

A PROCESS FOR CONSULTING WITH LESS THAN CRITICAL MASS CONGREGATIONS



Presented to the Committee on Ministry and the Committee on Transformational Ministries
December 6, 2007

Presented to Kiskiminetas Presbytery Council on December 13, 2007

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INTRODUCTION: WHY A LESS THAN CRITICAL MASS CONSULTATION PROCESS?

REALITY OF DECLINING CONGREGATIONS IN THE PRESBYTERY OF KISKIMINETAS

In the Presbytery of Kiskiminetas, the presbytery has focused considerable resources on supporting congregations in transformational and missional endeavors. Currently fourteen congregations are engaged in the Acts 16:5 Initiative with Dr. Stan Ott, while other congregations pursue action plans formed through the Vital Church Twelve Keys process. Some of our congregations are thriving, vital, and healthy.

But the reality for many of our congregations, even some of those which are healthy and missional, is that they are facing decline which the best efforts of all of us have not been able to reverse. Presbytery statistics and demographics indicate the likelihood that this downward trend will continue. The presbytery needs to find a way to work with our congregations as they face the challenges of the future. Over the past three years, presbytery leaders from the Committees on Ministry and Transformational Ministry have labored to understand the overall “picture” in the presbytery and to discern a way forward which will be reality-driven, hope-filled, and graceful in change management. This proposed process is the fruit of the work of this group.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “LESS THAN CRITICAL MASS”?

An ongoing issue for this task group was to find the most helpful term to describe our congregations which are pressured by change and declining. The group rejected many labels: “dying,” “declining,” “not thriving,” and finally settled on “Less Than Critical Mass.” This is not a perfect term, but it does indicate the realities facing our congregations.

Less Than Critical Mass (LTCM) congregations are those whose resources and energy have dropped below the level needed to sustain their mission, ministry and maintenance. In the Presbytery of Kiskiminetas, we have two populations of LTCM congregations.

Some of them are still vital and able to continue on in ministry, but can no longer afford to sustain pastoral leadership at the previous level. A number of our congregations have dropped or are dropping below the ability to pay the salary of a full-time pastor, and hope to share pastoral leadership with another PC(USA) congregation or an ecumenical partner. Some hope to find a part-time Minister of Word and Sacrament, or a Commissioned Lay Pastor. Some hope a period of vacancy will re-fill the coffers in order to be able to afford a full-time pastor, and that the labors of the new pastor will spark increased income.

The other category of LTCM congregations are those which have declined below the level of sustaining reduced pastoral leadership even at reduced levels, or those for whom such leadership is not available. Many of these congregations have few people in worship on

Sundays, have a disproportionate number of aging parishioners, and sustain no other mission and ministry than a service of worship on Sundays.

WHY MUST WE RESPOND TO THE REALITY OF BECOMING A “LESS THAN CRITICAL MASS” PRESBYTERY?

When a congregation dips below the level of sustaining pastoral leadership, this affects the entire presbytery. As the number of ministers decline, the number of congregations which require the services of a moderator, who is a pastor of a neighboring congregation, rises. We are now stretched to a breaking point. We do not have enough ministers to moderate sessions and congregational meetings, officiate at local installations and ordinations, and to provide for the administration of the sacraments. We do not have enough presbytery-authorized preachers to fill all of our pulpits each Sunday. We do not have enough Commissioned Lay Pastors. As the population of our congregations continues to age, more congregations will lose the ability to fund pastoral leadership and the situation will worsen. As we ask ministers to take on more responsibilities: moderating, mentoring CLPs and First Call Pastors, committee responsibilities and presbytery task groups, pastoral salaries are not keeping up. The Presbytery of Kiskiminetas has one of the lowest effective salaries for pastors in the Synod.

The task group which worked on this process believes the time has come for the presbytery to lead consultations with our Less Than Critical Mass congregations to discern God’s best call to them for the future.

WHERE WILL WE FIND THE COACHES?

This process has been crafted to be completed in two sessions, whenever possible, rather than stretching for the six-twelve sessions which used to be the norm for “mission studies.” One mantra of the task group is “We simply do not have enough horses to pull the wagon.” Coaches must come from the same pool of competent presbytery leadership that we already rely upon for many facets of presbytery mission, ministry and maintenance. We need to identify more “non-minister” members of the presbytery to work with pastors as coaches.

We will need to select and train a cadre of people with skills in change management, discernment, self-differentiation, wisdom and grace. Every consultation should have two coaches. Some of the coaches may serve more as recorders, and less as group process leaders as they gain the skills in group leadership. The first proposed session has a clear course charted out. The second session requires a skilled group process navigator to pilot the group to the necessary destination; there is no map which will provide a direct route through the currents of change. In some consultations, it may be possible and advisable to deploy staff as part of the coaching team. In other situations, distrust of the presbytery may prevent staff from being able to play an effective role during the consultation.

SESSION 1 – WHO ARE WE? (2.5 HOURS)

Purpose: In this session, congregational leaders and consultation coaches from the presbytery will work together to discern the vision, values and resources of the congregation and to identify a range of future options.

Expected Outcome: Participants will leave this session equipped to reflect upon God’s best future for their congregation

Session Outline:

- I. Introductions/Community Building
- II. Core Identity: Group Reflection Upon Scripture
- III. Naming what is life-giving/life-draining for the congregation (Assets & Challenges)
- IV. Looking at Congregational Statistics and Demographics
- V. Naming of Options for the Future
- VI. Depart for a time of prayer and reflection

COMMUNITY BUILDING (30 Minutes)

Even when people have lived together in the same congregation for many years, they may know less than they think about how each feels and thinks about the congregation. In addition, it is possible that they may feel uncomfortable about having “the Presbytery” meet with them.

1. Distribute Name Tags:

Presbytery coaches will make arrangements for nametags. As each person arrives, ask them, in addition to their name, to draw a symbol on their nametag of something they love to do. Go around the table, share names, role in the church (the reason they are at the meeting), and in one sentence tell about their symbol. (If there are more than 15 at the meeting, have them share their symbol with 2 or 3 people near them).

2. What Do You Love About the Mission/Ministry of Your Congregation?

Introduce the process of Mutual Invitation. A coach invites one of the participants to share one thing they love about the mission/ministry of the congregation. That person invites another person by name to share their response, until all have shared. A person is allowed to say “pass.” If someone passes, do not comment upon the pass, but ask them to invite the next person to share. One of the coaches records these responses on newsprint for use later in the session.

3. Establish a Covenant

The Clerk of Session and Moderator will previously have received copies of *Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement*, along

with the request to distribute and review the guidelines as a session meeting. Distribute a fresh copy to all present. By prior arrangement, the clerk of session or moderator will read the guidelines aloud. (If neither is comfortable doing so, one of the coaches will read it.) Ask for any questions or comments, and tell them that we will be following these guidelines during this consultation process.

4. Open With Prayer

One of the coaches, or moderator by prior arrangement, opens the session asking for God's wisdom, grace and blessing upon the discernment process.

DWELLING TOGETHER IN THE WORD: John 21:1-17 (30 Minutes)

Listening for Presence of Christ the Word in the Passage

One person slowly reads aloud the passage of scripture, as others are attentive to some word or phrase that is especially meaningful to them.

1. Silence for 1-2 minutes. Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
2. In groups of 3-4, each shares aloud the word or phrase that attracts, with no elaboration.

How the Word of Christ speaks to ME

Another person reads the same passage aloud.

3. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
4. Each shares aloud, briefly: "I hear..." or "I sense..."

How the Word of Christ Speaks to US and What the Word of Christ Invites Us to Do

5. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "How does this reading speak to our congregation?" "What is Christ calling us to be and do?"
6. In groups of 3-4, each shares aloud what they Christ saying to their congregation through the words of the passage.
7. After each has had time to share, spend a few minutes in prayer for each other and for the congregation. People may pray aloud or silently.

A Coach Draws the Group Back Together

A Coach states that during this session, participants will be reflecting upon where the nets are "full," for the congregation and where they seem empty or stretched to the threat of breaking.

THE MISSION, MINISTRY AND MAINTENANCE OF THIS CONGREGATION (30 Minutes)

1. Presentation of Mission/Ministry/Maintenance Diagram

Explain each of the terms in the “3 M” Diagram (attached).

2. Where are Our Nets Full? Identifying Congregational Assets

Using the imagery of the John 21 passage, emphasize that every congregation has more ways their nets are full, gifts/assets for mission, ministry, and maintenance than they may realize. Remind them that when Jesus wanted to restore Peter’s soul, Jesus gave Peter a mission, “Feed my sheep.” The fish in our nets are given to us to use as assets to tend the sheep.

Return to the newsprint sheet started earlier, “What is Life-Giving for this Congregation” and remind them of what is already on the list. Turn to the next sheet, which has the 3-M diagram pre-drawn upon it, labeled “Where Our Nets Are Full”. Writing in the appropriate circle, or next to it, list the “fish” -- life-giving assets for ministry they can identify for each area. Transfer over pertinent points from the first sheet.

3. Where are our Nets Empty, or So Strained They Feel Like they Might Break? Identifying Congregational Challenges

Turn to the next sheet, which has been labeled “Where Our Nets Are Empty or Strained”.

Ask: What are the challenges we face and where do we feel overwhelmed trying to sustain ministry? List their reflections without editorial comment

4. Pause for Prayer

Conclude the section by offering a brief prayer, giving thanks for the assets which God has given the congregation and asking for wisdom in discerning how to address the challenges

LOOKING AT THE CONGREGATION’S DATA: DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS (25 Minutes)

1. Congregational Demographics and Statistics

The coach leads them through a look at their statistics (30 year history, age chart, financial/attendance figures and rankings) and an overview of community demographics.

2. Reflecting Upon Congregational Data

The coach asks the group to reflect back what they observe and what conclusions they draw about likely future scenarios for the congregation.

IDENTIFYING FUTURE OPTIONS (20 Minutes)

1. What Options Have Other Congregations Found?

Without editorial elaboration, a coach lists options that other congregations which have dipped below critical mass for sustaining mission/ministry/maintenance have found to be the future to which God is calling them. Explain that the first step is to brainstorm all options, and that tonight we will not be discussing which one might be the Call for this congregation.

- **Close** -- recognizing that all congregations have a lifespan which is part of God's plan, and giving thanks for the faithful ministry of the congregation)
- **Merge** with ecumenical partner or PC(USA) congregation
- **Continue as Long as Possible** -- as an "extended family chapel" going on with diminishing resources (internal and what the presbytery can offer). Will take annual monitoring to see if going on remains a life-giving option for the congregation. It may require finding new strategies for pastoral leadership with declining resources.
- **Turn-Around** -- takes energy, focus, resources, and motivation

2. Dismiss for A Period of Prayer, Reflection and Conversation

Announce the date for the next session, at least one week away. Invite them to go out for a time of dwelling in God's Word, Prayer, Individual reflection and conversation about what they hear as God's call for their congregation.

SESSION 2: WHERE IS GOD CALLING US TO GO? (2.5 HOURS)

Purpose: In this session, congregational leaders and consultation coaches from the presbytery will work together to God's call to their congregation for their best future.

Expected Outcome: Participants will be ready to devise an action plan based upon their discernment of God's call to their congregation.

Session Outline:

- I. Community Building
- II. Core Identity: Group Reflection Upon Scripture
- III. Identification of Options for the Future
- IV. Discerning God's Call from Among the Options
- V. Choosing Next Steps

COMMUNITY BUILDING (15 MINUTES)

Identify any participants who may not have attended the first session. Acknowledge any absences. Ask them to share in groups of 3-4 something which has been life-giving since their last meeting, and something which has been life-draining. Draw them back to the large group with an opening prayer.

DWELLING TOGETHER IN THE WORD: JEREMIAH 29:1-14 (15 MINUTES)

Listening for Presence of Christ the Word in the Passage

One person slowly reads aloud a passage of scripture, as others are attentive to some word or phrase that is especially meaningful to them.

1. Silence for 1-2 minutes. Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
2. In groups of 3-4, each shares aloud the word or phrase that attracts, with no elaboration.

How Christ the Word speaks to ME

Another person reads the same passage aloud.

3. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
4. Each shares aloud, briefly: "I hear..." or "I sense..."

How the Christ the Word Speaks to US and What the Word of Christ Invites Us to Do

5. Silence for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on “How does this reading speak to our congregation?” “What is Christ calling us to be and do?”
6. In groups of 3-4, each shares aloud what they Christ saying to their congregation through the words of the passage.
7. After each has had time to share, spend a few minutes in prayer for each other and for the congregation. People may pray aloud or silently.

IDENTIFICATION OF OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE (45 minutes)

1. Remind them of the Covenant “Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement”

People are likely to have strong feelings, and not all the feelings will be the same. In fact, some of our feelings and thoughts may be in conflict. This is normal and healthy, and means we need to be the presence of Christ for each other by following the covenant, and listening carefully to each other.

2. Return to the Options for the Future Sheet from Session 1

Point out the passage from Jeremiah 29 is about deep hope and trust in God, even in the midst of painful times like exile. Return to the list of options other congregations have been called to follow, when their resources for mission, ministry and maintenance have dropped below the critical mass needed to sustain a healthy congregation. Do not elaborate or ask for comments.

3. Small Group Work on Options

Work in small groups to share the fruit of their reflections since the last meeting, and list the options those in that group believe might be God’s call. They may have more than one option on their list. Give them 10-15 minutes to work, paying attention to the energy and conversation levels

4. Reporting Out from the Small Group

Invite a presenter from each group to report the options their group sees as possibly God’s call to them. List them on a fresh sheet of newsprint without comment, other than asking for elaboration if a statement is not clear. “Clump” similar options while listing on newsprint.

5. Group and Clarify Options

Invite questions for clarification or to expand options. Once the list of options seems to be “good enough,” briefly invite reflection upon implications and strategies for each option.

DISCERNING GOD'S CALL FROM AMONG THE OPTIONS (45 minutes)

Note: the flow of this section depends upon the skills of the coach/es, and their ability to read and lead the sense of the room. These group process suggestions are from *Guidelines for Communal Discernment* by Victoria Curtiss, which will be used during coach training.

1. Negatives First, and Then Positives

This approach places the sharing of negative feedback before the positive. John Futrell wrote, "Negative reasons always generate negative emotions which, in turn, cause aggressive feelings. Stating the cons first enables one to release these feelings and to be truly open to the pros. It does not put the pros into a privileged position, but simply makes it possible to really hear them."

First each person prays in silence and reflects on the negative aspects of each alternative. These are then shared with the whole group, using the process of mutual invitation, without debate. Only questions for clarification are voiced. Individuals then reflect and pray in silence on the positive aspects of each alternative. These are then shared with the whole group, again using the process of mutual invitation. Individuals then reflect and pray in silence about all that has been shared. The group evaluates the pros and cons, working collaboratively to sense an emerging consensus. One alternative at a time will be discussed, talking about both negatives and positives before moving on to the next one option.

2. **Choosing Direction:** The coach's role is to mirror back to the group what may be emerging as a consensus for direction. This is done by articulating a "trial balloon," a summary statement based on group input that expresses where the Holy Spirit seems to be leading the body. The "trial balloon" is often formulated by the coach but may come from a member of the group. Persons may then be asked to indicate their level of support of the trial balloon. Support may be gauged through conversation, or through a straw poll. One form of a straw poll is the Five Finger Method:

Five Finger Method:

Participants hold up the number of fingers that conveys their level of support:

- *Five fingers = I am fully supportive.*
- *Four fingers = I am not convinced, but am ready to support the majority view.*
- *Three fingers = I am not persuaded and need to hear more from those who support this*
- *Two fingers = I am not certain and need more time to pray about this*
- *One finger = I cannot support at this time.*

It is important that the group all has the same understanding of what each of the levels mean. Sometimes groups will define level 3 as having reservations, but willing to stand

aside and allow movement to go forward. A group needs to decide in advance what level of support determines whether they will approve and proceed. Usually if participants are all supporting at levels 5 and 4, consensus can be declared. If there are persons signifying levels 3, 2, or 1, more time is usually taken to respond to questions and concerns and possibly modify the option, direction, or timetable. Once a high level of support is assessed, the facilitator confirms with the group the direction to proceed.

3. Deciding What Next Steps to Take

If the sense of the room is clear about a future option, the coach identifies next steps:

- **Close:** If it seems the best option might be to close, then the process for when the presbytery must close a church will be followed.
- **Merge:** If it seems the best option is for exploring merge possibilities with another PC(USA) congregation, or an ecumenical partner, a COM task team will work with them and appropriate ecumenical representatives.
- **Continue On:** If they believe their best call is to go in the same manner they have been, the presbytery will be in a period of watchful waiting with them, and look for signs the time has come to re-open the conversation. This consultation should be repeated on a yearly basis. Pastoral Leadership options include:
 - **Moderator/Preaching Supply:** As the number of available ministers in the presbytery also dips below the critical mass needed to sustain the number of congregations which need to be moderated, the services moderators can offer to churches not their primary responsibility will be very limited. Based upon the schedule of the moderator, congregations may need to plan to have only the four session meetings per year mandated in the Book of Order. Congregational Meetings, Installation/Ordination of Officers, and Administration of the Sacraments will be scheduled upon congregational request when the presbytery has someone qualified who is available. This may require modifying congregational by-laws for more flexibility in mandated meeting dates. The presbytery currently does not have enough preachers available to supply all pulpit requests each Sunday. Pulpit Supply requests will be filled first for congregations which are in transition, and are expecting to engage appropriate pastoral care, and for pastors who have requested vacation/study leave/medical leave.

- **CLP:** If one is available, the session may request the assignment of a Commissioned Lay Pastor. A CLP who has successfully passed the online Polity course and has been examined in Polity by CPM may be eligible to moderate the session and congregational meetings.
 - **Ecumenical Shared Leadership:** In some situations, an appropriate alternative might be to share pastoral leadership with a nearby congregation/s of another denomination. This must be negotiated through denominational representatives on both sides.
- **Transformation/Turn-Around:** If the congregation believes they have the resources, energy and vision to engage intentionally in a turn-around/transformation process, then the Committee on Transformational Ministries will work with them for deeper assessment and action planning, using the David Ray *Assessment for Smaller Membership Congregations* or the Kennon Callahan 12 Keys process.
 - **Stuck/Don't Know What to Do:** If the sense in the room is not clear, then the session terminates for the night. The discernment process will continue, after consultation with COM or COM leadership. Some of the options identified in the Communal Discernment Process are:

If a group does not complete discernment within the time allowed, or is seriously divided or at an impasse, several options may be considered. The group can:

- *take time for further prayer and reflection*
- *identify issues about which agreement has been reached*
- *identify issues that remain to be resolved at a later time*
- *identify possible steps for further exploration, perhaps by repeating some of the discernment process*
- *appoint a smaller group or person to work further and bring a plan back to the session*
- *vote by majority rule*

JOHN 21:1-21

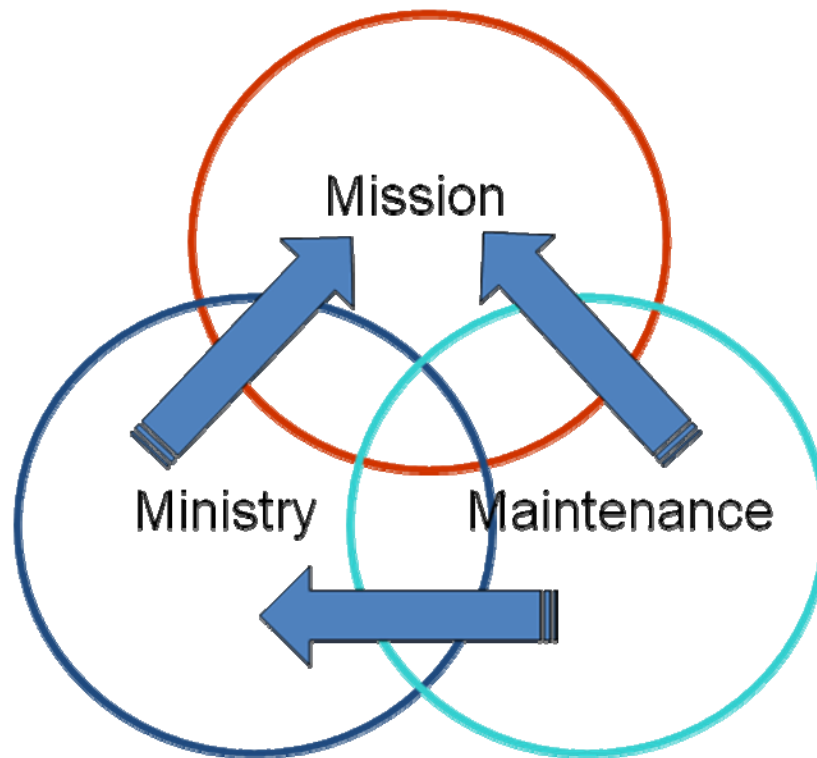
21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' ⁶He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' ¹⁶A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' ¹⁷He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

M³



MISSION-- that which we do for and with those outside our congregation to proclaim and to demonstrate the love of God in Christ Jesus

MINISTRY-- that which we do for and with those of our congregation to develop, enhance and expand their faithfulness as disciples of Christ Jesus.

MAINTENANCE-- that which we do to keep the church, as the body of Christ Jesus, alive and well functioning so that mission and ministry might be accomplished.

JEREMIAH 29:1-14

²These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: ⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.

¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I sent you into exile.