

Here is a closer look at one of the “vital signs,” or marks of vitality. These four “marks” are the leading indicators as to whether or not a congregation exhibits vitality, that is, whether or not a community of disciples is alive and growing in faith.

#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.

#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.

#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.

#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.