

Congregation Vitality and Viability: Get There and Stay There

Introduction



God alone knows the true vitality of any congregation. There is no dipstick that humans can stick into a congregation to measure its vitality. This is in part because vitality is not a single thing that is true for the entire congregation. Different individuals experience the congregation in different ways which make it more or less vital for them. Yet it is also true that there is a collective quality to congregation. Different congregations have different personalities and they go through times of vitality and times of turmoil. The best we can do is identify indicators that point to overall vitality of a congregation at any given time.

Vitality

Vital congregations exude a certain kind of vibrancy, a friendly, welcoming manner, and a tangible sense of God's presence. Those who attend regularly have a sense of purpose. They support each other by nurturing one another's faith and helping each other identify their spiritual gifts. They use those gifts in the congregation and in the world. When they disagree they do so in a respectful manner, ultimately strengthening the congregation.

The people in these vital congregations understand God's mission goes beyond their walls. They intentionally connect with the wider Christian community and within their local context to share the good news in word and deed by striving to be God's hands in the world.

The relationships between the congregation's members and God, each other, and the world are critical – relationships are at the church's heart, strengthening our connections to God and sharing God's love with each other and the world.

Viability

What make a congregation viable is a ministry model that is sustainable with the resources available. It really is that simple. What gets complicated is how to determine what ministry models are available to the congregation. No longer does one size, one approach to pastoral care, or one formula for ministry fit the variety of ministry expressions found in the church. There are vitality and viable house churches of 15 people, congregations served by lay leaders, bi-vocational

Cultural-Contextual Systemic Change

We are not responding to change that is coming in the near or distant future. We must learn to adapt and respond to change that is already taking place.

Students currently in their first few years of college:

- Were in Kindergarten when 9/11 happened. The only reality they know is a society that dramatically changed after that
- Only know of a world where bans to same sex marriage are always overturned by the courts
- Live in a world where two-term presidents are routine, but none ever won in a landslide
- The Daily Show with Jon Stewart has always been the only news program that really “gets it right” and is most likely watching online rather than on TV through a cable provider
- Are known as a sharing generation, having shown tendencies to share everything, including possessions, no matter how personal

Additionally:

- This year the projected number of Millennials is predicted to surpass that of Boomers, with Gen-Xers anticipated to follow in 2028
- In the last 5 years alone student debt has increased by 25% to \$28,400 per borrower, with 71% of all graduating students carrying debt
- 15% of all Millennials are foreign born, nearing the last peak of 20% in 1910

pastors, collaborative multi-site ministries, and “heritage” communities within congregations.

Younger generations are marrying, having children, and buying homes later in life; a response to coming of age in an uncertain economic environment.

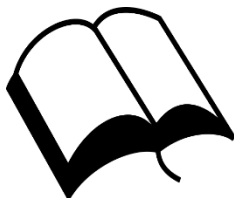
CORE WORK...As a congregation moves to be a more vitality community, there is important work to be done. The challenge comes from the reality that we do not know where we will end up, we cannot predetermine the destination before we start. The work of being vital and viable is a journey that unfolds as we walk. The four areas which continue to surface in much of the thinking writing and training today are the core work which is relational, biblical, adaptive and organizing.

BIBLICAL WORK

Biblical work is done to focus the congregation’s work, give examples of faith communities responding to new challenges and equipping leaders to do the work ahead. This is not your parents’ bible study.

This opens the door for Word to be spoken into the midst of leader and congregation discernment. It lets the Spirit out to stir up the wisdom, knowledge, courage, strength, and joy to engage the work going forward.

Be intentional about what scripture and how these scriptures are to be used. A lens of relationships, leader development, adaptive challenges, or faith-based organizing helps focus the learning indirect applicable ways. Build scripture into each gathering, planning sessions and leader meeting. Often a relational question surfaces directly from the text that leads into a 1 to 1 conversation. This is working when the group continues to refer back to the text or reflection to help clarify what is unfolding in the meeting.



Texts that are especially helpful in inspiring, focusing and equipping the Core Work:

Gospel of John
Acts of the Apostles
Romans
Galatians

RELATIONAL WORK

In order to impact the lives of others and effectively carry out God’s mission in the world as we are called to do, we must extend to others the love and grace granted to us through our own personal relationships with God. Relational work is the process of creating and/or restoring relationships with those both inside and out of our faith communities, so as to help strengthen our connections with each other, God, and the world.

Relational work is done primary through face to face (one-to-one) conversations between one person and another, in order to explore an issue or challenge together, or to simply engage more deeply with a person who has shared a pew with you for years, maybe even decades, yet you actually know hardly anything about. It is especially important that relational work be done before a community takes on any sort of big change, where often times the mistake is made of beginning a change process without understanding the hopes, wants, and needs of the community. Taking the time to build relationships through one-to-one conversations allows people to feel respected and heard, builds trust that can then be drawn upon when needed, is a way to get people excited and engaged, and helps you be better prepared for any obstacles that come up.

Relational work is also necessary for us to engage with those who are looking for but have not yet found a faith community. Younger generations are showing a greater desire for communication and connectedness in their communities. They tend to place much more value in authentic stories in preaching, leading, and relationship than those before. A congregation that does not know how to foster these needs will find itself at a disadvantage in it’s sustainability.

It is important to understand that the work of building a congregational culture that focuses on relationships with others must begin from within; it is a process that can be long and sometimes difficult without the usual

Ephesians

Remember: *If you don't have time for God's input into the conversation, your decisions will reflect that.*

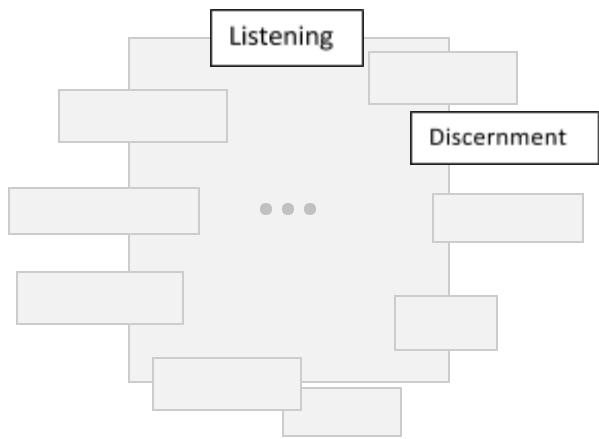
benchmarks of success that we have relied on in the past. But it is key to our success in the work we wish to do in the world right now, as well as prepare us for the ever changing needs of the future.

ADAPTIVE WORK

Technical	Adaptive
~Status Quo adequate with minor changes ~Complex, but solved w/ current knowledge ~Utilizes existing structure & procedure ~Can be implemented with current authority	+Gap between vision and reality is big +Old ways don't work, difficult new learning is required + New practices & New stakeholders required

ORGANIZING WORK

Faith-based Organizing begins with the belief that organizing the work ahead requires more than good intentions. It understands the process of accomplishing what needs to happen, provides practices and skills to organize the work, keeps relationships at the center, raises up new leaders and equips them and holds the group accountable to evaluate what worked and did not work.



Responses to applying **technical solutions to adaptive challenges:**

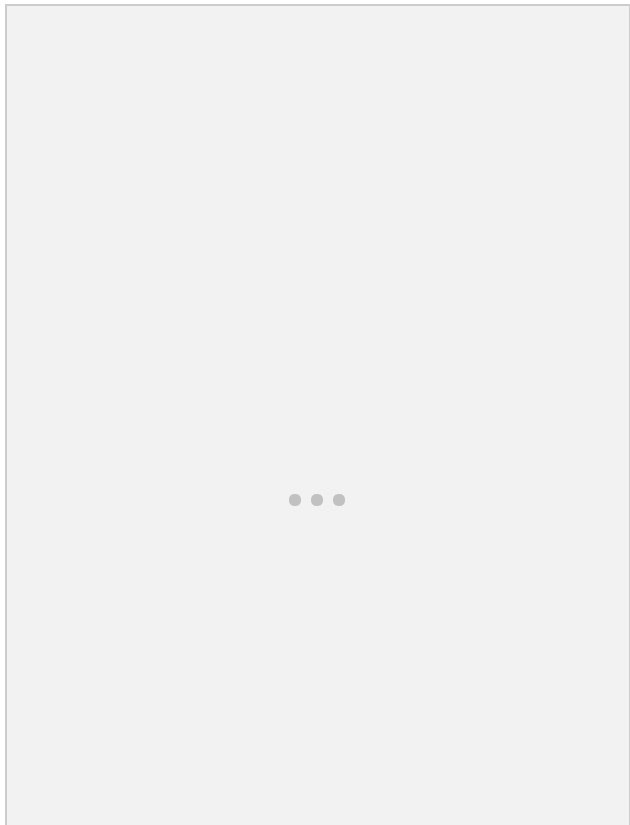
- ~ Denial-There is nothing to be concerned about, just keep moving.
- ~ Bullying All you have to do is get in line and quit wasting time.
- ~ Shaming....As leader, Why cannot I get this ministry in shape and moving forward?
- ~ Blaming If we only had the right pastor /location/leaders/music/technology/people...

Adaptive Challenge-Building adaptive capacity

seeing big changes on the horizon in the external environment that will catch up with them soon, and worry that the organization does not have the wherewithal to adapt and thrive in those new realities.

Adaptive Leadership is:

- +practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive
- +specifically about change the enables the capacity to thrive
- +change builds on the past rather than jettison it
- +the willingness to experiment organizationally and learn from it
- +recognizing this takes time, cannot be done alone, relies on diversity, disorients, and causes resistance



Rules for Survival

- 1) Don't do it alone—build relationships and a team to work with
- 2) Practice adaptive leadership in all aspects of life; discipline to be learned and practiced
- 3) Resist a leap to action; analyze the system
- 4) Discover the joy in making hard choices
- 5) Name the elephant in the room
- 6) Share responsibility for organization's future
- 7) Value independent judgment
- 8) Build leadership capacity

Vitality

A vital congregation is one that lives out God's mission in their context. These congregations connect with God, each other and the world.

A Short List of Critical Vitality Measures

Work done by Linda Bobbitt consult to ELCA

- 1-Worship nurtures people's faith***
- 2-There's a clear sense of mission here***
- 3-Excitement about congregation's future***
- 4-Congregation is always ready to try something new***
- 5-Incorporating new members into congregational life***
- 6-Seeking out and using the gifts of members of all ages***
- 7-Building strong, healthy relationships among members***
- 8-Managing disagreements in a healthy respectful manner***
- 9-Addressing social concerns (helping those in need and advocating for justice)***
- 10-This congregation is a positive force in the community***
- 11-Equipping members to share their faith with others***
- 12-Interacting with the local community***

Actions YOU can take now

Relational

- +Read as a church council or leader team Unbinding the Gospel by Martha Reese
- +Read Building Healthy Communities Together (A framework for Area Ministry Strategy)
- +Get training in "1-to-1" relational meetings through the Oregon Synod
- +Do a "listening season" in the congregation

Biblical

- +Read the Bible through the lens of relationships and organizing your work
- +Start each council and leader meeting with biblical work and 1-to-1s. Get lay leaders to present.
- +As decisions unfold bring the Word of God to bear in the discernment.

Adaptive

- +Read some of the work by Heifetz, Linsky, Grashow or Parks on Adaptive Leadership
- +Take the Vitality survey//Quick or long form
- +Find others in the synod who are working with these concepts already
- +Form a cohort to read The Practice of Adaptive Leadership; meet monthly in your congregation or cluster

Organizing

13-Helping members live out their faith in daily lives

- +Council take one vitality statement each month for “futures” imagination and conversation
 - +Participate in organizing training through the synod or MACG (Metropolitan Alliance for the Common Good, an IAF-NW affiliate)
 - +Read Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal by Michael Geran
 - +Read The Mission Table by Stephen Bouman
 - +Participate in a synod training on Transformational Leadership (integrates Adaptive and Organizing frameworks)
- SEE WORKSHOP HANDOUT