustaining competitive advantages

It is critical to note that, as a church, our competition is NOT other churches. It is all the other stuff we can fill our lives with - how we choose to spend the resources entrusted to us, including our attention, care, money and possessions.

Definition #2: The allocation of scarce resources

No organization has infinite resources. Therefore, intentionality in resource allocation influences how well an organization can achieve its purpose.

The task force recognizes that God invites all into his love. We also recognize that no human organization can be all things to all people. Different congregations will attract different congregants. Through focus, we can provide a spiritual response that is relevant and compelling for those attracted to one particular congregation. Focus is NOT about excluding or setting boundaries on love or welcome. Focus is about playing our role in the Church body. Evolution in a congregation's focus over time is healthy and necessary to keep a congregation relevant to the time and place in which it is situated.

The task force adopted an approach of discernment, rather than decision-making, as described by theologian Henri Nouwen in [Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life](#):

Christian discernment is not the same as decision making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively.

Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God's desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away."

## Guiding Questions for Discernment

The task force drew significantly from concepts developed by Scott Cormode in [The Innovative Church](#). We identified 3 major questions for attention as we consider where to focus our resources:

- Who will comprise the congregation in 5-10 years?
- How do these people experience the longings and losses that make up the human condition?
- What is our spiritual response?

Longings and losses are yearnings that get to the heart of being human. Every person faces these questions and the pain and joy that can accompany them. These questions can be grouped into major areas:

- *Purpose and Meaning* - Is this all there is? Does anything I do really matter? Am I needed? Is life really worth the pain?
- *Identity* - Who am I? For people of all ages, what do I want to be when I grow up?
- *Belonging* - Does anyone really know me? Would people like me if they knew the real me? How can I be in community without losing my identity? How can I be an individual without succumbing to isolation and loneliness?
- *Fears* - Death. Condemnation (Am I really good enough?). Shame or guilt. Conflict when work, relationships, health, finances, etc. compete.

## Appendix D: Good, Great, or Remarkable?

Most organizations are good in some areas and not in others. Some organizations may become great in one or more areas. It is a rare organization that stands so far apart from its peers to be *remarkable*. Remarkable requires significant resources and is extremely difficult to attain.

The task force considered whether we are aiming for good, great, or remarkable in various areas and what great or remarkable might look like. In some areas we would need to overcome significant barriers to become remarkable due to our physical building design or other limitations. Music and faith formation are two areas without such barriers to becoming great or remarkable.

## Music

Music has been a strong attraction for many St. Martin's congregants. There is a sense in the congregation that the music at St. Martin's is great and perhaps even remarkable.

In developing this strategic plan, the task force realized that we have no shared statement explaining *why* a great or remarkable music program is worth pursuing. In attempting to draft such a statement, we quickly realized the importance of a second consideration - our ideas of what makes "remarkable" varied dramatically.

For example, one way to be remarkable would be to pursue the highest technical excellence in the music by hiring professional musicians to fill every role. Another could be having every single congregant involved in at least one music ministry (or perhaps that they feel they have such opportunity). A third might be a congregation that sings amazing acapella harmonies. A fourth might unexpectedly pair secular music in the context of sacred worship in ways that invite new insights and connect the sacred and secular throughout the week.

A third consideration is that it is natural for us all to want "the best" of all things until there is a stated cost. In the context of other priorities, what cost tradeoffs are we, as a community, willing or unwilling to make in our pursuit of great or remarkable music?

If we are serious about pursuing "remarkable" rather than "good" in our music program, we would be well served to cultivate congregational discernment (not just decision-making) leading to adoption of a congregational statement covering these three areas:

- Why do we choose to dedicate significant resources to music?
- In what way do we want to be remarkable?
- How do we see the significant resources needed for such an aim relating to other priorities?

Rather than continuing as a collection of individuals, some of whom understand a personal "why" and "how" and "how much" for music and others who don't, developing a shared understanding of the priority we place on music presents an opportunity to come together as a community and engage in Holy Listening.

The task force began working with music staff and volunteers to consider these questions to inform the strategy, especially as it relates to growing the congregation. However, during our discernment, it became increasingly clear that we first need to "put on our own oxygen masks" by calling the congregation to become disciples who live Jesus' daily rhythms and practice Holy Listening. Once living these rhythms, we can consider how music might play into outward growth. As a result, we concluded that this discernment effort would be better taken up by another group.

The task force clearly sensed the value of continued pursuit of high quality in the area of music, both inherently and as a potential driver for future congregational growth. While we are not making formal recommendations in this area, the task force is sharing the highlights of what was discussed in this area.

### Why would we choose to dedicate significant resources to music?

Music is an important part of culture throughout the world. In Western culture, it is fundamental to our understanding of humanity and of God, as reinforced by the prominence Martin Luther gave to both spoken



word and music in worship. Through music, we encounter God; beauty and joy in music reflects the beauty and joy of God.

Music primarily touches us through spiritual and emotional paths whereas the Word primarily touches through intellectual and emotional paths. We experience music in our minds and bodies in a different way than we do words alone: we engage the emotions, the breath, and the limbs and we listen, sing, or move along with music. Many people have trouble conveying their faith well in other ways; music has the ability to facilitate listening and reflection through connection with the Holy Spirit. Music lingers in the memory, and is thus often a key way we learn about our faith as children, and memories of music often remain with people throughout their lives.

Music can help us get unstuck by allowing us to reflect on sacred and secular concepts in a different way. Music, and particularly singing together, brings together worshippers of different generations. It connects us to the historic, present, and future Church and across denominations.

Having remarkable music is a way of tying together community, place, and time in an act of worship that means something to those participating. — Tim O'Brien

Potential congregational growth through music

Given that many existing congregants were attracted to St. Martin's by its music, the task force considered music as a potential driver for future congregational growth. We identified six potential groups for such growth across how people make a living and style of music:

	Musicians making a living through music	Avocational musicians	Non-musicians who appreciate music
Pops / classical music			
Sixth Street / contemporary music			

The task force did not further discern which, if any, of these groups we might be called to focus on for growth to comprise the future congregation. As noted in the Staffing section, the first two years of this strategic plan focus on the specific recommendations around living as disciples and practicing holy listening. In 2025 we would want to develop a more specific plan for driving congregational growth to inform the call of a deacon focused on internal and external engagement.

Musical approaches to worship

The musical approach of the 11:00 worship service has been long established and is steeped in "Christian traditional" music that has long been found in Western European churches.

The musical approach of the 9:00 service has been evolving. For some years, it was led by a praise band which played some contemporary music. The service did not fully embody the "strong Christian praise band" style of "Christian contemporary" worship service found in many non-denominational churches.

Most people in Austin would not have considered the older version of the 9:00 service as a contemporary worship service. Not only would the music be expected to shift deeper into that of "praise band" but the

service would likely be expected to drop most or all liturgy. Yet Lutherans are a denomination that explicitly values liturgy.

More recently, there have been efforts to establish a different approach for the 9:00 worship. Instead of trying to pursue what would be generally recognized as a “Christian contemporary” service, it pairs a wide range of secular music in the context of sacred worship in unexpected ways that invite new insights.

Observations about the recent 9:00 music approach:

- Well matched to the tendencies of St. Martin’s congregants as discerned by the task force: accepting, curious, thoughtful, and service-oriented. Curiosity and thoughtfulness particularly lead people to search for and appreciate new, surprising insights.
- Encourages congregants to become producers by prompting them to take additional steps to seek meaning. Most “Christian contemporary” music delivers a more fully formed meaning for direct consumption.
- Invites further connection of the sacred and secular throughout the week - a matter of great relevance to becoming disciples

Observations about our environment:

- Austin has many existing options for “Christian contemporary” worship in Austin - options that are very well done
- “Christian contemporary” worship is not immune to the trend of shrinking congregations
- “Christian contemporary” works for some people and not for others
- There is increasing busyness, loneliness, and a weak sense of individual and collective purpose in our society

From a strategic point of view, it is often more impactful to open a new category of offerings rather than mimic existing successful offerings. This is especially true during times of change. Choosing a thoughtful approach to music at 9:00 that is distinct from “Christian contemporary” or “Christian traditional” has the potential to engage people in a manner they find compelling.

As busyness, loneliness, and a weak sense of individual and collective purpose have become commonplace, these longings and losses represent pressing spiritual needs for many people. The distinct style being developed at 9:00 has the potential to powerfully bridge from these experiences to sacred responses. This unexpected approach could prove especially meaningful for people who are currently finding neither traditional nor contemporary worship services to be generative. Through unexpected music and poetry, St. Martin’s can facilitate spiritual sense-making for these deeply emotional longings and losses by bridging to a story of hope.

## Faith Formation

Faith formation is another natural area for a congregation of curious and thoughtful individuals to pursue in great or remarkable fashion.

### Why would we choose to dedicate significant resources to faith formation?

Faith formation is the primary means for Christians to:

- Grow in our relationship with Christ and become more Christ-like (growing in love, peace, mercy, gentleness, self-control, etc.)

- Learn and experience God's love and grace in community with other Christians
- Learn to how to serve and share our faith with others

Faith formation is a foundation of religious life. We all hunger to know the whats, whys, and hows of life. As people created with spiritual needs, faith formation helps us find spiritual food. It fosters individual and communal spiritual disciplines, such as study of scripture, prayer, worship, fasting, meditation, stewardship, service, and observation of the sabbath. It teaches us how to build community and connection among ourselves and with God so we learn to more deeply trust God and each other. In reading scripture we can find examples of people struggling with what we each struggle with. We learn guidelines for godly living and interactions with others. Faith formation empowers us to service and evangelism by providing hope and encouragement.

Faith formation also helps us grapple with fundamental questions. Why do we exist at all? What is my purpose? How do I help others? How do I make sense of bad things happening to good people? How can I celebrate well? How can I mourn well? Faith formation helps us come to terms with the reality that we aren't actually clever enough to fully answer many fundamental questions.

Faith formation is also core to the Lutheran denomination. Martin Luther wrote about the importance of faith formation:

- He defined faith as "a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times"
- He argued that faith is not a human achievement, but a gift of God that comes through hearing the gospel
- He believed that faith was not a passive acceptance of doctrines, but an active pursuit of God's promises and a personal relationship with Christ
- He taught that faith is not a static but rather a dynamic process

#### Approaches to faith formation

Faith formation needs to be much more than the academic classes this congregation has traditionally focused on. Throughout the work of this task force, learning to incorporate Jesus' rhythms into our lives has repeatedly emerged as crucial to the on-going health and vibrancy of our congregation. We need to significantly strengthen faith formation with a focus on becoming disciples - people who live Jesus' daily rhythms, including study of scripture, prayer, rest, and community - and practicing Holy Listening.

No amount of belief can offset the arrest of spiritual development when we don't live Jesus' daily rhythms as our own. Jesus first drew individuals to himself by asking them to follow him and become disciples, not by asking them to profess beliefs. We need holistic faith formation and not just Sunday worship and academic classes.

#### What would remarkable faith formation look like?

This is an area where we have much to learn. It would certainly be far beyond just classes. We would likely have developed strong holistic means of making disciples that other churches want to use, too. We would have spiritual directors on staff with robust congregational interest in receiving spiritual direction.

Given where we are starting, reaching remarkable faith formation is probably too tall an order for 5 years. However, in the next 5 years we can make significant progress so we will then be better able to see what remarkable faith formation looks like and potentially build a plan to pursue that vision in the next 5 years.

## Appendix E: Task Force Reading and Listening

The task force has undertaken a broad range of reading and listening.

### Books

1. [The Innovative Church: How Leaders and Their Congregations Can Adapt in an Ever-Changing World](#) by Scott Cormode
2. [Building a Discipling Culture](#) by Mike Breen
3. [Competing Against Luck: The Story of Innovation and Customer Choice](#) by Clayton M. Christensen, et al.
4. [Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World](#) by Gilbert R. Rendle
5. [Life Worth Living, A Guide To What Matters Most](#) By Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun and Ryan McAnnally-Linz
6. [Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint](#) by Nadia Bolz-Weber
7. [A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach](#) by Ruby K. Payne
8. [How \(Not\) To Be Secular](#) by James K A Smith
9. [Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness](#) by L. Gregory Jones
10. [A Way Out of No Way: An Approach to Christian Innovation](#) by Stephen Lewis, Kimberly R. Daniel
11. [Strength of Love](#) by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
12. [The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry](#) by John Mark Comer
13. Various Bible passages, including the descriptions of power from Genesis 3:14-24 and Genesis 1:1-10, 26-28

### Audio / video recordings

14. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reading his [“Letter From a Birmingham Jail”](#) (55 minutes)
15. Video Simon Sinek’s 2009 TED talk [How great leaders inspire action](#) (18 minutes)
16. On Being with Krista Tippett podcast [Vivek Murthy - To Be a Healer](#) (57 minutes)
17. On Being with Krista Tippett podcast [Unedited] Vivek Murthy with Krista Tippet (1 hr 17 min - audience Q&A starts around 42:00)

### Articles describing dechuraching (some available only to subscribers)

18. New York Times Opinion series on Americans moving away from organized religion by Jessica Grose
  - “The decline in religious belief and interest is much slower than the decline in organizational participation.”
  - Part 1: [Lots of Americans Are Losing Their Religion. Have You?](#)
  - Part 2: [‘Christianity’s Got a Branding Problem’](#)

- Part 3: [Why Do People Lose Their Religion? More Than 7,000 Readers Shared Their Stories](#)
  - Part 4: [The Largest and Fastest Religious Shift in America Is Well Underway](#)
  - Part 5: [What Churches Offer That 'Nones' Still Long For](#)
  - Followup: [The Church of Group Fitness](#)
19. [Why Middle-Aged Americans Aren't Going Back to Church](#)
20. [The Church Is Losing Its Gray Heads](#) Christianity Today
- “It was so easy to sit inside the sanctuary and think about the people who were choosing to go to brunch or choosing to mow their lawns on Sunday morning or choosing to sign their kids up for a sports league that played on Sunday morning,” Murphy said. “It was so easy to look at those choices and think, ‘Well, those people don’t think as deeply as we do. They don’t care as deeply as we do. They don’t take God as seriously as we do.’”
  - But in the end, she realized that her church wasn’t meeting people’s spiritual needs. “When people come looking for spiritual transformation and looking for tools that make life in this broken world bearable, we don’t have them. And so people walk away,” Murphy said.
  - “I think some of us inside the church have forgotten how transformative and life-changing and how inherently and intrinsically good the gospel is,” Murphy said. “If we get back to that, I think we’ll see that God is faithful.”
21. [3 Reasons People Over 60 Leave Your Church](#)
- “Everyone wants a church filled with energetic, enthusiastic young people, but they don’t want to attend a service that feels like a youth group for adults.”
22. [Why So Many Americans Have Stopped Going to Church: The decline is not just about religious institutions; it's about society itself](#)
- “the defining problem driving out most people who leave is ... just how American life works in the 21st century. Contemporary America simply isn’t set up to promote mutuality, care, or common life. Rather, it is designed to maximize individual accomplishment as defined by professional and financial success. Such a system leaves precious little time or energy for forms of community that don’t contribute to one’s own professional life or, as one ages, the professional prospects of one’s children.”

Articles on paths forwarded and what congregations uniquely offer compared to other groups

23. [As a Rabbi, I've Had a Privileged View of the Human Condition](#) by Rabbi David Wolpe, Guest Opinion Piece, New York Times
- Sometimes it seems, for those outside of faith communities, that religion is simply about a set of beliefs to which one assents. But I know that from the inside it is about relationships and shared vision.
24. [The global transformation of Christianity is already here](#) (7 minute read)
- “The future of American Christianity is neither white evangelicalism nor white progressivism. The future of American Christianity is probably not one where white concerns and voices

dominate the conversation. The future of American Christianity now appears to be a multiethnic community that is largely led by immigrants or the children of immigrants.”

25. [Predictions about the decline of Christianity in America may be premature](#) (9 minute read)
  - “Waves of Christians are migrating to the US.... the biggest challenge to Christianity’s future in America is not declining numbers, but the church’s ability to adapt to this migration.”
26. [As attendance dips, churches change to stay relevant for a new wave of worshippers](#) by John Burnett, NPR
  - Gardens, farms, and breathing under stained glass as pastors innovate around what church is
27. [Innovation: Living into Your Next Potential](#) (4 minute read)
  - Covers core, adjacent, and transformational innovation
28. [American Christianity is Due for A Revival](#) by Tim Keller, The Atlantic
  - Can Christianity grow again? Yes through several options. 1) learn how to speak compellingly to non-Christian people 2) learn how to unite justice and righteousness (White Protestant churches in America tend to pick one or the other) 3) embrace the global and multiethnic character of Christianity 4) strikes a dynamic balance between innovation and conservation 5) benefits from “the unquiet frontiers of modernity.
  - Additionally, a significant portion of the church must escape from political captivity, have a union of “extraordinary prayer”, and distinguish the gospel from moralism.
  - ”Modern secularism holds that people are only physical entities without souls, that sensations of love and beauty are just neurological-chemical events, that there is no meaning other than what we construct, and that there is no right or wrong outside of what we in our minds choose. Yet most people feel that life is greater than what can be accounted for by naturalistic explanations. While having the freedom to define and validate oneself is superficially liberating, it is also exhausting: You and you alone must create and sustain your identity.
29. [I left the church — and now long for a ‘church for the nones’](#) - other gatherings don’t offer singing, sermons and solidarity all at once.

#### Articles describing what other communities are doing

30. [In booming Austin, Texas, churches struggle to keep pace with the city’s growth](#) (11 minute read)
  - Describes 6 growing congregations in Austin, published March 2019
31. [The Worship Center](#) (10 minute read about UT Methodist campus ministry)
  - Three core principles: inclusive love, exploring faith and real friendship
32. Website for the [Community of St. Anselm](#)
  - A one-year experience of monastic life for Christians aged 20-35
33. [Houses of Worship Shouldn’t Mirror the Class Divide](#)
  - Opinion piece on value to society of diverse churches
34. [The “We Have No Money!” Letter](#)
  - Money is a lagging indicator

35. [Diaspora worship service in Austin represents nationwide shift in church demographics](#)
  - “As I talked to immigrant clergy for this story, one theme kept coming up: what the American church is missing. They see the American church, and the U.S. in general, as having great material wealth but being poor in matters of spirit and heart. One pastor likened the American church to a mansion with a beautiful fireplace, but no fire burning. The immigrant church, she said, is a tiny hut with a roaring fire inside.”

Articles on Loneliness / listening / broad social change

36. [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation 2023](#): The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community
37. [A Loneliness Epidemic?: How Marriage, Religion, and Mobility Explain the Generation Gap in Loneliness](#), Sept 2019
38. Set of online reports from [Sacred Design Lab](#) – How We Gather, Something More, Faithful, Design for the Human Soul, A Call to Connection, and Care of Souls
39. [The Booming Business of American Anxiety](#)
40. [Death doulas: Redefining end-of-life care, or blurring the boundaries?](#)
41. [We Know the Cure for Loneliness so Why Do We Suffer?](#) Opinion piece By Nicholas Kristof
42. [Difficult talks spike anxiety. Learning conversations can help](#) by Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone, Washington Post.