



Foundational Concepts Thriving Congregations Initiative

Vibrant Faith's Thriving Congregations Initiative is guided by a vision and practices of vital and vibrant congregations that is grounded biblically, theologically, and pastorally. This vision guides the formation of leadership and the development of project designs and resources to create thriving congregations.

Five Core Practices of the Local Church

- ❖ The local congregation is where the Church lives. Congregations are communities of faith, of action, and of hope. They are where the gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. Congregations are the home of the Christian community; they are the heart of the Church. Congregations are the place where God's people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church's life.
- ❖ There are biblically-mandated, time-honored, Spirit-infused practices that guide a congregation in living its mission. "These five faithful practices are essential markers of faithful Christian communities. They celebrate and testify to the ongoing presence of God in human history in a particular locality. They vivify the gospel to a wider public. Or, as some theologians put it, they celebrate and testify to the ongoing presence of God in human history in a particular locality. Through each and all of these practices, a Christian community seeks to reflect the lifestyle of the risen Lord. These faithful practices are public 'signs and seals' of a congregation's character." (Stewart, 59)
- ❖ The five essential biblically-mandated, time-honored, Spirit-infused practices include:
 - *koinonia* (belonging, hospitality, community life)
 - *mathetes* (discipling, lifelong faith formation, wisdom)
 - *martyria* (witnessing, testimony, vocations)
 - *diakonia* (serving, compassion, justice),
 - *leiturgia* (worshipping,
- ❖ These five practices are rooted in the experience of the early Church as recorded in Acts. These practices have been paradigmatic for all other faithful Christian communities.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47)

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and

brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured. (Acts 5:12-16)

- ❖ These five faithful practices are connected and interdependent. Each one illumines and nourishes the others. No one practice can thrive in isolation from the others. All five of these faithful practices need to be operative if congregations are to flourish and fully live out their mission.
- ❖ These five faithful practices require leaders become bilingual. "That is, congregational leaders must interpret *both* the language of the biblical world where the gospel originated *and* the idioms of contemporary cultures. These faithful practices, whether in rural, urban or suburban environments, need 'user friendly' explanations for ordinary parishioners of all ages, all educational levels, and in all stages of discipleship." (Stewart, 63)
- ❖ These practices are contextualized within the life of a congregation with a specific community of people in a specific time, place, situation, and set of circumstances.

Characteristics of Congregational Vitality

What is congregational vitality? Using the research from the *American Congregations 2015* research, Linda Bobbitt describes vitality in this way,

Spiritually vital congregations are places where people come together for a common purpose of divine origin. The divine may be experienced through personal spiritual experiences, through encounters with others in their faith community, and through people outside their congregation. It is the recognition of the divine origin of their purpose that sets faith communities apart from other benevolent or social organizations.

... in spiritually vital congregations, people experience the divine in ways that are **transformative**. ***The common divine purpose and transformative experience compel the people to authentically engage both within the congregation and the world around them.*** In this way, transformation within individuals gives life and energy to the larger faith community which is itself transformed. A transformed faith community transforms the world around them. Without this kind of multi-layered transformation, the congregation seems inauthentic.

In high vitality congregations, people are drawn deeper into their faith and/or community in ways that transform their perspective about themselves and the world around them. When they re-enter the world, they see things in a new light (some would say they see the world from God's perspective) and this changes how they view and engage the world around them. People begin asking "How can I help God?" and they take steps to change the world around them. In doing so, the line between the congregation and the rest of the world may be blurred if not eliminated.
(*Vital Congregations*, 2-3)

Since the early 2000s congregational research studies have identified characteristics that significantly contribute to the vitality of the local church. The following characteristics surface repeatedly in study after study. We believe that these characteristics of congregational vitality provide a solid foundation upon which to build projects and strategies to strengthen and expand the life and ministries of the local church. (The Documentation section has summaries of the research studies used to develop the following characteristics.)

Mission & Vision

- ❖ The church has a clear identity: who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going.
- ❖ The church has a clear sense of its mission: a shared understanding of God's larger mission and the purpose for their church in this time and place.
- ❖ The church is focused on living its mission.
- ❖ The church possesses a sense of God's living presence in everything it does.
- ❖ The church has a holistic, compelling vision and plan for church life and ministries encompassing *koinonia* (belonging, hospitality, community life), *mathetes* (discipling, lifelong faith formation, wisdom), *martyria* (witnessing, testimony, vocations), *diakonia* (serving, compassion, justice), and *leiturgia* (worshipping, sacraments, prayer).
- ❖ The church is willing to try something new to live its mission; and is willing to change or adapt to meet new challenges.
- ❖ The church community is excited about its future.
- ❖ The church demonstrates a commitment to excellence in all that it does and focuses on its strengths—what it can do well.

Worship

- ❖ The church community experiences God's presence, joy, inspiration, and awe at worship and feels worship helps them with everyday life.
- ❖ The church's preaching connects Scripture to daily life and inspires Christian living.
- ❖ The church's music at worship inspires prayer and worship of God.

Hospitable and Caring Community

- ❖ The church cultivates a sense of community and belonging among all members where people of all ages are known by others in the congregation and can experience a safe and loving atmosphere.
- ❖ The church builds caring relationships among members of all ages.
- ❖ The church is a supportive community where people care for one another.
- ❖ The church engages in the practice of hospitality and welcoming new people into the community.
- ❖ The church creates an inclusive and welcoming environment for a diversity of people (ethnicity, social class, age, gender, and sexual orientation).

Evangelism / Evangelization

- ❖ The church has a strong apostolic culture with a passion to reach new people where they live, helping them to come to know Jesus and hear the Good News.
- ❖ The church is culturally relevant by learning how to speak to the mission field and knowing who to reach and how to reach them.
- ❖ The church seeks out, welcomes, and incorporates newcomers and returnees into the congregation's life.
- ❖ The church provides ways for new or returning people to learn about the Christian faith and join the faith community.

- ❖ The church cultivates and equips leaders with a passion to reach new people.

Discipleship and Faith Formation

- ❖ The church engages in lifelong faith formation and spiritual growth to help people of all ages grow their relationship with God, learn how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and grow in faith for a lifetime.
- ❖ The church provides a multiplicity of ways for people to grow in faith and discipleship.
- ❖ The church equips people to live their Christian faith in daily life.
- ❖ Our church helps children, youth, and families grow in faith and become active members of the faith community.

Service & Justice

- ❖ The church is engaged in outreach and service to those in need, locally and globally, to address the spiritual, human and emotional needs of those who are marginalized, hungry, homeless, hurting, or in need.
- ❖ The church is engaged in the work of social justice and advocacy to make our community and world a better place.
- ❖ The church is a positive force in the community.

Communication and Social Media

- ❖ The church has a website that communicates the church's identity and mission, is interactive, and is inclusive of all people—involved or uninvolved in the community.
- ❖ The church uses social media (like Facebook, Instagram, etc.) to communicate and connect with people.
- ❖ The church regularly communicates with all members using digital tools through email, texting, etc.

Leadership

- ❖ Pastoral Leaders lead from a clear set of core values and personal principles.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders possess a profound sense of being called by God and called to ministry, that is manifested as a deep trust in God and the willingness to act boldly and to take risks as part of that called ministry.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders combine a fierce resolve for what is best for the organization with a deep personal humility.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders transform lives by helping people grow in their love for God and develop a deeper relationship with God.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders have the ability to cast a vision and mobilize and empower people to work toward it— influencing people in ways that will help them achieve their goals.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders demonstrate adaptive skill to frame or reframe a congregation's vision for ministry and exploring ways of giving expression to the vision in the face of the particular challenges the congregation is facing.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders engage the gifts of the laity in leadership within the church community.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders help people in the congregation discover and utilize their gifts for ministry in the church and world.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders understand that genuine leadership requires a team approach—investing time and energy in building and sustaining capable teams.
- ❖ Pastoral Leaders have the desire, qualities, and skills to work collaboratively and co-responsibly with church leaders. They have the relationship skills needed to listen, to communicate, and respond pastorally.

Works Cited

John W. Stewart, *Envisioning the Congregation, Practicing the Gospel*).

Documentation

A Summary of Studies on Congregational Vitality

Review of Research

(From: 2015 United Church of Christ study, “Congregational Vitality and Ministerial Excellence”)

Mead (1993)	Bobbit (2014)	Woolver and Bruce (2004)—U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS)	National Church Life Survey (NCLS)	Hadaway (2010)—Faith Communities Today (FACT) Survey	Schnase (2007)—Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations	Stankle (2006)—Seven Health Promoters	Schwarz (1998)—Natural Church Development (NCD)	Buller-Bass (2006)—Ten Signposts of Renewal
Maturational growth	Connection to God: Faith formation and spiritual growth Sense of mission	Growing spiritually Meaningful worship Looking to the future	Alive and growing faith Vital and nurturing worship Clear and owned vision	Spiritually and vitally alive Innovative, reverent worship	Intentional faith development Passionate worship	Sense of purpose/clarity	Passionate spirituality Inspiring worship services	Discernment/Reflection/Contemplation Worship/Beauty
Organic growth	Connection to each other: Healthy Christian community	Participating in the congregation Having a sense of belonging Caring for children and youth Empowering leadership	Strong and growing sense of belonging Inspiring and empowering leadership Imaginative and flexibly innovation	Active focus on families Absence of serious conflict	Extravagant generosity	Mature interaction Healing capacities/ Mood and tone Appraise and manage conflict	Gift-based ministry Holistic small groups Empowering leadership Loving relationships	Healing Diversity
Incarnational growth	Connection to the world: Social outreach and evangelism Welcoming and accepting newcomers	Focusing on the community Sharing faith Welcoming new people	Practical and diverse service Willing and effective faith sharing Intentional and welcoming inclusion	Working for social justice/Moral beacon in the community Engaging in evangelism or recruitment	Risk-taking mission and service Radical hospitality	Focus on resources	Need-oriented evangelism	Justice Testimony Hospitality

“Open Wide the Doors to Christ” - A Study of Catholic Social Innovation for Parish Vitality (2020)

Marti Jewell and Mark Mogilka

Primarily, we discovered that parish communities known for their vitality:

1. **Are innovative.** Pastoral leaders engage a variety of innovative processes to address the difficult challenges they face. While interviewees did not speak of using Catholic Social Innovation as a formal process, their leadership, grounded in the tradition and basic teachings of the church, is open to and actively seeks out new ways to listen, work with diverse groups, lead, respond, and adapt. They actively engage new solutions to difficult problems so that they can meet the needs in their faith communities and the world around them in creative ways.
2. **Have excellent pastors.** These are pastors who have the desire, qualities, and skills to work collaboratively and co-responsibly with staff and parish leaders. Pastors who know how to be servant leaders, recruiting, affirming and empowering people, were frequently named as effective leaders. They have the relationship skills needed to listen, to communicate, and respond pastorally. Their adaptability allows them to meet the continuously changing context in which they find themselves.
3. **Have leadership teams.** Pastoral leaders recognize the essential contribution of the laity to the ongoing life of the church. Leadership teams, usually staff but sometimes active parishioners, share responsibility for the life of the parish with the pastor. This group, when actively collaborating with the pastor, often does creative and innovative brainstorming, can have difficult conversations, provide timely and frank feedback, and assist the pastor in making difficult decisions. The leadership team needs to be reflective of the various cultures found in the neighborhood in which the parish is located; balanced with women and men, young and the old; and open to the changing and complex nature of today's parish life.
4. **Have a holistic, compelling vision.** Pastoral leaders have a vision for parish life which includes engaging in relational ministry; fostering authentic relationships within the parish community; ensuring the proclamation of, and formation in, the Word; Worship that nurtures one's relationship with God; and Service that reaches both parishioners and the community outside the parish walls. They focus on the faith and spiritual life of adults who in turn are co-responsible for the vision and life of the community.
5. **Place a priority on the Sunday experience.** Pastoral leaders named the importance of the gathering of the community on Sunday to hear God's word, celebrate and share the Eucharist, and be sent forth in service. Parishes with vitality place a priority on the key elements of the felt experience of welcome and hospitality for all, an uplifting homily that is applicable to the daily lives of parishioners, and quality liturgical music that engages the hearts and voice of members.
6. **Foster spiritual growth and maturity.** Parishes recognize a wide multiplicity of ways in which the People of God journey to and build their relationship with Jesus. They provide a variety of opportunities or entry points for the parish. In return, they listen to and build relationships with members of the community who are proud of their parish, and who then take ownership for the life and development of the community.
7. **Live the faith in service.** The community reaches beyond the four walls of the parish to meet the spiritual, human and emotional needs of those who are marginalized, hungry, homeless, hurting, or in need. As parishes live out the call to form missionary disciples, the baptized often respond by reaching out to the less fortunate on the local, national, and international levels.

8. **Utilize online communications tools.** The parish website is the doorway – the first place that people “check out” the parish. Good, interactive, and culturally sensitive websites are critical, as well as the proper use of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Some parishes and dioceses offer short, daily video blogs or podcasts on the day’s readings, or topics of interest. Others make use of available interactive, online catechetical lessons for all ages, or even create their own online programs.

Flourishing Congregations Research (2019)

Dr. Joel Thiessen

- “What is a Flourishing Congregation.” *ADC Today*, Winter 2019.
- “What is a Flourishing Congregation? Leader Perceptions, Definitions, and Experiences.” Joel Thiessen, Arch Wong, Bill McAlpine, and Keith Walker. *Review of Religious Research*, 2018.)

Organizational Ethos

Congregations benefit when they are clear on their identity, have leaders who develop and equip other leaders, experiment and try new initiatives, and have organizational structures and processes that help them accomplish the things they believe they are called to do and be in their specific context.

- **Clear Self-Identity:** Congregations are clear on who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going. Flourishing congregations honor the particularities of their local context, they do not aim to be like the church down the road, and they are clear on their central mission.
- **Leadership:** Congregations survive and thrive with strategic leadership and by generating congregational ownership over the group’s identity, vision, and mission via leadership development.
- **Innovation:** Congregations flourish when they take risks, experiment, and think and act entrepreneurially.
- **Structures and Processes:** Organizational structures and processes should be in place to help congregations flourish, from attracting and retaining new members, to helping people grow in their spiritual life, to effective governance and organizational systems.

Internal

Flourishing congregations prioritize robust and intentional discipleship practices, laity are engaged in various facets of congregational life, hospitable communities where people are loved and cared for, and the involvement of people from diverse demographic backgrounds.

- **Discipleship:** Living out holistically the Christian identity and life. Part of fostering these habits include creating an environment for people to meaningfully experience God. Well thought out and planned liturgy to facilitate people’s experience of God. Another element of discipleship: when lives are transformed and people live differently in their day-to-day activities.
- **Hospitable Community:** Flourishing congregations are those that offer a “home” to those inside and outside of their church, where people are known by others in the congregation and can experience a safe and loving atmosphere and community.
- **Engaged Laity:** When congregants are regularly involved in the life of their local congregation.
- **Diversity:** When all members can find a home or can find an involvement (race, ethnic, social class, age, gender, and sexual orientation). Diversity extended to include space for questions, dialogue, doubt, and even disagreement. Leaders maintained that healthy conflict resolution is integral to congregational flourishing.

Outward

Congregations whose neighborhoods would notice if they were no longer there, who emphasize and practice evangelism, and who partner with other organizations to strengthen their collective capacities to accomplish shared goals.

- **Evangelism:** Reaching out to people where they live; helping them come to know the Lord, help people hear the Good News, equipping people to share their faith with others.
- **Neighborhood Involvement:** Being community-minded and having a community impact; having an incarnational presence
- **Partnerships:** Partnering with other congregations in the denomination, congregations from other Christian traditions or faith traditions, and/or civic community organizations.

Vibrant Collective Spiritual Life

A cornerstone of a congregation's identity is its value for and opportunities to develop a vibrant collective spiritual life. Flourishing congregations created opportunities for individuals to meaningfully experience God; these were centrally available to congregants in weekly services. Meaningful spiritual experiences with God leads to transformed lives. The ultimate expression of a vibrant spiritual life is a transformed personal life.

7 Marks of Congregational Vitality: Presbyterian Church USA (2019)

Vital Congregations Revitalization Initiative, Theology, Formation and Evangelism Office, Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

1. Lifelong Discipleship Formation

Lifelong Discipleship Formation is about daily life. It's about how we claim and proclaim our identity as followers of Christ. It's about how we practice our faith; how we grow in faith, cherish faith, and share faith in the world. Beyond mere words, how do people know we are disciples of Jesus Christ?

No matter the age, it's about daily seeking and living in relationship with the living God. We are called to be righteous, to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. Thus, lifelong discipleship formation is about how we live into that right relationship with God, with all God's people, and all of creation. It's about growing in the community of God's grace, the church, and interpreting faith in our everyday life; confronting brokenness and sinfulness when we fall short of the glory of God, and shining a bold light of Christ for all to see. Lifelong discipleship formation requires an awakened and engaged commitment to God, and to all people whom Christ loves. It is about the call to daily take up our cross and follow Christ.

- An intentional plan for discipleship formation of all ages; from the cradle to the grave theology (including, but not limited to, family systems and intergenerational discipleship where applicable)
- A regular practice of Bible study, prayer, and other spiritual habits, inside and outside where we gather
- Church teaches rituals and faith traditions, biblical literacy and spiritual practices to all members
- Church equips and empowers all people to interpret faith in daily life. It engages in, not hides from, difficult conversations of society and cultures today. (i.e.. sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and all other "isms" that divide)
- Fostered environments of diversity which help enhance and deeply enrich biblical study, worship, and communal life

2. Intentional Authentic Evangelism

Evangelism is simply sharing the Good News. It is authentic and it is intentional, not merely expressions of kindness or good moral ethics. We all have Good News to share in our lives; it is a part of our identity. And when we share this news, it is with intentionality and with people with whom we have relationships. We don't have to be trained to share the good news of a new job, baby or puppy! We simply share what is beautiful and dear to us. Therefore, evangelism must be connected to lifelong Christian formation. It is through intentional spiritual practices in the faith community that we meld God's story with our story, and we share that story with people in our daily lives.

- To recognize that all disciples are called to Evangelism, not just committees and leaders; it is an authentic part of their life
- To empower and equip all people to enter relationships unashamed and unafraid to share the Good News
- The church recognizes that evangelism should be need-based (meets needs of un-churched/de-churched)
- The church develops practices for people to share their story and give witness to Good News in their lives

3. Outward Incarnational Focus

If discipleship formation is about learning/understanding/living the Good News, and authentic evangelism is about intentionally sharing the Good News in relationships, then outward incarnation

is about not limiting where and to whom we share the Good News. Outward incarnational focus is about being the gathered community of Christ sent out! We go not because we have a strategy for new membership; we go because we have a Savior who commanded us to be on God's mission. We go because God's saving love in Christ, cannot be inwardly contained in our buildings when we live with neighbors in need and a hurting world. The Good News is meant to transform and transcend. The church is meant to be a beacon of Christ's grace, justice, freedom, and love. Outward incarnational focus means we daily take up our cross and follow to the marginalized of society, the poor among us, the suffering and sick, the stranger and enemy, the down-trodden and "the least of these." We do not just focus on bringing similar or like-minded people inside to assimilate to our way of doing things; nor do we just go to people and places that are familiar and comfortable. Outward incarnational focus, requires an emboldened faith, that goes because Christ is already present, and calls us to join.

- Conduct community analysis to ascertain the needs, fears, hopes, and pressure points in the community, so that the church's ministry and mission can address them.
- The church practices genuine hospitality (more than being warm and friendly, it is about attempting to anticipate the needs of others; practicing inclusion; stepping out of the comfort zone; loving and nurturing others; it's about them, not you)
- Join on Christ's mission with the lost, weak, suffering, lowly, least, marginalized, oppressed, outcast; working towards forgiveness and reconciliation
- Faithful engagement in rich relationships of all diversity
- Church becomes a living being sent to follow the Spirit and join where Christ is already present; not still/static

4. Empowering Servant Leadership

All people of God, in the image of Christ, are given fruit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts meant for building up the Church. In this way, we are all called to serve the Lord, to do our part in membership of the body of Christ. Every part is necessary. Every part is valuable, and every voice is important. Every person should be equipped, nurtured, and supported to use their gifts to glorify God, through servant leadership; not just cliques of powerful people or continual burnout of the same leaders. In keeping with true discipleship formation, churches are called to help all members to be empowered to use their gifts in servant leadership. And, God calls and equips some for the particular task of pastoral ministry, which must be cultivated, nurtured and trained. Ministry can never be about a single pastor, but it is about identifying, equipping and empowering those servant leaders God puts in our midst.

- The church encourages members, when appropriate, to be "ministers" (priesthood of all believers)
- The congregation provides tools and a healthy environment to train and support leaders
- The staff and other leaders model servant leadership principles
- Develop methods in which voices, ideas, opinions are shared; people are empowered in their faith
- Congregation assists people in discerning spiritual gifts for use in service to church and community

5. Spirit-Inspired Worship

Spirit-Inspired worship is a gift of God's wonder! Six days we labor and toil, and on this Holy Sabbath day we get to come into the presence of God; we get to encounter the awesome mystery of the God who longs to be known in relationship with us. We worship, because through prayer and supplication, through the Word proclaimed and the sacraments celebrated, through the songs of praise and passing of peace — God meets us there. Worship is our lifeline to the Holy God. Our worship should be active participation into the living relationship with the triune God; thus, all should feel welcome and have a place. Worship should challenge, teach, transform, convict, and call us into deeper relationship with God and one another; not gratify our comforts and entertain our desires. Worship is an encounter with God that we understand and do not

understand. It is an act filled with mystery and awe, but in worship we have the opportunity to express our deepest desires to God and listen for God's voice. In worship, we also experience the call to serve and be in mission.

- Prayerful discernment of members actively participating in all aspects of planning and leading worship
- There is thoughtful and sound biblical preaching
- Intentional worship does not cling to rituals, but is open to filling sacred space with new rituals
- Engages all people, of all diversity, and enables them to be active participants in the experience
- Creates space for peoples' stories; not afraid of silence
- Communal connectivity to one another, and connection to God
- Challenges and sends the people of God beyond their pew into daily life
- There should be awe, expectation, and anticipation in coming into the presence of God

6. Caring Relationships

Caring relationships seems an easy mark of vitality. We all want a place to belong; people who care about us. Many congregations would argue: "this is why we come together; we welcome and care for each other." Yet, caring relationships in Christ requires true agape love; a sacrificial, self-emptying, perfect love. Although we are imperfect, it is about striving to see all people the way Christ sees them; not from judgments or preconceived perceptions. It is about helping walk with others, responding to their needs, desiring their well-being. It is about walking with people in tragedy, and rejoicing in their triumphs. Caring relationships of God is about allowing people to be real in their stories, without hiding or holding back, and loving every imperfect part of them. Church should be the one place where the God who already knows, encounters our honest confession, and allows us to give testimony. It should be the place where conflicts are confronted, crucial conversations of forgiveness and reconciliation are had, and people of God are transformed by agape-love. Caring relationships is about vulnerability and trust. It is about meeting all people of God where they are, and sharing our One Savior, Jesus Christ. Caring relationships don't come through hospitality and welcoming committees, they come through a carefully cultivated environment that is genuine and sincere in being the household of God.

- Cultivates an environment of true caring relationships through genuine opportunities to share testimony
- The church seeks to strengthen ties within the household of God; fostering relationships between demographics, with members on the margin, people who are missing or who have been hurt
- The church seeks to build and rebuild relationships of conflict or strain; clear process of conflict resolution
- The church develops caring relationships in the neighborhood and community (i.e. other churches, community organizations, health and human services, advocacy groups, presbytery)
- Evaluate and envision ways of sharing the love of Christ in new relationships

7. Ecclesial Health

Ecclesial health is about: 1) Why we gather as a church community 2) How we practice being church together. It is about whether our mission, vision, and values match up with the ways we live together. It requires continual attentiveness, awareness, and assessment in asking "are we who we say we are?" And more importantly, "are we who God is calling us to be?" Prayer and discernment are at the heart of ecclesial health! There are several factors to ecclesial health: prayerful discernment, decision-making process, health of pastors, stewardship of budget and resources, clarity in mission and ministries. Ecclesial health is about the people of God having a clear purpose; all people are stake-holders invested in being a part of this community of faith. There are shared core values, a clear mission, and commitment and loyalty to the

life we gather in as church. Yet, they also know that this is a living faith. So, they dare to dream and understand that change is inevitable. With ecclesial health, there is joy and gratitude in coming together; people, not programs or properties are valued. People gather and are sent to be Christ's Church.

- A communal life centered on prayer and discernment of God's will
- Clarity in Vision, Mission, Core Values; budget reflects these core principles
- Continual attentiveness, awareness and assessment to mission and practices of being church
- Pastor(s) and staff are regularly evaluated using best practices
- Pastor(s) and staff, all servant leaders, are nurtured and supported in health; clear expectations
- Stewardship and tithing are taught year-round; accountable giving in gratitude
- Transparent in spending; continual discernment of budget sustainability
- All are stakeholders, committed to fiscal responsibilities, active participation, and necessary voices in envisioning, dreaming, and decision-making

Vital Congregations (2018)

Linda Bobbit

American Congregations 2018, Faith Communities Today

Spiritually vital congregations are places where people come together for a common purpose of divine origin. The divine may be experienced through personal spiritual experiences, through encounters with others in their faith community, and through people outside their congregation. It is the recognition of the divine origin of their purpose that sets faith communities apart from other benevolent or social organizations (e.g. nonprofits, social action groups, social clubs, etc.).

Respondents further agreed that in spiritually vital congregations, people experience the divine in ways that are transformative. The common divine purpose and transformative experience compel the people to authentically engage both within the congregation and the world around them. In this way, transformation within individuals gives life and energy to the larger faith community which is itself transformed. A transformed faith community transforms the world around them. Without this kind of multi-layered transformation, the congregation seems inauthentic.

Low vitality congregations have people who participate minimally. People engaged in this way are primarily asking "How can the congregation or God help me?". When they re-enter the world, they may feel comforted or refreshed, but their way of viewing and engaging with the world has not changed. The line between the two worlds is thick. This is the kind of experience many respondents called "inauthentic".

In high vitality congregations, people are drawn deeper into their faith and/or community in ways that transform their perspective about themselves and the world around them. When they re-enter the world, they see things in a new light (some would say they see the world from God's perspective) and this changes how they view and engage the world around them. People begin asking "How can I help God?" and they take steps to change the world around them. In doing so, the line between the congregation and the rest of the world may be blurred if not eliminated.

What Helps a Congregation's Vitality?

For a congregation to shift from minimal to deep engagement, several things must be present. Leadership, relationships and practices were described as key to creating and sustaining a vital congregation.

Relationships

Building strong, respectful and loving relationships among members, and between leaders and members was key in every faith community. Most faith traditions also emphasized the importance of building relationships between the congregation and community around them. While some traditions emphasized mercy ministries (giving from the congregation to society), others focused on building more mutual relationships where both congregation and society gave and received from one another and worked toward common purposes. How respondents viewed their relationship with the world had to do with how they understood God's vision for the world and expectations of them.

Leadership

The role of leaders varies considerably across faith traditions. Quakers have no designated leader, but do designate a clerk who records and reflects back meeting notes with the group. Other traditions use trained lay leadership to teach and lead spiritual practices and discussions (e.g. Latter-day Saints and Baha'i), whereas some traditions ordain professional leaders (e.g. protestant denominations, Jewish and Orthodox). Traditions with professional leaders more often looked to those leaders as the agents that would engage their congregation to create or sustain vitality. Those without professional leaders were more likely to look toward the collective congregation "we" as people with agency.

While the role and qualifications of leaders varies, similar traits were named across traditions. Leaders should be capable of sharing vision and building consensus or motivation and be willing to experiment and try new things (within the restrictions of the tradition). They should have an attitude of servanthood and humility, be trustworthy, patient, loving, good listeners, and work well with others. They should be committed to developing their own spiritual lives and experience a strong sense of God's call to them to be leaders. Leaders were expected to model spiritual practices and appropriate behavior.

Practices

Each tradition had a variety of practices designed to cultivate faith and action among members. Some traditions emphasized spiritual practices to form deeper faith which would hopefully turn into action. Other traditions focused on taking action in the neighborhood or world outside the congregation. Most faith traditions did a combination of the two. Participating in worship, scripture studies, small groups, personal prayer, etc. were common ways for people to go deeper into their faith. Volunteering in the community (with or without other congregants), speaking out for justice and sharing faith with others were some of the ways people lived out their faith in the world. It was understood that participating in either or both of these activities not only expressed faith, but also deepened it.

One of the most interesting findings of this study was the degree of agreement, across faith traditions, about what it means to be spiritually vital and what things contribute to promote or damage that vitality. Spiritually vital congregations are those that come together for a divine common purpose in ways that are transformative to the people within them and to their communities.

Congregational Vitality Project (2017)

Linda Bobbit (ELCA)

Domains

Vital congregations have life-changing relationships with God, one another and their community. Research shows that the following areas are important to a congregation's vitality.

God's Presence

Leaders experience God's active presence in the congregation. Leaders can articulate how God shows up and works in and through the congregation and its people.

Mission/Purpose

The congregation has a clear understanding of God's larger mission and the purpose for their church in this time and place. The congregation can articulate that purpose and has a specific plan to implement.

Leadership

Pastor, lay leadership, and unofficial leaders- Their skills, personalities, overall health (physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, etc.) are strong and match the current mission.

Relationships

Relationships among leadership, pastor & staff, and the congregation create loving community with good communication. People work together respectfully through disagreements.

Attitudes/Culture

Mission orientation (Mission is the driving force behind everything the church does.), willingness to change to achieve mission, sense of ownership, belonging/ commitment, level of engagement, and interest in embracing local community

Local Context

Congregation has mutual (2 way) relationships with its neighbors and is an important part of and partner with the community where it is located.

Resources

There is adequate money, facilities, equipment, technology, and people power support missional activities

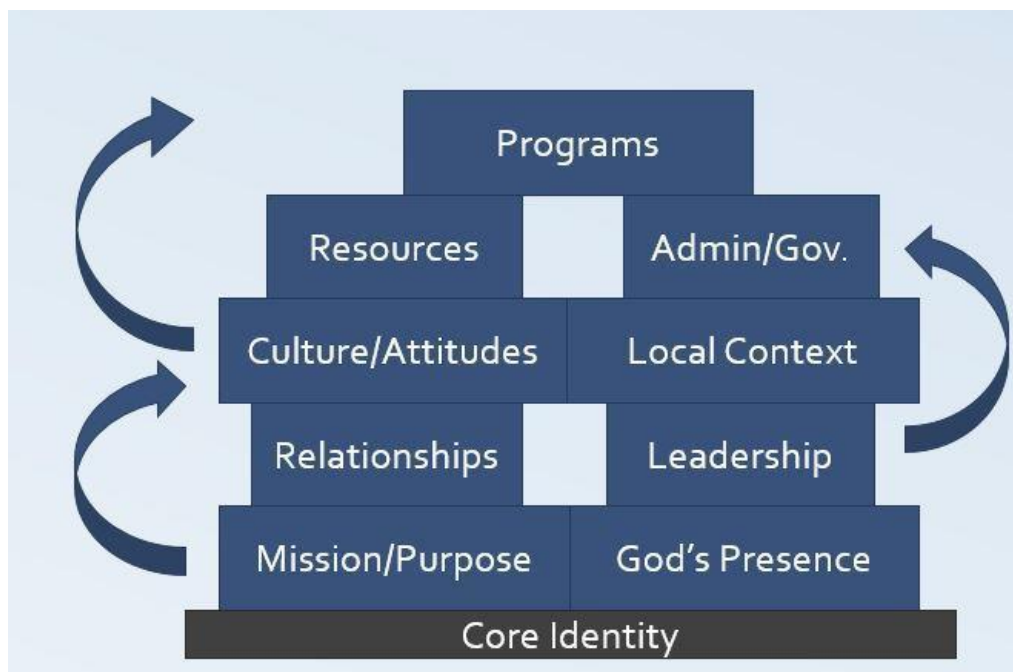
Governance & Administration

Decision making, administration of finances, and personnel management support missional activities

Programs

The things a congregation does, it does well. May include: worship, fellowship, faith formation, prayer, youth/ young adult ministries, evangelism, outreach, stewardship, etc.

Jenga Theory of Vitality



While all domains are important to vitality, they do not all have the same impact. Domains work like Jenga blocks (the game with blocks that stack crosswise). Lower domains are a foundation for others, influencing the way higher domains are lived out. The bottom blocks of Mission/Purpose (*What is God's purpose for our congregation?*) and God's Presence (*What is God doing here and now?*) set the tone for the congregation's culture and how it relates to the local community. That culture and those relationships determine the kinds of programs that are developed or emphasized by the congregation. The alternating row of leadership and the relationships drive how resources are managed. Layers also interact with the adjoining blocks.

The alternating pattern allows congregations to improve or change some things without toppling the structure. Over the years every congregation experiences changes. Missions evolve as people and pastors come and go. All the while, the tower can hold strong on a firm foundation built on a sense of God's presence and mission.

The core identity of your congregation is the table upon which everything sits. This describes the deep, often unspoken "why" behind your congregation. This why frames the way God's mission and presence are understood.

Four Essential Practices of Great Catholic Parishes (2016)

William E. Simon Jr. (Ave Maria Press, 2016)

Essential Practice Number One: Great Parishes Share Leadership

One thing that came through loud and clear in our research is that shared leadership is fundamental to the success of today's flourishing parish. Indeed, four out of five of the pastors we interviewed said they used some form of shared leadership. Leadership in ministry that is truly shared does not happen simply because people work together or cooperate with one another in some way. It is a gradual and mutual evolution of new patterns. The shift to shared leadership represents a marked change from the traditional Lone Ranger model of pastoring. Teamwork and communication between clergy and lay leaders become essential to decision-making processes. The pastors we interviewed who share leadership take pride in their strong, professional staffs and volunteers and are intentional and creative about how they go about it. We identified three styles of leadership sharing among them: Collaborative, Delegative, and Consultative. Many pastors combined these styles, using one style over another depending on the situation, but most had a dominant tendency toward one of them.

Essential Practice Number Two: Great Parishes Foster Spiritual Maturity and Plan for Discipleship

Our second foundational practice has to do with the spiritual formation and discipleship of parishioners. Over ninety percent of our pastors considered the spiritual growth of their people to be the strongest characteristic of their communities, while at the same time, seventy percent saw a need for continued improvement in this area. This is not a contradiction. Spiritual growth is a journey, not a destination, and it was of paramount concern to the pastors we interviewed. They set spiritual growth as an explicit goal for the parish community, and actively look for ways to address the spiritual hungers of their people. Most importantly, they understand that spiritual growth, or disciple-making, requires dedicated resources as surely as raising a new building does. So they allocate both the financial and the human resources required to implement spiritual growth initiatives.

The initial step in disciple-making is the decision to align all programming and training in such a way that every parish opportunity begins and ends with encountering Christ. For some pastors and their catechetical teams, success began through reimagining and overhauling traditional religious education programs. Other pastors began with small groups.

But the goal of nurturing discipleship development is not a set-it-and-forget-it kind of goal. A parish culture that revolves around inviting individuals to take the next step in their relationship with Jesus Christ requires a certain amount of patience and flexibility on the part of parish leadership because, once articulated, the goal of encouraging discipleship must continually be revisited and adapted to address the various and evolving stages of faith developing in their parishioners.

One side benefit to leadership's strategic commitment to the ongoing spiritual growth of the community is the strong impact these deepened disciples have on their parishes. They develop a greater connection to the parish, are more committed to its spiritual health, more likely to invite outsiders to parish events, and more inclined to give generously of their time, talent, and treasure.

Essential Practice Number Three: Great Parishes Excel on Sundays

The third area that came up in many of our interviews is the experience a church attender has when he or she comes to Mass on Sunday. In Great Catholic Parishes you will find data and quotes from pastors describing the importance of good music, well-crafted homilies, and a warm welcome to all. One of our pastors referred to this as: Hymns, Homilies, and Hospitality. Here are some of the highlights.

- Hymns: When it comes to music there is no optimal style. It varies from place to place. Good music requires financial investment in both equipment and the best musicians a parish can afford.
- Homilies: This is the most critical piece of all. Our pastors are disciplined and carve out large chunks of time to prepare their homilies. One standard we heard in our interviews was that every minute of preaching required one hour of preparation. One experienced pastor interviewed remarked that he could now prepare his homily in about half that time.
- Hospitality: Sunday morning hospitality begins long before the weekend. You might say it begins with the parish website where people feel welcomed and drawn by an active, vital community. For many parishioners it begins when they pull into the parking lot, where someone in the parish welcomes them. Young children are invited to a separate Children's Liturgy of the Word and friendly people are clearly present to welcome and answer your questions.

Essential Practice Number Four: Great Parishes Evangelize

Almost fifty percent of the pastors we interviewed consider evangelization to be a strength of their parish. Others are beginning to take the concept of invitation beyond the door of the church to the local neighborhood and to the world at large. More than half of the pastors (58.6%) have evangelization in their sight, but reported that their efforts need further development. One of our pastors put it this way: "We can no longer leave the light on for people; we now have to bring the light to them."

Many of the parishes interviewed have changed the culture of their parish in order to become intentional, evangelizing parishes. As it is sometimes said, they have moved from maintenance to mission. This is not a change in doctrine; it is a change in attitude. It is extraordinarily difficult for a culture of invitation to take root if only a few scattered individuals are willing to move toward a more evangelical outlook. Scale is important, meaning that the whole parish community needs to be on board to keep evangelization afloat.

Evangelizing parishes disciple parishioners through homilies, listening sessions, small groups, Bible studies, and other opportunities that deepen discipleship as well as encourage parishioners to discuss their faith, which makes them more at ease about sharing it with others. They are also intentional about creating easy entry points for people outside of the church community who are searching.

What it Takes to Be a Vital Church (2016)

Bishop Bruce Ough and Susan Nienaber (Congregational Consulting Group)

(<https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/what-takes-vital-church>)

While much has been written by other authors about how to become a more vital congregation our experience suggests that there are several key practices that when combined will produce some level of results in nearly any size congregation. This isn't a recipe or a checklist because the leadership challenge is that each congregation is different and each mission field is unique. Great leadership is the ability to contextualize. Rather, it's about how clergy and lay leaders focus their time and energies. When these 6 things are prioritized we see results.

1. A Vital Church has an Apostolic Culture

A vital congregation has to have strong leaders who create a culture and passion to reach new people. While congregations need to think strategically, technical solutions will only carry them so far. There has to be a passion to reach the persons who have been left behind, unreached and on the margins. In the New Testament we read that Jesus had persons who followed him and learned from him. However, it wasn't until he turned them outward—to go ahead of him to pronounce that the Kingdom had arrived, to heal and bless, to bring others into a life-changing relationship—that the shift happened. He moved them from being disciples to being apostles. A vital church is constantly figuring out who will be the next person to reach. Instead of caring for the 30 that already attend how do we reach the 300 who need us in our mission field? Without that kind of culture, a church won't get momentum, nor will people find compelling reasons to support that church.

2. A Vital Church is Committed to Excellence

We certainly know churches that have settled for mediocrity, but this is no longer good enough. We have to be purposeful and believe that we can offer excellence, because God's love is excellent and extravagant. We must model God's extravagant grace. Excellence inspires confidence, trust and loyalty. A commitment to excellence leads a congregation to focus on its strengths—what it can do well. What is the signature ministry that allows the congregation to be known and recognized in its community? We often mistakenly believe that excellence means expensive. But the burning desire to do things well doesn't mean that programs or outreach ministries have to be expensive.

3. A Vital Church is Culturally Relevant

Churches that are vital have figured how to speak to their mission field. They know who they are trying to reach and know the tools for reaching that population. Many congregations now are figuring out how to do this. Instead of being judgmental about the current realities (i.e. "Why do the schools schedule practices and other activities on Sunday mornings?"), vital churches find creative ways to use their surrounding culture as a means to attract. Blaming the culture around us because it has changed often becomes an excuse to give up and die.

This doesn't mean we don't have standards as people of faith. We aren't just going to be completely molded by the culture. Rather, it means we are willing to understand and use cultural doorways to help us reach out and be heard. Being narrow and dogmatic doesn't help us be relevant. Yet, we don't have to throw out the theological standards of our traditions. We just need to approach the culture in a way so that we don't make the cultural issues the problem. We allow the culture to inform how we make tactical decisions. Our theology gives us our large guiding principles; tactics allow us to speak to the culture around us. We can be mission-driven, but we need hands-on projects to engage folks in a culturally sensitive way.

4. Vital Churches Reach Children and Families

Vital congregations are committed to reaching the children of their communities and the people who care for them. When we walk away from kids or buy into the myth that there are no children in church anymore or settle into the myth that these community kids are not “our kids,” we become a dying church. We can minister to the children in our communities in a multitude of ways. When the traditional Sunday School movement began, we clearly had an understanding of the church’s role in educating and nurturing kids. It wasn’t all about our own biological children. We then entered into a season when we shifted into caring for our own kids, and then we aged out and stopped biologically having our own kids. Vital congregations quickly determine and allocate their resources to at least one ministry to children. This is not devaluing the seniors in our congregations, but rather a return to generational balance.

5. A Vital Church Engages in Faith Formation

Vital churches are spiritually alive. They are not social clubs or places where business meetings dominate. Folks have to be invited to grow in their relationship with God and to understand what it means to be a disciple and how to pray.

6. Vital Congregations Develop Exceptional Clergy and Lay Leadership Teams

Every vital congregation has clergy who are committed to developing lay leadership and equipping the saints for ministry. Clergy must understand that developing strong lay leaders is a primary task of their ministry. Growing the core lay leadership team and being committed to leaving a legacy of leadership strength is essential. Vital congregations develop exceptional teams where lay leaders understand their roles, but they build those teams in order to help every person be all that God has gifted them to be. We want all of our laity to be free to be all that God has called them to be. We can’t use the warm-body approach to nominating members for service and we can’t afford to put people in areas where they can’t thrive.

Three Marks of Healthy Congregations (2017)

David Brubaker (Congregational Consulting Group)

(<https://www.congregationalconsulting.org/three-marks-of-healthy-congregations>)

1. Healthy Congregations Have a Clear and Shared Center.

“Identity is vital not only for internal unity but also for our engagement with others outside of our congregations.” A shared purpose is equally important, as it provides a “social glue” for members who can work or serve together even when their beliefs are not entirely congruent. In practical terms, this means that congregational leaders need to pay more attention to the “center” or core of the congregation than they do to maintaining the boundaries. A congregation’s core is often expressed through its written statements of vision, mission and values—and even more so, is lived out through its behaviors. A congregation whose stated mission is to “welcome ALL who wish to worship God and serve others” will create welcoming norms and practices that help all who come to indeed feel welcomed.

2. Healthy Congregations Have Clear but Permeable Boundaries.

While healthy congregations focus far more on their core than on their periphery, they are also aware that there are boundaries that determine what it means to “belong” to the congregation. A completely undefined congregation will have no meaningful boundaries, while at the other extreme a “cult” will have very rigid boundaries. A healthy congregation, by contrast, is clear about membership expectations but also anticipates that participants will both come and leave. It thus creates rituals to welcome those who come and to recognize those who leave.

Aside from the formal “membership standards” that exist for most congregations, the far more important informal “congregational culture” shapes the behavior of members and creates a unique congregational body. Congregational culture is determined by the geographic location, the founding personalities, the historic experiences, and the denominational affiliation of the congregation—along with the composition of its current membership. Creating a welcoming culture will usually require a deliberate decision on the part of congregational leaders to look critically at the congregation’s culture and make adaptive changes.

3. Healthy Congregations Focus Outward Not Just Inward.

While effective congregational leaders monitor their congregation’s culture and model an attitude of welcoming, they also pay attention to the multiple environments in which the congregation is located. Most important is the local community in which the congregation is located, and the strengths and challenges of that community. A healthy congregation recognizes that it is both a reflection of and a resource to the community where it resides, and its leaders invest time in understanding and serving that community.

Characteristics of Congregational Vitality (2015)

(“Congregational Vitality and Ministerial Excellence” – United Church of Christ)

Connection to God

- Faith formation and spiritual growth
- Sense of mission
- Growing spiritually
- Meaningful worship
- Looking to the future
- Alive and growing in faith
- Vital and nurturing worship
- Clear and owned vision
- Spiritually and vitally alive
- Innovative, reverent worship
- Intentional faith development
- Passionate worship
- Sense of purpose/clarity
- Passionate spirituality
- Inspiring worship services
- Discernment/reflection/contemplation
- Worship/beauty

Connection to Each Other

- Healthy Christian community
- Participating in the congregation
- Having a sense of belonging
- Caring for children and youth
- Empowering leadership
- Strong and growing sense of belonging
- Inspiring and empowering leadership
- Imaginative and flexibly innovative
- Active focus on families
- Absence of serious conflict
- Extravagant generosity
- Mature interaction
- Healing capacities/mood and tone
- Appraise and manage conflict
- Gift-based ministry
- Holistic small groups
- Empowering leadership
- Loving relationships
- Healing
- Diversity

Connection to the World

- Social outreach and evangelism
- Welcoming and accepting newcomers
- Focusing on the community
- Sharing faith
- Welcoming new people
- Practice and diverse service

- Willing and effective faith sharing
- Intentional and welcoming inclusion
- Working for social justice/moral beacon in the community
- Engaging evangelism or recruitment
- Risk-taking mission and service
- Radical hospitality
- Focus on resources
- Need-oriented evangelism
- Justice
- Testimony
- Hospitality

16 Drivers of Vital Congregations (2013)

United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church conducted a study of 33,000 churches and found that nearly 5,000 over five year period were growing and engaging a greater percentage of their membership in worship and ministry. The study further examined these churches and found they shared at least 16 ministries/ strategies in common. The study called them “drivers of vitality,” and indicated that if churches worked on all 16, they would move toward vitality or become more vital. The 16 ministries/strategies can be grouped into four areas:

Engagement of disciples in small groups and the number of ministries for children and youth

1. Vital churches have more small groups for all ages.
2. Vital churches have more programs for children.
3. Vital churches have more programs for youth.

Lay leadership

4. Vital churches focus on increasing the effectiveness of lay leaders (understand their role and carrying these roles out effectively).
5. Vital churches have lay leaders who demonstrate a vital personal faith (regular worship, intentional spiritual growth, personal devotional life, and giving of financial resources).
6. Vital churches place an emphasis on rotating lay leadership in order to involve more people over time.
7. Vital churches call, equip, use and support more lay leaders than non-vital churches. (Twenty percent or more of their worship attendees describe themselves as current or past leaders in their church).

Pastor

8. Vital pastors give attention to developing, coaching, and mentoring lay leadership to enable laity to increase their ability to carry out ministry.
9. Vital pastors use their influence to increase the participation of others in order to accomplish changes in the church.
10. Vital pastors motivate the congregation to set and achieve significant goals through effective leadership.
11. Vital pastors inspire the congregation through preaching.
12. Vital pastors, when they are serving effectively, stay for a longer period of time. (Short-term appointments of effective pastors decrease the vitality of a congregation).

Worship

13. Vital churches offer a mix of contemporary (newer forms of worship style) and traditional services.
14. Vital churches have preachers who tend to use more topical sermon series in traditional services.
15. Vital churches use more contemporary music (less blended music that includes traditional tunes) in contemporary services.
16. Vital churches use more multi-media in contemporary services (Some congregations in other parts of the world may have limited access or do not use multi-media to the same extent and therefore it may not be as important as it is in some cultures.)

While the study noted that vital churches give more to mission, some have noticed that other types of mission engagement and outreach are not listed as proven “drivers.” This is because, during the past, we have not collected this data consistently across the UMC and therefore the research could not quantitatively substantiate mission engagement. But, in conversations with vital congregations, they tell us that this is an important aspect of their ministry. Directly related to the giving to mission is in all matters fostering a spirit of generosity both giving and serving in individuals and in congregations. It also should be noted that while

the study alludes to spiritual vitality in the faith of the laity and the inspirational leadership of clergy, one should not see these ministries/strategies as mechanical operations. Rather, they are undergirded or enlivened by a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ.

44 Faith Assets - Exemplary Youth Ministry Study (2010)

Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry. Rollie Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto. EYM Publications, 2010.

One of the most important contributions of the Exemplary Youth Ministry Study is the identification of 44 “Faith Assets” that contribute to the development of a vital Christian faith in young people. The Faith Assets are elements or building blocks that constitute a framework for developing faith in young people. The study points to these 44 elements as ways and means through which congregations have over time built their capacities to influence the faith and lives of young people.

Part 1. Congregational Faith & Qualities

Congregational Faith

1. God’s Living Presence: possesses a sense of God’s living presence in community, at worship, through study, and in service
2. Centrality of Faith: recognizes and participates in God’s sustaining and transforming life and work
3. Emphasizes Prayer: practices the presence of God as individuals and community through prayer and worship
4. Focus on Discipleship: committed to know and following Jesus Christ
5. Emphasizes Scripture: values the authority of Scripture in its life and mission
6. Centrality of Mission: consistently witnesses, serves and promotes moral responsibility, and seeks justice

Congregational Qualities

7. Supports Youth Ministry: youth and ministry with young people are high priorities
8. Demonstrates Hospitality: values and welcomes all people, especially youth
9. Strives for Excellence: sets high standards, evaluates, and engages in continuous improvement
10. Encourages Thinking: welcomes questions and reflection on faith and life
11. Creates Community: reflects high quality personal and group relationships
12. Encourages Support Groups: engages members in study, conversation, and prayer about faith in daily life
13. Promotes Worship: expands and renews spirit-filled, uplifting worship through the congregation’s life
14. Fosters Ethical Responsibility: encourages individual and social moral responsibility
15. Promotes Service: sponsors outreach, service projects, and cultural immersions both locally and globally
16. Demonstrates Effective Practices: engages in a wide variety of ministry practices and activities

Youth Involvement in the Congregation

17. Participate in the Congregation: youth are engaged in a wide spectrum of congregational relationships and practices
18. Assume Ministry Leadership: youth are invited, equipped and affirmed for leadership in congregational activities

Part 2. Youth Ministry Qualities

19. Establishes a Caring Environment: provides multiple nurturing relationships and activities resulting in a welcoming atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging
20. Develops Quality Relationship: develops authentic relationships among youth and adults establishing an environment of presence and life engagement
21. Focus on Jesus Christ: the life and ministry of Jesus inspires the ministry’s mission, practices, and relationships
22. Considers Life Issues: the full range of young people’s lives is valued and addressed

23. Uses Many Approaches: intentionally, creatively employs multiple activities appropriate to the ministry's mission and context
24. Organized Well: engages participants and leaders in long range planning, implementation, evaluation and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations

Part 3. Family / Household Faith

25. Possess Strong Parental Faith: parent(s) possess and practice a vital and informed faith
26. Promotes Family Faith Practices: parents engage youth and family in conversations, prayer, bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life
27. Reflects Family Harmony: expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith
28. Equips Parents: offers instruction and guidance that nurture parental faith and equips parents for nurturing faith at home
29. Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships: offers parent-youth activities that strengthen parent-youth relationships

Part 4. Leadership

Leadership of the Pastor

30. Spiritual Influence: knows and models the transforming presence of God in life and ministry
31. Interpersonal Competence: builds a sense of community and relates well with adults and youth
32. Supports Youth Ministry: understands, guides, and advocates for youth ministry
33. Supports Leaders: affirms and mentors youth and adults leading youth ministry

The Leadership of the Youth Minister

34. Provides Competent Leadership: reflects superior theological, theoretical, and practical knowledge and skill in leadership
35. Models Faith: is a role model reflecting a living faith for youth and adults
36. Mentors Faith Life: assists adult leaders and youth in their faith life both one-on-one and in groups
37. Develops Teams: reflects clear vision and attracts gifted youth and adults into leadership
38. Knows Youth: knows youth and changes in youth culture and utilizes these understandings in ministry
39. Establishes Effective Relationships: enjoys effective relationships with youth, parents, volunteers, and staff.

Youth and Adult Leadership

40. Equip for Peer Ministry: youth practice friendship, care-giving, and outreach supported by training and caring adults
41. Establish Adult-Youth Mentoring: adults engage youth in faith and life supported by informed leadership
42. Participate in Training: evaluate and equip youth and adults for ministry in an atmosphere of high expectations
43. Possess Vibrant Faith: youth and adult leaders possess and practice a vital and informed faith
44. Competent Adult Volunteers: foster authentic relationships and effective practices with youth within a clear vision strengthen by training and support

10 Strengths of US Congregations: 2008 Congregational Life Survey

(A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations; www.uscongregations.org)

1. **Growing Spiritually:** Worshipers are growing in their faith and feel the congregation meets their spiritual needs.
2. **Meaningful Worship:** Worshipers experience God's presence, joy, inspiration, and awe in worship services and feel worship helps them with everyday life.
3. **Participation in the Congregation:** Worshipers attend services weekly and are involved in the congregation.
4. **Sense of Belonging:** Worshipers have a strong sense of belonging and say most of their closest friends attend the same congregation.
5. **Caring for Children and Youth:** Worshipers are satisfied with the offerings for children and youth and have children living at home who also attend there.
6. **Focusing on the Community:** Worshipers are involved in social service or advocacy activities and work to make their community a better place to live.
7. **Sharing Faith:** Worshipers are involved in evangelism activities and invite friends or relatives to worship.
8. **Welcoming New People:** Worshipers began attending in the past five years.
9. **Empowering Leadership:** Worshipers feel the congregation's leaders inspire others to action and take in account worshipers ideas.
10. **Looking to the Future:** Worshipers feel committed to the congregation's vision and are excited about the congregation's future.

Catholic Parish Vitality Indicators (2008)

Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project (<http://www.emergingmodels.org/article.cfm?id=28>)
(Indicators rated on a 1-7 scale with "7" being the highest score. All items listed below are 5.0 and higher.)

Liturgy

- The preaching at our parish connects Scripture to daily life and inspires Christian living. (5.81)
- The liturgies at our parish are prayerful, reverent, and spiritually moving. (5.66)
- The music at our liturgies inspires prayer and worship of God. (5.43)
- Our parishioners participate fully and consciously in the celebration of the liturgy. (5.26)

Responding to the Needs of People

- Our parish attends to the needs of the sick, homebound and bereaved. (5.79)

Pastoral Leadership:

- Our pastor and pastoral staff are energized and enthusiastic about their ministry (5.70)
- Our parish effectively communicates information about ministries, activities, and events. (5.54)
- Our parish recruits and retains high quality parish staff. (5.28)
- Our parish invests in the ongoing training and formation of the pastor and pastoral staff. (5.06)

Caring Community

- Our parish is engaged in outreach to the poor. (5.63)
- Our parish is a supportive community where people care for one another. (5.52)

Collaboration

- Our pastor and pastoral staff work together as a team, where members are empowered to use their gifts to advance the mission of the Church. (5.51)
- Members of our parish pastoral council collaborate with each other and the pastor. (5.43)

Parishioner Involvement:

- Our parish offers a wide variety of opportunities for parishioners to become involved in parish life and ministry. (5.42)
- Parishioners are personally invited to engage in parish leadership and ministry. (5.35)

Prayer and Spirituality:

- Our parish is spiritually vital and alive. (5.38)
- Our parishioners are spiritually prepared to live the gospel in their daily lives. (5.13)

Parish Mission and Vision:

- Parish leadership consults parishioners in decisions that affect parish life. (5.13)

The Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice (2006)

Diana Butler Bass

- *Christianity for the Rest of Us—How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*. Diana Butler Bass. Harper One, 2006
- *Nomads to Pilgrims—Stories from Practicing Congregations*. Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Stewart-Sicking, editors. Alban Institute, 2006.
- *The Practicing Congregation—Imaging a New Old Church*. Diana Butler Bass and Joseph Stewart-Sicking, editors. Alban Institute, 2004.

The congregations studied have found new vitality (visibility, spiritual depth, renewed identity and mission, and often, numerical growth) through an intentional and reflexive engagement with Christian tradition as embodied in the practices of faith, with the goal of knowing God.

Overall Pattern

- These congregations practice Christianity in ways that are dynamic and organic, reconstructing tradition in terms of experience and wisdom rather than programs and absolutes.
- Much of the vitality has arisen from participants (many of whom are newcomers) who conceive of Christianity as a journey or subjective question to “find home” or “authentic faith” that is deepened by forming relationships with others on similar quests and engaging the wisdom of those who have gone before (i.e., tradition and history).
- These congregations emphasize contemplation in action, faith in daily life, finding God in all things, the reign of God in the here and now, and creating better communities; by joining spirituality to social concerns, they are constructing a theological alternative to both conservative evangelicalism and class Protestant liberalism.

A Romantic Impulse

- Most of the congregations express strong interest in ancient sources, tradition, and history, mining those sources for practices, models, and insights that bear on their personal lives and communities.
- Tradition is understood as something to be flexible and fluid, something that contemporary Christians participate in (rather than simply inherit).
- Worship, beauty, and music are participatory and tend toward one of two expressive and experiential modes—either muted Pentecostalism or contemplative/liturgical (or, a blend of the two).

Practices

- The practices that predominated discussion were: worship, hospitality, discernment, theological reflection, healing, forming diverse communities, testimony, and contemplative devotional disciplines.
- The triad of these practices—discernment, hospitality, and worship—laid the foundation of congregational spiritual depth and vitality. Working together these three practices not only opened the way to congregational renewal, but they initiated the movement of the individual from being a spiritual tourist to being a Christian pilgrim. The renewed congregation served as the locus for personal transformation.
- Practices observed but not necessarily discussed included creativity and the arts, especially innovative uses of music (not necessarily contemporary styles).
- Practices require commitment (they are “high demand”), but that commitment is typically internally and subjectively driven and not external or authoritarian.
- Engaging practices elevates the sense of intentionality throughout the congregation that leads to greater vitality and spiritual depth.

Public Presence

- Diversity appears as a fundamental virtue in all the congregations as a reflection of God's kingdom and is often tied to the practice of the Lord's Supper.
- Social justice and peacemaking are considered important practices in these congregations and are interwoven with the rest of the practices (especially worship and devotional practices).
- These congregations express anxiety about evangelism that they perceive as exclusive or fear-based; rather, they focus on personal connections and make modest claims regarding Christian conversion, choosing instead to link evangelism with hospitality, catechesis, and relationships.

Leadership

- The leaders reject managerial, programmatic, and technical models of leadership (although they are knowledgeable about and often trained in such models) in favor of leadership models drawn from Christian history, spiritual traditions, and biblical sources.
- Leaders willingly borrow across boundaries (mainline—evangelical; Protestant—Catholic; Western Christian—Eastern Christian; and racial divides) in order to further the mission of the church; they rarely avail themselves of denominationally produced materials in favor of creating their own resources from a variety of sources (including the congregation itself).
- The pastors and key lay leaders often possess spiritual charisma, but that charisma is not used to control the congregation, rather, charisma is shared or dispersed through congregational systems and creates grassroots commitment.
- Leaders initiate and motivate individual and congregational change through narrative; being able to articulate and link their own personal story, the congregation's story (and that of individuals in the congregation), and the larger Christian story appears to be a primary leadership capacity.

Ten Signposts - Diana Butler Bass

Diana Butler Bass defines congregational faith practices as “the things people do together in community for the sake of God and the world.” In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (Harper 2006), she tells the story of moderate and progressive mainline Protestant congregations who found new vitality through such practices. Through her research, certain consistent congregational faith practices emerged as central to congregations seeking to rediscover authentic Christian faith and witness today. These practices, listed below, seem to speak to the spiritual longings of many in the Northwest – whether affiliated or not with congregational life.

1. **Beauty:** knowing God through art, music, drama, poetry, icons, textiles, vestments, windows
2. **Contemplation:** open for prayer; unmediated access to the divine spirit in communion with others.
3. **Discernment:** open to the work of the Spirit; listening for God's call; relying on the human capacity to hear, see, touch and feel God
4. **Diversity:** losing homogeneity and gaining complex wisdom; church as a place where people of many backgrounds and ages encounter a God that is alive, personal, powerful and full of love for all people
5. **Healing:** what will make us whole? what will put all things in harmony? how does God want to express shalom here?
6. **Hospitality:** welcoming the stranger; openly risking change and welcoming it; creating 'free space' where change can take place.
7. **Justice:** the hands and feet that embody the virtues of the servant community in the world; the Christian calling in everyday life; washed in baptism to serve the world

8. **Reflection:** thinking theologically; exegeting life and faith; asking questions; linking the life of the mind and heart together; intellectual curiosity with humility
9. **Testimony:** talking the walk; bearing witness in words to the presence of the living Lord; God is still speaking (through the people).
10. **Worship:** not reflecting on God but experiencing God; lost in wonder, love and praise; ritual symbols, words and actions that have power to transform.

Eight Quality Characteristics

(Natural Church Development)

Empowering Leadership: Effective leadership begins with an intimate relationship with God, resulting in Christlike character and a clear sense of God's calling for leaders' lives. As this base of spiritual maturity increases, effective pastors and leaders multiply, guide, empower and equip disciples to realize their full potential in Christ and work together to accomplish God's vision.

Effective Structures: The Church is the living Body of Christ. Like all healthy organisms, it requires numerous systems which work together to fulfill its intended purpose. Often churches have to keep in mind a multitude of complex forms and regulations which may have been useful at the time they were instituted, but which lost their functionality over time. Each must be evaluated regularly to determine if it is still the best way to accomplish the intended purpose.

Gift-based Ministry: The Holy Spirit sovereignly gives to every Christian spiritual gift(s) for the building of God's kingdom. Church leaders have the responsibility to help believers discover, develop and exercise their gifts in appropriate ministries so that the body of Christ "grows and builds itself up in love."

Holistic Small Groups: Holistic small groups are disciple-making communities which endeavor to reach the unchurched, meet individual needs, develop each person according to their God-given gifts and raise leaders to sustain the growth of the church. Like healthy body cells, holistic small groups are designed to grow and multiply.

Inspiring Worship: Inspiring worship is a personal and corporate encounter with the living God. Both personal and corporate worship must be infused with the presence of God resulting in times of joyous exultation and times of quiet reverence. Inspiring worship is not driven by a particular style or ministry focus group, but rather, the shared experience of God's awesome presence.

Loving Relationships: Loving relationships are the heart of a healthy, growing church. Jesus said people will know we are His disciples by our love. Practical demonstration of love builds authentic Christian community and brings others into God's kingdom.

Need-oriented Evangelism: Need-oriented evangelism intentionally cultivates relationships with pre-Christian people so they can become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who are actively participating within the life of the church and community. Using appropriate ministries and authentic relationships, believers can guide others into the family of God.

Passionate Spirituality: Effective ministry flows out of a passionate spirituality. Spiritual intimacy leads to a strong conviction that God will act in powerful ways. A godly vision can only be accomplished through an optimistic faith which views obstacles as opportunities and turns defeats into victories.

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