



THRIVING CONGREGATIONS

A VIBRANT FAITH INITIATIVE

A Vision of Thriving Congregation (with Commentary)

Vibrant Faith’s Thriving Congregations Project seeks to equip churches to help congregations thrive by strengthening ministries that help churches deepen their relationships with God, enhance their connections with each other, and contribute to the flourishing of their communities and the world.

This work is guided by a vision of vital and vibrant congregations congregation that is grounded in the Christian tradition and contemporary research on congregational vitality. The following 23 statements comprise the vision that Vibrant Faith hopes bring to reality through its work – training, coaching, resourcing, and designing innovative projects – with the churches participating in the Thriving Congregations Initiative.

- 1. We believe the local congregation is where the Church lives—where the gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where God’s people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church’s life, and where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth.**
- 2. We believe the Church is a hybrid Christian community that lives in both physical and virtual spaces, embodying God’s love and good news, carrying out its mission, engaging in conversation and relationship building, and cultivating and living Christian practices. (See Paul’s description of the “body of Christ” in 1 Cor 12:14-27, Romans 12:1-8, Ephesians 4:1-16.)**
- 3. We believe there are five essential biblically-mandated, time-honored, Spirit-infused practices that guide a congregation in living it’s mission: *koinonia* (belonging, hospitality, community life), *mathetes* (discipling, lifelong faith formation, wisdom), *martyria* (witnessing, testimony, vocations), *diakonia* (serving, compassion, justice), and *leiturgia* (worshipping, sacraments, prayer). These five practices are rooted in the experience of the early Church as recorded in the Book of Acts, especially Acts 2:43-47, Acts 4:32-35, and Acts 5:12-16.**
- 4. We believe these five faithful practices are connected and interdependent, illuminating and nourishing each other; and need to be fully operative if congregations are to flourish and fully live out their mission.**

5. We believe these five faithful practices require leaders to become bilingual: interpreting the language of biblical world where the gospel originated and the idioms of contemporary cultures.
6. We believe spiritually vital congregations are places where people come together for a common purpose of divine origin; that people experience the divine in ways that are transformative; and the common divine purpose and transformative experience compel the people to authentically engage both within the congregation and the world around them.
7. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when churches have a clear identity – who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going – and are focused on living a shared mission in their specific time, place, and situation.
8. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when churches are willing to adapt and innovate to meet new challenges in living their mission.
9. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church engages in lifelong faith formation and spiritual growth to help people of all ages grow in their relationship with God, learn how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, grow in faith for a lifetime, and live their Christian faith in daily life.
10. We believe vibrant lifelong faith formation can renew and revitalize the faith life of all ages, and that how and what a congregation is learning is critical to building a vital congregation.
11. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church intentionally engages in living Christian practices within and outside the congregation; and that the church will find 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.
12. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened through the individual, familial, and communal practice of historic Christian practices: discernment, hospitality, worship, theological reflection, healing, forming diverse communities, testimony, contemplative devotional disciplines, social justice and peacemaking, and beauty (art, music, drama, poetry).
13. We believe that people come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian community, by learning the practices of the Christian faith, by participating actively in these practices, and by living these practices in the context of their daily lives and their community.
14. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church community experiences God’s presence, joy, inspiration, and awe at worship, and when worship and preaching connects Scripture to daily life and inspires Christian living.

15. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when a church cultivates a caring, hospitable, welcoming, and safe community where people of all ages, generations, and diversities can experience belonging and acceptance.
16. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when a church has a strong apostolic culture with a passion to reach uninvolved and unaffiliated people where they live, welcoming and incorporating them into the congregation's life, and helping them to come to know Jesus and hear the Good News.
17. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church is engaged in outreach and service to those in need, locally and globally; addresses the spiritual, human and emotional needs of those who are marginalized, hungry, homeless, hurting, or in need; works and advocates for social justice; and cares for creation.
18. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church communicates its identity, mission, and ministries through digital technologies and platforms (website, social media, e-mail, texts); and provides virtual spaces that are interactive and inclusive of all people—involved and uninvolved in the church community.
19. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership lead from a clear set of core values and personal principles; and 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.
20. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership 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.
21. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership demonstrate adaptive skill to frame or reframe a congregation's vision for ministry, and develop innovative ways of giving expression to the vision in the face of the particular challenges the congregation is facing.
22. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership create a team approach—investing time and energy in building and sustaining capable teams; and demonstrating skills to work collaboratively and co-responsibly with leaders.
23. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership help people in the congregation discover and utilize their gifts for ministry in the church and world; and engage the gifts of the laity in leadership within the church community.

Commentary

1. We believe the local congregation is where the Church lives—where the gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where God's people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church's life, and where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth.
2. We believe the Church is a hybrid Christian community that lives in both physical and virtual spaces, embodying God's love and good news, carrying out its mission, engaging in conversation and relationship building, and cultivating and living Christian practices. (See Paul's description of the "body of Christ" in 1 Cor 12:14-27, Romans 12:1-8, Ephesians 4:1-16.)

Commentary

"Hybrid Christian communities embody God's love and "make the message believable" through meaningful conversations and faithful habits that are both in person and mediated, that take place at various times, and that happen in both physical and digital spaces.

"I do not think it is too daunting for Christian communities to think about their community as being hybrid, give Paul's letters and specifically his use of the metaphor of the "body of Christ." Paul's letters are a clear example of hybrid Christian communities, since his letters were extensions of his in-person ministry within particular communities and also provided mediated guidance for those communities.

"It is possible to nurture a hybrid Christian community. Many Christian communities *are* hybrid Christian communities (though they would probably not use this terminology) because they are nurturing relationships, growing spiritually, and engaging in ministry in-person and online. Through social media, members are cultivating connections online that are not that different from the relationships that prevailed before the internet and mobile phones." (50-51)
(Angela Gorrell. *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media World*. Baker Academic, 2019)

3. We believe there are five essential biblically-mandated, time-honored, Spirit-infused practices that guide a congregation in living it's mission: *koinonia* (belonging, hospitality, community life), *mathetes* (discipling, lifelong faith formation, wisdom), *martyria* (witnessing, testimony, vocations), *diakonia* (serving, compassion, justice), and *leiturgia* (worshipping, sacraments, prayer). (See Acts 2:43-47, Acts 4:32-35, and Acts 5:12-16.)

Commentary

"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.” (59)
(John W. Stewart, *Envisioning the Congregation, Practicing the Gospel*).

These five practices are rooted in the experience of the early Church as recorded in the Book of Acts, especially Acts 2:43-47, Acts 4:32-35, and Acts 5:12-16. 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)

- 4. We believe these five faithful practices are connected and interdependent, illuminating and nourishing each other; and need to be fully operative if congregations are to flourish and fully live out their mission.**
- 5. We believe these five faithful practices require leaders to become bilingual: interpreting the language of biblical world where the gospel originated and the idioms of contemporary cultures.**

Commentary

“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.” (63)
(John W. Stewart, *Envisioning the Congregation, Practicing the Gospel*).

6. **We believe spiritually vital congregations are places where people come together for a common purpose of divine origin; that people experience the divine in ways that are transformative; and the common divine purpose and transformative experience compel the people to authentically engage both within the congregation and the world around them.**

Commentary

“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.”
(2-3)

(Linda Bobbit. Vital Congregations. American Congregations 2018, Faith Communities Today)

7. **We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when churches have a clear identity – who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going – and are focused on living a shared mission in their specific time, place, and situation.**

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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.

8. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when churches are willing to adapt and innovate to meet new challenges in living their mission.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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.

9. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church engages in lifelong faith formation and spiritual growth to help people of all ages grow in their relationship with God, learn how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, grow in faith for a lifetime, and live their Christian faith in daily life.

10. We believe vibrant lifelong faith formation can renew and revitalize the faith life of all ages, and that how and what a congregation is learning is critical to building a vital congregation.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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.

Commentary

In *Teaching and Learning in American Congregations*, an analysis of the 2015 *Faith Communities Today* survey, Joseph V. Crockett found a strong correlation between vital congregations and faith formation. Many of the characteristics of vital congregations from the research positively related to the priorities of faith formation in a congregation, and most likely to the effectiveness of faith formation. Among the most significant characteristics were:

- *mission clarity and effectiveness*: having a clear sense of the mission and living the mission
- *adaptability and willingness to change*: willing to change or adapt to meet new challenges and trying new things to live the mission
- *incorporating new members*: seeking out and incorporating new people into the faith community and providing ways for new or returning people to learn about the Christian faith and join the faith community
- *spiritual vitality*: being spiritually vital and alive, helping people grow in their faith, and preparing people to live the gospel in their daily lives
- *working for social justice*: engaging in outreach and service to those in need, locally and globally; working for social justice to make the community and world a better place; being a positive force in the community
- *thriving now and into the future*

11. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church intentionally engages in living Christian practices within and outside the congregation; and that the church will find 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.
12. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened through the individual, familial, and communal practice of historic Christian practices: discernment, hospitality, worship, theological reflection, healing, forming diverse communities, testimony, contemplative devotional disciplines, social justice and peacemaking, and beauty (art, music, drama, poetry).

Commentary

- Congregations practice Christianity in ways that are dynamic and organic, reconstructing tradition in terms of experience and wisdom rather than programs and absolutes.
- 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.
 - 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.
 - Congregations understand tradition as something to be flexible and fluid, something that contemporary Christians participate in (rather than simply inherit).
- Congregational 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.
- Congregations that engage in Christian practices elevate the sense of intentionality throughout the congregation that leads to greater vitality and spiritual depth.
- Congregations consider social justice and peacemaking as important practices that are interwoven with the rest of the practices (especially worship and devotional practices).

From:

(Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity for the Rest of Us—How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith..* Harper One, 2006)

13. We believe that people come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian community, by learning the practices of the Christian faith, by participating actively in these practices, and by living these practices in the context of their daily lives and their community.

Commentary

“People come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith by participating in the practices of the Christian community. These are practices of the whole church. Because and to the extent that the church is faithful in its practice, it makes available to itself and to the world “external means” by which the gift of God’s Word and presence may come to persons and take root in them. Those who participate in these practices are involving themselves ever more deeply in processes by which faith may come, grow, and mature.

“People come to faith and grow in faith and in the life of faith in the context of these practices as they themselves, participating in them actively, actually do what they practices involve. We engage in them personally in particular physical and material settings and in face-to-face interaction with other people. It is not enough simply to know about them or think about them or observe other people engaging in them. Each of us must actually pray, read the Scriptures and interpret them, and provide hospitality to strangers.

“We are not born with the abilities to carry out these practices, and they do not come simply with age. We need to *learn* them. To learn them, we need not only experience but guidance. We need at many points to be taught. So we grow best in these practices when we participate in the activities involved in them with others, especially those who are skills in them and are able to teach them to us. Then, as we are well taught, as our experience with them broadens and deepens, as our own engagement in them becomes more extensive, we grow more and more into the practices. Increasingly, we come to live into them until they live in us. (44)

“In my view, an essential task of education in faith is to teach all the basic practices of the Christian faith. The fundamental aim of Christian education in all its forms, varieties, and settings should be that individuals—and indeed whole communities—learn these practices, be drawn into participation in them, learn to do them with increasingly deepened understanding and skill, learn to extend them more broadly and fully in their own lives and onto their world, and learn to correct them, strengthen them, and improve them. (71)

“To learn these practices and learn in the context of them, we need others who are competent in these practices to help us: to be our models, mentors, teachers, and partners in practice. We need people who will include us in these practices as they themselves are engaged in them, and who will show us how to do what the practices require. We also need them to explain to us what they practices mean, what the reasons, understandings, insights, and values embedded in them are. And we need them to lure us and press us beyond our current understandings of and competence in these practices, to the point where we together may extend and deepen the practices themselves. (72)

(Craig Dykstra. *Growing in the Life of Faith*. Westminster/John Knox, 2005.)

14. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church community experiences God's presence, joy, inspiration, and awe at worship, and when worship and preaching connects Scripture to daily life and inspires Christian living.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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.

15. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when a church cultivates a caring, hospitable, welcoming, and safe community where people of all ages, generations, and diversities can experience belonging and acceptance.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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).

16. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when a church has a strong apostolic culture with a passion to reach uninvolved and unaffiliated people where they live, welcoming and incorporating them into the congregation's life, and helping them to come to know Jesus and hear the Good News.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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.

17. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church is engaged in outreach and service to those in need, locally and globally; addresses the spiritual, human and emotional needs of those who are marginalized, hungry, homeless, hurting, or in need; works and advocates for social justice; and cares for creation.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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.

18. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when the church communicates its identity, mission, and ministries through digital technologies and platforms (website, social media, e-mail, texts); and provides virtual spaces that are interactive and inclusive of all people—involved and uninvolved in the church community.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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 (email, texting, etc.).

19. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership lead from a clear set of core values and personal principles; and 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.

20. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership 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.

21. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership demonstrate adaptive skill to frame or reframe a congregation's vision for ministry, and develop innovative ways of giving expression to the vision in the face of the particular challenges the congregation is facing.

22. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership create a team approach—investing time and energy in building and sustaining capable teams; and demonstrating skills to work collaboratively and co-responsibly with leaders.

23. We believe spiritual vitality is strengthened when pastors and church leadership help people in the congregation discover and utilize their gifts for ministry in the church and world; and engage the gifts of the laity in leadership within the church community.

Commentary: Characteristics from Research

- 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.