



LEARNING YOUR WAY INTO MISSIONAL MINISTRY

A "Design Thinking" Guide for
Congregations Seeking a New Way Forward

By the Rev. Peter Coutts



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Many congregations have a sense that God is calling them to connect with their neighbours and community in new ways but are unsure how to do it. Do the following statements sound familiar to you?

- We want to demonstrate love for neighbours in a tangible way, but we don't know what to do.
- We want to think outside the box, but we don't know how to do that.
- We want to follow God's will for our church, but we don't know what that is right now.

The desire to do something new is a conviction that propels us forward, but not knowing what we must do is a quandary that impedes movement. Simply ratcheting up the sense of urgency to change ("WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING!!") is not enough to move through the impasse. If this is what your congregation is experiencing, consider switching your approach from seeking to learning. What would happen if you replaced the question of "what do we need to do?" with "what do we need to learn?"

"Design Thinking" in the Congregational Context

There is a great process for learning through doing called "Design Thinking." It's a process that helps learners think outside of the box with the help of others. It is created to help you gain a greater understanding of a need and how to address the need well. A key part of Design Thinking is "prototyping"—the practice of putting a new idea into action on a small scale over a short period of time.¹

In this resource, we will explore the steps of Design Thinking through a story of a fictitious congregation called First Presbyterian Church. First Presbyterian wants to be more missional and make a difference in their neighborhood, but they are not sure how to do it. As you read through this resource, you'll be given a series of useful steps that you can use to guide your congregation through the process of determining how to live out your missional calling.

1 This process and its language come from Stanford University's Design Thinking program, called "d.school."

STEP

1

Empathize

The first step in the Design Thinking is all about empathizing. In this step, participants are invited to listen with compassion. The goal is to come to an understanding of the needs of others, their values and what they find meaningful. This step is about putting yourself in someone else's shoes.

For First Presbyterian, this step occurred when an opportunity presented itself for them to get to know some of the new immigrants living in the apartment buildings across the street from their church building. Two newcomers, both immigrants from Cameroon, started coming to First's worship services. Their presence inspired the congregation to ask themselves, "Is there something God might want us to do to support the people who live in the building across the street?"

After a few conversations with the newcomers to the church, it became clear that more conversations needed to happen with others who live in the building. A few congregants began to organize weekly drop-in "Coffee and Conversation" chats in the apartment's common room to build relationships with residents and to hear more about the challenges and joys of their lives.

Friendships grew slowly as weeks passed. Due to the variable nature of the work schedules of the residents, those who attended the Coffee and Conversation group each week also varied. Over time a picture of the diverse needs of the residents became more and more clear.

Step 1: EMPATHIZE

Observe: Is there a need that people in your congregation have noticed in the community? If nothing is immediately obvious, invite congregants to pay attention for a few weeks to the challenges and issues people in their neighbourhood, community or city are facing. Pray together and ask God to make the issues known to you.

Engage: Connect with the people who are affected by the issues or challenges and any organization that addresses them already. Have conversations about the issue. Ask the important “why” question to get a better sense of the causes.

Watch and Listen: Pay attention to how people who are affected by the challenge are dealing with it. What solutions have they come up with? Listen carefully to what they say about what they need to deal with the challenge or issue at hand.

STEP 2

Define

In this step, participants are answering the question, “What is a need that is being expressed that would be possible for us to address?” The goal is to define the challenge clearly and narrowly so that, as you move to the next step, you will have a clear focus.

In choosing a challenge for the church to address, use empathy as your guide. While it may be tempting to choose the biggest challenge, it is recommended that you ask yourselves: what challenge stirs our collective sense of empathy the most? If the congregation is feeling stirred to address a need that is fifth on the priority list, take that as a sign that God is calling you in that direction. It is important that the congregation feels a strong motivation to move forward in the direction you are discerning.

For First Presbyterian, this step involved inviting the two newcomers, who had been attending their church for several months by this point, to have a conversation with those who had been leading the Coffee and Conversation group. Their goal was to make sense of what the congregants had learned from those they met at the apartment building. People around the table shared what stood out for them and discussed what they thought the residents saw as their priorities. Connections between different needs began to emerge, and one that clearly stood out was food security.

The United Nations defines food security as “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.” Immigrants are among the 10% of people in Alberta who

regularly struggle with food security. In the conversations First Presbyterian had with their neighbours, many of the neighbours shared that they struggled to buy nutritious food on their modest incomes. The group of congregants came to a consensus that this was a crucial need they wanted to help address. With this focus, they gave their group a name: the 6th Food Group.

Step 2: DEFINE

List: Put together a list of the needs identified in Step 1.

Discuss: What have we learned about the people who are facing the challenge? What are their priorities? Are there commonalities or sets of needs they expressed that fit together? Are there needs that we feel particularly stirred to respond to?

Define: Decide which challenge or issue you are going to address. Write a statement that clearly defines the problem you are addressing. This will be the statement that will guide the rest of the process.

STEP 3

Ideate

The third step in the Design Thinking process is called “Ideate.” In this step, participants are challenged to discover the widest range of potential solutions to the need that has been identified. It is important to resist the urge to come up with the *best* solution. Instead, participants are encouraged to “greenlight every idea” and push beyond the first and obvious solutions that emerge. This step is part of the learning process; thinking about a potential solution can feed back and provide greater insight into the challenge. Every idea is helpful because a few in combination may present an elegant response to the challenge.

Since First Presbyterian had a clear picture of the challenge from their work in step two, they were able to easily jump into a brainstorming session around solutions. As more and more ideas were generated and listed on a flipchart, people around the table were encouraging each other to keep going. No idea was dismissed. Even the idea of arranging regular shipments of produce from Africa was put up on the sheet!

One of the ideas that gained traction was for First Presbyterian to become a depot for a food box program. The Good Food Box Program (GFB) is an initiative of a non-profit organization that, through an arrangement that gives them the same buying power as large grocery stores, sells boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables at discounted prices. Most members of the group had never heard of the program before but were impressed by its success at addressing food insecurity by providing sustainable access to affordable and nutritious food to those who need it most. The 6th Food Group

proposed this idea to the apartment residents at the next Coffee and Conversation chat gathering, and it was received enthusiastically. So, they decided to move forward with this potential solution.

Step 3: IDEATE

Brainstorming: Using the problem statement you came up with in step 2 as your basis, start coming up with solutions to the need that has been identified. Encourage people to give their imaginations free reign.

Defer Judgement: Remember that at this stage there is no judging of ideas. This stage is meant to generate as many ideas as possible. There are no “bad” ideas. Give every idea the “green light” by allowing it to be on the list of possible solutions.

Choose an Idea or Two: After brainstorming as many solutions as your group can come up with, discuss which one(s) your group would like to move forward. The criteria for choosing will depend on the problem you are tackling, but it is good to consider what is possible for your group to do and what is generating the most interest/excitement.

STEP

4

Prototype

To prototype something means building a small-scale version of the object or program you are imagining. One key aspect of prototyping is to limit the amount of time and money you spend at this stage. The goal is not to create a full-scale program that will endure forever, but to set up a close approximation to your idea for the purposes of testing it.

For First Presbyterian, this stage involved contacting the GFB program and organizing for the congregation to become a depot coordinator, which meant that food could be dropped off at the apartment building for the convenience of the residents. The building manager was so enthused with the idea that she provided the congregants a key to the building. Ten families in the building signed up with the program to give it a try for three deliveries, once every two weeks. Some families ordered small boxes while other families ordered larger boxes.

Step 4: PROTOTYPE

Start Small: Don't spend too long or too much money on the prototype. You are setting up a short trial to see if your solution will truly meet the need you've identified.

Build with People in Mind: What do you foresee those using the prototype (e.g., those participating in the GFB program) will experience? What sorts of improvements in their need do you expect to see?

Prototyping and Testing in Tandem: Prototype and Test are modes that often occur in tandem. What you will be testing and how you are going to test it are important considerations when creating a prototype.

STEP 5

Testing

The fifth step in the Design Thinking process is the testing phase. In this phase, participants will try the prototype over a short period of time to see what can be learned. They will ask questions like:

- Does it address the challenge we identified?
- What new learning about the challenge did the experience bring to light?
- Where did the prototype fall short, and how can it be improved?

The answers to these kinds of questions can provide the needed learning for a new and improved prototype.

For six weeks, First Presbyterian organized for the residents of the apartment building to receive their fruit and vegetable boxes. Then, they met with the residents at Coffee and Conversation to see how the prototype program worked. Here are some of the things they learned:

- The freshness and quality of the fruits and vegetables was wonderful and greatly appreciated. In this regard, the GFB program was a winner.
- Receiving food every two weeks met the need.
- None of the families could eat their way through a large box so ordering small boxes was adequate.
- It was not uncommon for some of the food to spoil over time because the families simply never got around to using it.

Through this testing phase, the 6th Food Group learned that their neighbours were very busy working. Typically, both parents worked and took public transit to and from work. Even though there was nutritious food in the fridge, the time crunch often led them to cooking quick meals that didn't use the produce. This was something about the food challenge that no one recognized before this testing phase.

Step 5: TESTING

Get Participants Involved: Put your prototype to the test by inviting the people you designed it for to engage with it. Let your tester interpret the prototype. Watch how they use it, listen to what they say about it and the note all the questions they have.

Invite Feedback: Take the feedback participants give about the porotype seriously. How can you incorporate this feedback into your next prototype?

Repeat Steps 4 and 5

In the Design Thinking process, participants usually find themselves returning to the prototyping stage after testing. This is completely normal, and it is encouraged as part of the learning process. Like during the first prototyping stage, the goal is to set up a second trial quickly without too much cost or time invested. Participants are meant to use what they learned in the first testing phase to create an even better solution to the challenge. The goal is to get closer to fully meeting the identified need. Imagine that you are practicing shooting arrows. With each test, you get closer to hitting the bullseye of addressing the challenge completely.

For First Presbyterian, this meant sitting down with their neighbours from the apartment building and planning a second prototype. The second prototype they came up with included the following elements:

- They would continue to utilize the GFB program and receive deliveries every second week.
- The food would be delivered to the church, not the apartment building.
- A community kitchen program would be offered on delivery day. The plan was to gather residents in the church kitchen to prepare several meals utilizing food right out of their boxes. These meals would be packaged for each participating family to be taken home and frozen for use later during the two-week period.
- Congregants would help the residents take their boxes and prepared meals home.

Final Prototype

Eventually in the Design Thinking process, participants will find a prototype that meets the challenge they were trying to address completely. For First Presbyterian, the second prototype of the program was run for six weeks and found to be a great success. There was, however, still room for improvement.

While the families all appreciated the food that came in their boxes, they found that they still longed to have the box include some of their favourite foods from their home countries. So, the prototype was adjusted for another six-week trial. The third prototype added the following elements to the existing program:

- A couple of residents and one congregant volunteered to go every other week to a local market that did sell some of that prized produce residents longed for from their home countries. These fruit and vegetables were added to the boxes and the cost shared among the residents.
- To deal with this added cost, many of the families agreed to pair up to purchase and share large GFBs. The money they saved on GFBs just about covered the cost of the other fruits and vegetables.

The third prototype proved to be the winner. Over the following weeks, responsibility for organizing the food purchases and the community kitchen were shifted from the First Presbyterian congregants to the program participants. When the transition was completed, the congregants returned to Coffee and Conversation to explore new needs with their neighbours. The success of the first project added to everyone's confidence that together they could tackle a new challenge.

Using Design Thinking with your Congregation

The process of Design Thinking and the practice of prototyping can help congregations answer the questions of “What should we be doing?” and “How can we serve our neighbours?” For further, resources on the design thinking process, visit Stanford’s “d.school” website, where many of the foundation ideas for this resource can be found: d.school.stanford.edu. In particular check out:

- An Introduction to Design Thinking PROCESS GUIDE
<http://web.stanford.edu/~mshanks/MichaelShanks/files/509554.pdf>
- Design Thinking Bootleg
<https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/design-thinking-bootleg>

If you’d like to discuss how to use Design Thinking with your congregation, please contact Canadian Ministries at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca.



50 Wynford Drive, Toronto, ON M3C 1J7

1-800-619-7301 | presbyterian.ca