CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY

Vital Signs of the 21st Century Church

A 4-part curriculum to begin understanding indicators of congregational health
The reality of the 21st century church is clear: God has listened to our prayers and helped us. The church’s time to shine is now!

That might not have been what you expected. You might have expected to hear that the reality of the 21st century church is that it is declining in resources of all kinds, that it is moving to irrelevancy in the culture today, that it is dying. At least that seems to be the sentiment in many congregations who have emptier sanctuaries and bank accounts.

But the Apostle Paul is clear about our salvation – salvation does not come when “we get more young families” or when “our Sunday School is full” or when “people come to worship again.”

Salvation is now. Today.

And that means that God has provided everything the church needs to continue to share the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world.

That said, there are certain things that congregations can work on – work out – to become vital communities of Jesus Christ. In medicine, our body’s vital signs; respiration rate, heart rate, blood pressure, and temperature, are used to help indicate our level of well-being. Congregations also exhibit vital signs that are indicators of health; proclamation of the gospel, willingness to try new things, connectedness to the whole church, and positive impact in the local community. Just as a healthy diet and exercise can improve our own vital signs, there are concrete activities and behaviors that congregations can engage in to improve their own vitality. For this reason, *Congregational Vitality: Vital Signs of the 21st Century Church* has been developed for use in congregations and small groups.

The series consists of four modules with Scripture study, one self-assessment question intended to start the conversation, group and individual activities, and additional resources to explore each vital sign more in depth.
VITAL SIGN #1
JESUS CHRIST – GOOD NEWS – PROCLAIMED

In the communities of faith where things seem to be “working,” where a shared future looks bright, the people consistently hear and experience the good news of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul calls this good news, “the gospel,” which he understood to be the announcement of Jesus Christ, the telling of his death and resurrection and his presence in the Spirit. This gospel is the very ground of faith in God and it is the source of love turning toward a world in need. Paul goes on to insist that the gospel = Jesus Christ. This means that in the proclamation (the telling of Jesus), Christ is present. To share this good news is to give Jesus to others. Life together in healthy congregations is shaped by the proclamation that in Christ, God loves the world…the whole world. There is no one beyond God’s loving reach. This good news shapes every aspect of shared ministry in communities where faith is alive and growing. This 1st mark of vitality looms over all the others. It is the primary “driver” of what it means to be the church. Without it, nothing about mission or ministry as followers of Jesus makes any sense.

STUDY

Open: Reflect on ways and times in your own life where you have experienced God’s grace and reconciliation. Share about one (or more) of these times.

Pray: Great Reconciler of the world, we give you thanks that even in our sin and brokenness Christ came that we might be made whole in reconciliation with you and with one another. Strengthen us to be faithful ambassadors that our congregations and lives might bear witness to your great love and mercy, through Christ who became our righteousness, Amen.

Study: Read 2 Corinthians 5.19-21
1. What do you notice most about this text? What do you wonder after hearing this text?
2. Discuss what makes a good worship experience. What is the sermon like?
How is God’s grace made known in other parts of worship?

3. What does it mean to have the Good News of Jesus as the primary driver of congregational ministry? Looking at the ministries in your congregation, would you say this is the primary focus? If not, why? And how might that begin to shift?

4. What does it mean to be an ‘ambassador for Christ’? Have you ever considered yourself as such? What would it mean for a congregation to be a faithful ambassador for Christ?

5. Martin Luther frequently talked about the “happy exchange” wherein Christ’s righteousness becomes our own (v. 21). How have you thought about and lived this in your own life? What implications does this have for our sharing the reconciling love of Christ with our neighbors?

Pray: Spend time in prayer thanking God for God’s reconciling love and righteousness which brings us into wholeness with God and each other. Pray that God can encourage you in all the ways you are an ambassador for Christ.

ASSESSMENT QUESTION

On average, the members of our congregation are excited about the shared future and consistently hear and experience the good news of Jesus Christ.

0 (not at all) 5 (people are very excited)
News vs. Good News

We live in a news saturated society. Social media, television, radio and print, and now even a basic Internet search window are filled with the latest stories and updates on events all over the world. Yet this constant inundation with news that is more often than not centered on crisis and conflict, hearers can become numb.

In this activity participants are asked to take a sabbath from the news (in all forms) for a set period of time. This may be a few days to a week or more, depending on the group’s wishes. Throughout the sabbath, participants are asked to read through the book of Mark and reflect on the following questions:

- What did you do to fill the time you would have spent listening to/reading the news?
- After a sabbath from the news, how is your spirit?
- What has this sabbath taught you about how you interact with the news and the effects it has on you?
- How does this sabbath help you think about news vs. Good News?
- What does it mean to be part of a community whose gathering is grounded in Good News?
- What are the drawbacks of taking a news sabbath?
- What did you miss most about not accessing the news?
- How will this sabbath impact your interaction with the news going forward?

After the sabbath time is over, gather participants together again to discuss the reflection questions in addition to the following:

- What did you notice about yourself during the sabbath?
- What (if anything) will you carry with you from this sabbath?
- How do you experience Good News within the congregation?
- How do sermons, fellowship, and other activities within the congregation proclaim the good news?
- Do I proclaim the good news to people I meet?
RESOURCES

► **Front Porchin’ Workbook**: In this 6-chapter workbook, Pastor Jake Jacobson leads you through exercises that show the interplay between ‘my story, your story, God’s story’. It is a great resource for councils, small groups, and congregations to learn how to tell stories of faith.

► **Faith Stories Worksheet**: A quick and easy resource for a 60-minute session on learning how to share stories of faith and practicing with partners or small groups.

► **Congregational Autobiography**: A tool that takes a congregation through the life of faith, stewardship, and how God’s reconciling love has been present in the community throughout its history. (If you liked the congregational autobiography there is a [personal autobiography](#) as well)

► **Living our Baptism**: Based on the promises made at baptism this resource includes study, worship, and activities for what it means to live into our grace-filled promises of baptism.

► **Unbinding the Gospel**: A resource by Martha Grace Reese for study by congregation councils, committees, or small groups with daily readings/journaling prompts that help to begin the conversation about evangelism and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.
VITAL SIGNS OF THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

VITAL SIGN #2
WILLING TO TRY "NEW" THINGS

Lots of bad jokes are based on the notion that nothing in the church ever changes, which reflects just a grain of truth. People naturally resist change, unless there is a deep sense that the change will guarantee an outcome better than present reality. In a church where the landscape itself has changed, and keeps changing, the only real guarantee is God’s unrelenting love for us and for the world; the love we know in Jesus Christ.

Because things change, congregational vitality requires a willingness to try “new” things. Paired with the need to say “yes” to trying something new is the equally important need to sometimes say “no” to things that are familiar, but are no longer vital to the mission God entrusts to us. The “yes” and the “no” make things seem doubly difficult.

Think about the Apostle Paul’s conviction that “in Christ, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Because of the saving work of Jesus, followers have a new way of seeing. That new way applies to how we view others as well as to how we see the circumstances around us. Congregational vitality is marked by a willingness to see and understand the approach to the ministry of sharing the Good News in new ways.

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Open: Reflect back on times in your life when something new happened. Maybe it was a choice you made (a move to a new house or city), maybe it was something out of your control (being laid off or a medical diagnosis). Share about these experiences with a partner or small group.

Pray: God of new life, we give you thanks that in your gracious love you have created of us something new. Give us power to continually put to death the old creation in the waters of baptism and live each day in the newness of your love and reconciliation. In Jesus name, Amen.
**Study**: Read 2 Corinthians 5.16-18

1. What do you notice most about this text? What do you wonder after hearing this text?

2. Think about how life is renewed and regenerated in nature. Fall to spring, caterpillar to butterfly, tadpole to frog, etc. What can the church (and we) learn from the natural world as it relates to becoming a new creation in Christ?

3. How easy is it for your congregation to make room for something new? As in – let go of something old so that something new can be reborn.

4. Are there ministries/activities in your congregation that prevent new things from starting? How do we have these conversations in loving and gentle ways that both affirm the old ministry and energize for the new?

**Pray**: Spend time praying that God would heal hurts and grief over old (and maybe beloved) ministries that have come to an end of their life and that God’s Spirit would breathe new life through inspiration and dreaming about what new creation God might be making of you and your congregation.

**ASSESSMENT QUESTION**

In the last 12 months, our congregation has been excited about trying something new.

0 (nothing new was tried)   5 (we tried more than one new thing)
ACTIVITY

Congregational Garage Sale

In this activity the congregation is invited to literally and figuratively make room for something new. Church basements or closets are notorious for never being cleaned, or if they are, there is a fear of getting rid of something. “What if we need these old coloring books from the 1970s?” “What if this technology comes back and we might be able to use it again?” “What if this six-decade old yarn could be used for a Sunday School craft?”

Gather the congregation for a day of intentional letting go and making room. Go through the old, celebrate, and then have a garage sale. Donate (or throw away) those things which aren’t sold and use the revenue from the sale to do something new.

RESOURCES

► **Asset mapping:** In this resource, which can be utilized for any size group of two or more, members of congregations engage in speed date style conversation centered on all of the great things about the congregation. Once the responses are gathered an individual (or group of individuals) compiles data for further conversation.

► [Paradigms for Mission Renewal](#)
VITAL SIGN #3
CONNECTION TO THE WHOLE CHURCH

Working locally with neighboring congregations, whether or not they are members of the ELCA, can provide a witness to the unity that is ours in Christ. Because of proximity, these local “connections” can lead to shared efforts “on the ground.” Whether partnering in feeding programs or community-wide youth ministries, the witness can take on many forms. When those connections include partner ELCA congregations, new and far-reaching possibilities emerge.

Vital congregations understand that as members of the body of Christ, we have been joined together in love. This is true for every local community of faith. But the Apostle Paul’s encouragement to be Christ’s body is not limiting. As a holy obligation to one another and an expression and reinforcement of the love that joins us together, ELCA congregations that are growing in faith see themselves as “one” with partners throughout this synod and across the entire Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. At best, this connection is reflected in mutual understanding, encouragement, and support.

Sharing financial resources, including what is often called “mission support,” extends the reach of ministry and builds up the body, of which the congregation is a vital part.

STUDY

Open: Reflect about a time in your life when your partnerships with others made possible what was otherwise out of reach. Are there similar examples of partnerships in the congregation? Share about how God has worked through these partnerships with a partner or small group.

Pray: Most high and holy God, pour out upon us your one and unifying Spirit, and awaken in every confession of the whole church a holy hunger and thirst for unity in you; through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.
Amen. -Evangelical Lutheran Worship p. 73
Study: Read 2 Corinthians 6.1-3

1. What do you notice most about this text? What do you wonder after hearing this text?

2. Paul begins this part of his letter to the Corinthians by saying “As we work together with [God], we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.” How do you view your life of faith as part of a larger web of Christians and congregations working to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world?

3. As you think about partnerships, working together, who first comes to mind? What are the experiences in your congregation working with other local congregations? With the synod? With churchwide? With global partners?

4. When the promise of God’s salvation is at stake, how do ‘territorial’ disputes among congregations get in the way of this message? How can we begin to view other Christians in our neighborhoods as partners rather than competitors?

5. Because we participate in a voluntary model of financial support (congregations rely on members, synods rely on congregations, churchwide relies on synods, etc.), how does our financial interdependence impact the ministry we do?

Pray: Spend time praying that God would open you and your congregation to exploring and building on partnerships beyond the walls of your congregation so that the witness of God’s salvation may be strengthened in your neighborhood and world.

ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

How well do members of your congregation see themselves as “one” with partners such as other churches in your town/area?

0 (we have partners?)

5 (well connected to partners)
How well do members of your congregation see themselves as “one” with partners such as the Southeastern Iowa Synod?

(we have partners?)

(we have partners?)

How well do members of your congregation see themselves as “one” with partners such as ELCA Churchwide Partners?

(we have partners?)

(we have partners?)

ACTIVITY

Take a Tour

How well does your congregation know its partners in the gospel? In this activity, small groups are invited to tour (both physically and literally) the ministry sites of partners.

Send small groups out on foot or car to visit your congregational neighbors. (Note: for more rural congregations this activity may have to be adapted to phone calls or planned visits.) Use your imaginations to make use of these visits. They might look like any of the following:

- attending worship one Sunday
- having a meeting with the pastor to introduce yourselves and have some conversation
- including council/board members in that conversation
- having a look around the neighborhood and praying for them

After the visits, have the small groups gather together to discuss the following:
- What, if anything, did you learn about your neighbors/partners?
- Do you have any ideas of how you can deepen (or start) your partnership?
- What does it mean to be church together? How can partnerships enhance the ministry already happening? How might they give new life?

**RESOURCES**

- **The Art of Neighboring**: In this resource congregations get several additional tools and exercises about engaging your neighbors, near and far.

- **Stories of Faith in Action** and **4 Ways to Use Stories of Faith in Action**: This is an annual magazine and ideas of how to use it that highlight ways in which our shared mission support make a difference in our world today.

- **Where my Offering Goes & Synod Partnership**: Do you wonder what happens when your offering is shared with synodical and churchwide partners? These two infographics breakdown just how your offering is used to enhance the ministry of the whole church all around the world.
VITAL SIGN #4
POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE WIDER COMMUNITY

If the ministry of a congregation would come to an end and the doors would close, would anyone other than the members notice? Of course, the hope is that others would more than notice. The ELCA tagline, “God’s work. Our hands.” is intentionally aimed at living out our faith among neighbors who may or may not be followers of Jesus.

Vital congregations contribute to the well-being of the wider community where they are located. When a congregation is thriving, neighbors, community organizations and all sorts of people in need know the congregation is “alive,” and they give thanks for the ways those ministries help the whole community.

We are church together for the sake of the world. God’s love for the whole world includes the community where the local church took root. Whether the setting is urban, small town, or in the open country, this is where we have been gathered by the Spirit; residents intent on making Christ known.

STUDY

Open: Discuss the following scenario in partners or small group:
Let’s say that one day your congregation suddenly ceases to exist. Apart from the members, who would notice that your congregation was gone?

Pray: Draw your church together, O God, into one great company of disciples, together following our teacher Jesus Christ into every walk of life, together serving in Christ’s mission to the world, and together witnessing to your love wherever you will send us; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 75

Study: Read 2 Corinthians 5.16-6.10
1. What do you most notice about this text? What do you wonder after hearing this text?
2. It can be difficult to prioritize mission and ministry, to break out of old ruts, to go out into community instead of waiting for people to come in. What does it mean for the church that the world is waiting to hear the message of salvation? How does this message of salvation compel the church to work toward reconciliation ministries?

3. The church can unfortunately get caught up in starting from the place of justice and reconciliation instead of starting from the place of God’s grace for the world. What does it mean to start from God’s grace rather than from our work?

4. How can God’s reconciling love bring people of different viewpoints together to work for the common good?

Pray: Spend time in prayer asking for God’s guidance in being the church in today’s world, and particularly in your neighborhood. Pray that doors are opened for new partnerships and for new ministries that continue to spread the message of God’s love and reconciliation and that positively impact the community.

**ASSESSMENT QUESTION**

Members of your community say that your congregation contributes to the well-being of the wider community.

0 (not at all) 5 (the community would notice our absence)
ACTIVITY

Community Leader Pep Talk

It can be discouraging sometimes to think that the work that happens in a congregation doesn’t make a difference in the face of all the challenges in the world. In this activity the congregation is asked to invite someone to talk during worship about how the work of the congregation positively impacts the community outside the walls of the church building. This could be a food pantry leader, other social service agency, or other partner who works with members of your congregation.

RESOURCES

► **Community Leader Conversations:** In this resource congregations are provided with a training document and a list of questions and conversation partners so that relationships can be strengthened with other community leaders and the congregation can begin to get a sense of the needs in the community.
There are many good books and websites available for small group or individual study. The following is a start into learning more about what a vital congregation looks like today.

In the area of adaptive/cultural change:
- Tales of the Pointless People – Daniel Erlander
- Canoeing the Mountains – Tod Bolsinger
- Who Moved My Cheese? – Spencer Johnson
- Congregational Vitality Survey
- Living Every Day as Disciples (LEAD)

In the area of stewardship:
- Stewardshift – Bob Sitze
- Embracing Stewardship – Grace Duddy Pomroy & Charles Lane
- Grateful – Diana Butler Bass
- Ecumenical Stewardship Center
- Stewardship of Life Institute

Authors of this resource:

- Bishop Michael Burk
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If you would like more information on any of the signs of vitality, to connect with the authors or share feedback connect with us:

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