Dimensions of Congregational Vitality

LINDA BOBBITT
What is congregational vitality?

Mission + Viability

Mission
- Great Commandment, Great Commission
- Relationship with God, Each other, World

Viability:
- Able to perform mission into the future
- Finances, critical mass, energy, commitment, hope

“Christian churches exist to worship God, to teach and nurture people in the faith and to spread the Good News. Managing to gather an ongoing group of people who regularly do these things together is my definition of success.”

(Nancy Ammerman 2005)
What about growth?

Growth = Success?

◦ Healthy congregations not always growing
◦ Some unhealthy congregations do grow

Right size of congregation = Most people contributing and receiving.

◦ Too few – stretched thin
◦ Too many – not engaged
What factors influence vitality?

9 Domains

Programs
Resources
Administration & Governance
Identity – attitudes & culture

❖ Local Context
❖ Leadership
❖ Relationships
❖ Mission/Purpose
❖ Sense of God’s presence
Exploring Domains

Programs

Description:

Things a congregation does. Includes: worship, faith formation, mission planning, youth/young adult ministries, hospitality, evangelism, community outreach, stewardship.

Assumptions:

If a congregation does the right things - with intentionality, quality and authenticity, then they will thrive.
Exploring Domains

RESOURCES
Description:
Money, facility, tech, people

Assumptions:
If a congregation has strong resources they will thrive. Those with poor resources will struggle.

ADMINISTRATION & GOVERNANCE
Description:
Decision Making, Administration of finances and personnel, communication

Assumptions:
If the congregation is run well it can remain nimble and able to adapt as needed.
Exploring Domains

ATTITUDES & CULTURE

Description:
How the congregation engages with each other. (e.g. sense of family, belonging, engagement, willingness to change, ability to fight, expectations & accountability)

Assumptions:
If a congregation has the right attitudes we will be able to make the changes needed to thrive.

LOCAL CONTEXT

Description:
Level of engagement in local context, Conditions within the local context

Assumptions:
Congregations accompany and reflect their communities will thrive.

Congregations in communities with strong economics, demographic growth have an advantage
Exploring Domains

LEADERSHIP
Description:
Pastor and professional staff, lay leadership and informal leaders.
Skills, personality characteristics, health
Assumptions:
If lay and rostered leaders have strong skills, appropriate personalities and are healthy we will thrive. Informal leaders can be helpful or harmful.

RELATIONSHIPS
Description:
Relationships among leadership, pastor/staff, leaders and congregation and among the congregation
Assumptions:
If we all get along well, support each other and work together we will thrive.
## ExploringDomains

### MISSION/PURPOSE

**Description:**
The congregation’s sense of God’s purpose. Where is God calling them here and now?

**Assumptions:**
Congregations who are centered in God’s mission focus their efforts strategically. Strong theology matters.

### SENSE OF GOD’S PRESENCE

**Description:**
The congregation’s experience of God in day to day life.

**Assumptions:**
Congregations that sense God’s active presence can trust God’s leadership and walk into the future with God.
Relationship among domains

Schools of thought:

Focus on individual domains
  ◦ (System’s theory, Leadership models, Stewardship, Evangelism models, etc.)

Cumulative effect
  ◦ Critical mass of strengths or lift all areas into strengths.

Necessary but not sufficient
  ◦ Some domains are critical to success without them success is impossible. Competing claims of necessary domains.
Working theory of Relationship among domains
Relationship among domains

- Mission/Purpose
- God’s Presence
- Local Context
- Leadership
- Relationships
- Culture/Attitudes
- Admin/Gov.
- Resources
- Programs
How domains apply to congregations

- organizational development

(Hannan 1998) Describes 5 concepts associated with organizational mortality:

Endowment (resources)

Imprinting (attitudes/culture/behaviors)

Inertia (getting stuck with imprinted culture)

Capability (ability to do mission efficiently, encrusted)

Position (influence and reputation in local community)

“Age tracks the fit between an organization and its environment”.(p.158)
How domains apply to congregations

- *organizational development*

Healthy Start matters:
- Organizations are fragile or robust from onset. This dictates mortality.
- It takes longer to start strong org. but is worth it.

(Dougherty 2008) applied theory to congregations.
- 2 critical times: first few years & generational transitions (40 & 75 years)

Erik Erikson described human development as stages with key tasks.
- Potential for positive or negative outcome at each stage.
- Negative outcome at earlier stage makes future positive outcomes less likely
(Rothauge 1996) and others describe similar stages in congregational cycle.
New Start

Description
- Congregations invite, begin to worship together create a new community of faith.

Key Theological Tasks
- Create supportive Christian community
- Establish initial missiology & sense of God

Practices
- Worship, community, sharing faith, outreach to new people

Dangers/Threats
- Lack of resources, failure to create community.
- Community based on poor missiology

Leadership Role
- Vision, excitement, empowerment, connecting with community, recruitment

Positive: Continue growing
- Paul starting new churches
- Joshua leading Israelites into promised land. (Establishing a new counter-culture community.)

Negative: Don’t get off the ground or weak foundation.
Formation-Learning

Description
- Growing church gets organized & self-sustaining

Key Theological Tasks
- Establish healthy culture/attitudes, expectations
- Establish initial ecclesiology (structures)
- Evangelism, inviting

Practices
- Create admin, build lay leadership, discipleship, spirituality, hospitality, evangelism

Dangers/Threats
- Fail to gain critical mass or resources
- Imprint unhealthy culture

Leadership Role
- Create lay capacity, dev. programs, stay missional

Positive: Grow to maturity
- Moses in wilderness
- Philippians

Negative: Back slide or establish unhealthy culture.
- Israelites worshiping other gods
- Corinthians
Maturity

Description
Community living its faith and adapting with context.

Key Theological Tasks
◦ Focus on creating disciples & leaders

Practices
◦ Faith formation and spiritual practices- all ages. Stay deep, celebrate, talk about faith.
◦ Create strong youth program, ensure strong governance/admin, stewardship, etc.

Dangers/Threats
◦ Disconnect from community, become rigid & bureaucratic, self focus
◦ Generational transitions

Leadership Role: collaborative
◦ Pastor is spiritual leader: mission focus, God is present
◦ Lay leaders run business side

Positive
◦ David- Solomon’s reign.??

Negative
◦ Jerusalem in Jesus’ time
◦ Israel & Juda before exile. (Judges)
  Pattern of sin, repentance, rescue, brief improvement and further decline
Decline

Description
◦ Loosing members, money, energy, mission

Key Theological Tasks
◦ Renew missiology, reconnect with God, Confession/Forgiveness & reconciliation

Practices
◦ 8 practices necessary to turn around troubled churches (see handout)

Dangers/Threats
◦ Congregation remains focused on survival not mission, loose critical mass, conflict

Leadership Role
◦ Create a sense of urgency. Relate to head, heart and hands.
◦ Restore or establish new missiology, healing & reconciliation, role clarification, address cultural blocks & dysfunction, prioritize activities

Positive: Renewal
◦ Nineveh (Jonah)
◦ John baptizing in the wilderness

Negative: Move to Struggling - unsustainable
◦ Jerusalem in Jesus’ time
Struggle

Description
◦ No longer self-sustaining. Closure only option.

Key Theological Tasks
◦ Let go of need for control and trust God’s promise of resurrection

Practices
◦ Prayer, reconciliation, celebrate life, administrative decisions

Dangers/Threats
◦ Denial, refuse to plan, fail to reconcile

Leadership Role
◦ Healing, accompaniment, planning, prayer, reconciliation, celebration, imagine a new life elsewhere

Positive: Holy Closure to Rebirth
◦ Israel re-established after exile

Negative: Death
◦ Romans destroy temple
Relationship among domains

Internal crisis and outside forces – test strength and flexibility.

Core strength is critical. Gentle touch required.
Types of Change

Technical change: tweaks to the system to fix a problem. How can we do this differently?

Adaptive change: Asks a different question. What are we doing and why? Is this still what we are about?
Types of change

- Technical Change
- Adaptive Change

Congregational Cycle
- Creative
- Rigid

- Maturity
- Sustainability
- Closure
- Rebirth
- Redevelopment
- Struggling
- Declining
- Redefinition
- Learning
- Formation
- New Start
Implications for my church?

- Determine where you are in cycle
- Review critical tasks and role of leader
- Seek resources and changes appropriate to your place in the cycle
- Attend to all domains especially the base.
- Create realistic expectations
- Pray, trust in the living God, Biblical work, Listening
- Recognize that each stage provides an opportunity for a faithful response to God’s mission.