

Congregational Vitality Project



Exaggerated vitality on congregation's annual reports? Findings from a Luther Seminary Class on Congregational Innovation

Linda Bobbitt, Congregational Vitality Project

Luther Seminary Graduate students: Oretha
Miller-Davis, Joel Hinck, Susan Modrow, Molly
Schroeder, Ashley Tangen

**Congregational Vitality
Project**
2080 E 134th Ave
Thornton CO 80241
(303) 523-3144

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Executive Summary

Over the past two years, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has shifted its attention and energy toward creating more vital congregations. Vital Congregations are those with life-giving relationships with God, with one another inside the congregation, and with their local communities, for the sake of God’s mission. Since 2016, congregation leaders answered questions describing those relationships on the annual congregational report. Previous studies suggested that congregations with an average score over 4.3 were highly vital, however when synodical staff were asked to get stories from some of these congregations, they expressed doubt that all the congregations were genuinely “highly vital”.¹

Luther Seminary students in an Innovations class collaborated with Linda Bobbitt to learn more about the discrepancy. Using a “Design Thinking” process², students interviewed synodical staff and congregation leaders to form their initial hypothesis that some pastors were in denial about their congregation’s vitality. They wondered whether techniques used with substance abusers to help them overcome denial might be useful to ELCA pastors.³ To test this, they developed a survey with control questions about congregational vitality and experiment questions inviting respondents to reflect on what it would mean to learn more about their own congregation’s vitality. Next, they invited every ELCA congregation with highly vital annual report scores to take the survey and randomly divided them into control and experiment groups.

Ten percent of qualifying congregations responded to the survey (n=244). Their responses revealed that the pastors answering the experiment questions were not more likely to rate themselves un-vital, but those questions did slightly improve their ability to rate themselves less than spectacular. These un-dramatic results suggest that while some of the responding congregations may have experienced some degree of denial resulting in slightly inflated estimates of vitality, this is probably not the primary cause of the synod staff’s observed overstatement of vitality on the annual reports.

However, further analysis suggested that the primary cause of the inflated scores may have more to do with the alternative hypothesis, that pastors are aware that their congregation’s vitality was lower, but intentionally misrepresented it on the annual report. The interviews suggested that at least some of those reasons for this misrepresentation may be related to some pastor’s sense of personal responsibility, shame and helplessness. When pastors felt their congregation was less vital than they would like it to be, that they were in large part responsible for the congregation’s vitality, and they did not think that their efforts could improve the situation, they were not likely to want to do any kind of assessment or even talk about vitality. Implications for how synods and the wider church can better support pastors in addressing their congregation’s vitality are discussed.

¹ Linda Bobbitt, "Creating Shorter Scales to Measure Congregational Vitality," *Review of Religious Research* (2015).

² Tim Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Creates New Alternatives for Business and Society* (Collins Business, 2009).

³ Jennifer L. Howell and James A. Shepperd, "Reducing Health-Information Avoidance through Contemplation," *Psychological Science* 24, no. 9 (2013).



Introduction

Since 2016 ELCA leaders have been asked to describe the overall vitality of their congregation during the past year by answering 15 questions on their annual reports. These questions can be aggregated to create a vitality score which describes the perceived strength of their connections with God, one another and the world. In the 2016 annual report, 1455 of the 6863 responding congregations described an overall vitality between 4.3 and 4.9. Prior research suggested that these congregations experienced life changing relationships with God, one another and their communities in ways that were transformative.⁴

In the Spring of 2017, the Mission Advancement Unit of the ELCA requested sources for stories of vital congregation. To create a list of potential stories, the vitality data was used to generate a list of potentially vital congregations. Congregations in the 4.3-4.9 range were organized by synod and that list was sent to the local Director of Evangelical Mission (DEM) with a request that the DEM use some of these to develop interesting stories for the wider church. However, when the lists were shared, the common response from across the DEMs (regardless of synod) was to say that only one or two on the list were exceptionally vital. The rest were less than vital and some were known to the DEM as being very un-vital and/or the verge of closing. Overall, they felt that only about 10% of the congregations on the list were considered “vital”.

That cast suspicion about the validity of the new vitality items on the parochial report. The suspicion is further stoked by the sudden increase in “vital” congregations between 2015 and 2016. As the following charts show, the number of congregations rating themselves Vital (3) or very vital (4) increased while the number describing themselves as somewhat vital (2) decreased substantially.

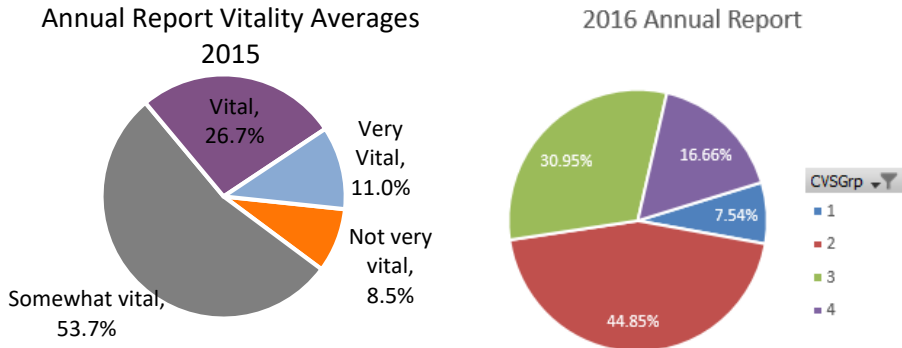


Figure 1: Vitality reported by congregation leader on annual reports

It seems unlikely that, with no new interventions, we would see a substantial shift in the number of congregations reporting vitality. Part of the reason for the shift may be that in the second year, the word “vitality” was being used by Churchwide staff to describe renewal efforts

⁴ Bobbitt, Linda. "Creating Shorter Scales to Measure Congregational Vitality." [In English]. *Review of Religious Research* (2015/07/01 2015): 1-2.



and to talk about funding for renewal efforts. The term “congregational vitality” became a common way to talk about what it means to be a healthy, strong, mission oriented congregation. It is very possible that the shift in language and added attention played a part in the apparent increase in vital congregations. The fact that the shift in annual report figures (reported by pastors) was not also reflected in the every-member surveys taken by entire congregations during the same time period further adds to the suspicion that the shift had less to do with actual change and more to do with something else. However, all this was simply speculation.

To learn more about this phenomenon, seminary students in an innovation class at Luther Seminary⁵ contacted DEMs from 5 different synods who had nominated vital congregations from their lists of all high scoring congregations.⁶ They asked how these congregations were similar to or different from those they did not consider nominating, and got a variety of responses.

To learn more, students contacted a few vital and less vital congregations (according to the DEM). They concluded that indeed, there did appear to be substantial observable differences between kinds of congregations that the DEM agreed were vital and those that the DEM said were less vital. One major difference was the openness for conversation about vitality and willingness to talk with the students about it. Those the DEM named vital were eager for conversation and sharing, while those the DEM felt were less vital were harder to reach (often not returning email or phone messages) and less willing to talk when they were reached. When considering the responses, students wondered what this difference was about. The following range of possibilities were discussed:

1. DEMs were wrong about the real vitality within congregations.
2. DEMs have a different understanding of vitality the person completing the annual report (usually the pastor). If this is true, it suggests that there is an aspect of vitality that is different from what we are used to seeing or that it isn't publicly displayed in a way DEMs can see it.
3. Pastors (or whomever filled out the annual report) were mistaken or otherwise simply did not know their congregation's actual vitality.
4. Pastors are aware that their congregation's vitality was objectively lower, but intentionally misrepresented it on the annual report (a variety of reasons would account for this).
5. Pastors are in denial about the true vitality of their congregation. They may suspect something is off, but they aren't interested in learning more, in part because it may show them things they don't want to know. Several DEMs suspected this reason for some of the congregations appeared on the list of vital congregations.

⁵ This class was taught by Dr. Terri Elton. It asked students to work with advisors/clients to participate in a “Design Thinking” process.

⁶ Linda Bobbitt (the author of this article) was the advisor for this group of the students and acted as their “client”. She provided contact information but did not conduct the research or come to the conclusions herself. She did, however, pose questions and push the students to look behind the easy answers. The findings of the students were presented in class via PowerPoint. This study summarizes their work so that it can be shared with the larger church.



For this experiment, the students decided to test the last hypothesis. Basing their work on information from addiction science, they cited research about the cycle of addiction and change which named the following stages:⁷

- Precontemplation (Not yet acknowledging that there is a problem behavior that needs to be changed – also called “denial”)
- Contemplation (Acknowledging that there is a problem but not yet ready or sure of wanting to make a change)
- Preparation/Determination (Getting ready to change)
- Action/Willpower (Changing behavior)
- Maintenance (Maintaining the behavior change) and
- Relapse (Returning to older behaviors and abandoning the new changes)

Another second article from Howell & Shepperd⁸ described an intervention that broke through denial present in the pre-contemplation stage to help subjects acknowledge the extent of their problem so they can move to the next stage. The students wondered if some of these congregations are in the precontemplation stage (also known as “denial”). If so, this study demonstrated that asking questions about what it would be like to learn more, opened people up to more honest self-assessments. They wondered if the same kind of thing may be work within congregations.

Study design

Hypothesis:

The research question they asked was, “Will asking questions about evaluation (like those used by Howell and Shepperd) open pastors up to a more honest self-evaluation of their congregations?”.

They expected that congregational leaders who are first asked questions about their interest in learning more about vitality and feelings around evaluation will provide more honest self-assessments than those who are not asked leading questions first. Since they believed that many congregations overestimated their vitality, “more honest” means that the experiment group’s mean vitality rating is expected to be significantly lower than the control group’s.

Method:

Every congregation in the ELCA that answered the 2016 annual report CVS questions with an average between 4.3-4.9 was included in the original sample. While there were a total of 1455

⁷James O Prochaska, Carlo C DiClemente, and John C Norcross, "In Search of How People Change: Applications to Addictive Behaviors," *American psychologist* 47, no. 9 (1992).

⁸Howell and Shepperd.



congregations in the sample, 1388 of them had email addresses, so those were used as the sample.

DEMs in every synod were informed about the survey and its purposes so that they could respond to questions. Surveys were sent to all 1388 congregations with half of them receiving a “control group” survey which contained only questions about their congregation’s vitality. The “experiment group” received the same vitality questions but the first questions were about their interest in learning more about vitality. See Appendix 1 for this survey questions.

Results

There were 244 responses to the survey (10% of valid emails). The control group had 120 respondents and 124 came from the experiment group. The fact that the response rate to the control and experiment groups were similar suggests that the experiment questions themselves didn’t scare people off.

Since responses were anonymous, there is no way to know how well they represented the larger ELCA in terms of demographics, location, size, finances, etc. It should be noted that 10% was the approximate number of congregations that DEMs considered vital in their sample. It was known from the phone calls that these congregations are more likely to respond to requests from students. This means that there is a real possibility that many of the congregations that responded were from the subgroup that were considered more vital by the DEMs. For this reason, results may be somewhat skewed.

When pastors described their congregation’s overall relationship between with God, each other and the world, 92% rated themselves 4-5 (vital as expected) and only 8% (22 congregations) rated their overall vitality less than 4 (less vital than expected). Looking at only the 22 congregations with lower vitality, 41% described their social climate as having tension while 9% said there was open, harmful conflict. Approximately 30% of these congregations said that their social climate had changed in the past 6 months. That means that at least 70% of the 22 congregations had been less vital at the time their annual report was completed. Still, this is the minority of all congregations reporting and it is not clear that the person who was interviewed was the same person that completed the annual report.

Primary Results:

A simple independent T test was done to compare control and experiment groups on the primary research question of overall vitality. That test compares the average of both groups to see if one is higher or lower than the other. After the primary questions were tested, all other vitality items were tested to see if they added any information. Of all the questions, only two items demonstrated significant differences between the experiment and control groups: Overall vitality and sustainability.⁹

⁹ For overall vitality, the experiment group rated themselves lower (M=4.31, SD .722) than the control group (M=4.50, SD .752); t (241) 2.041, p=.042. Likewise, when asked about sustainability, the



The following charts display the differences between the experiment and control groups. On both questions, the experimental group provided a more modest self-assessment while still maintaining a high degree of health and sustainability.

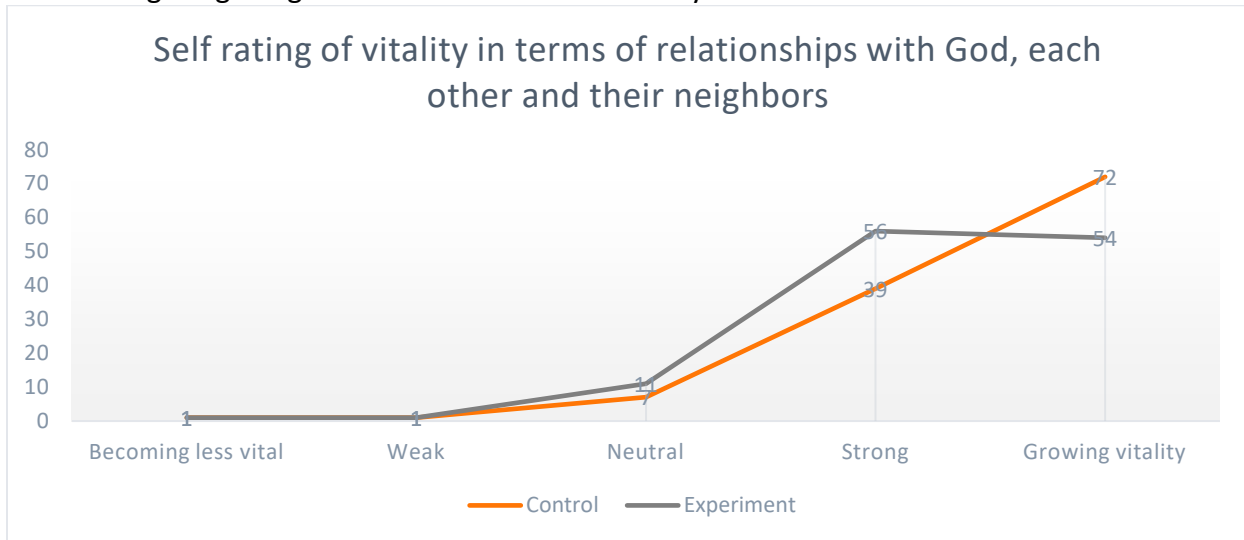


Figure 2: Experiment vs Control on vitality

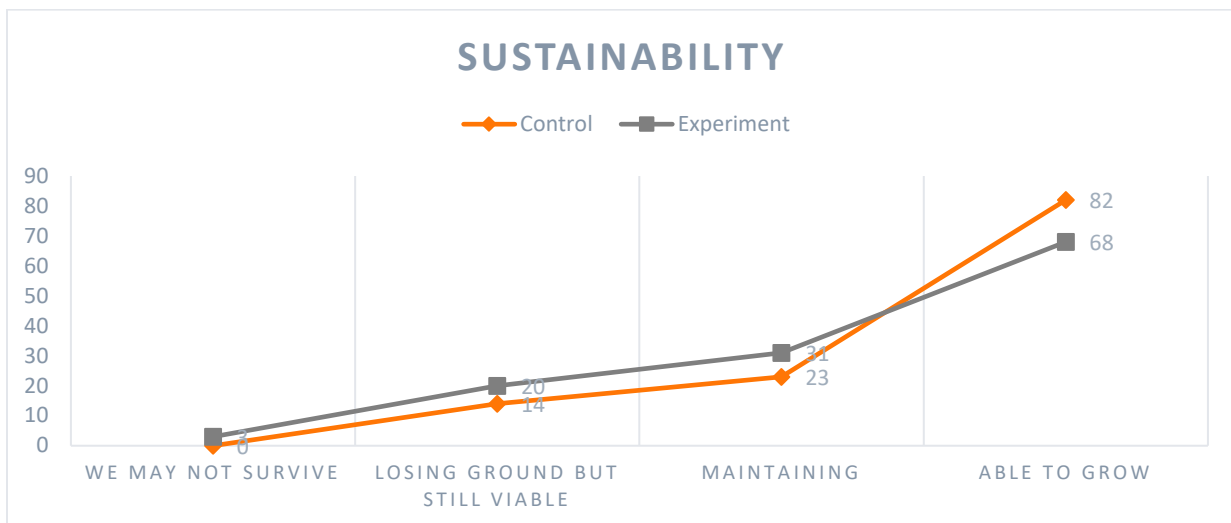


Figure 3: Experiment vs Control on sustainability

In both cases, the significance was not especially strong and a Bonferroni correction done to account for tests done on all the items eliminated the significance.

experiment group rated themselves lower in sustainability (M=3.34, SD .841) than those in the control group (M=3.57, SD .696); $t(239) 2.282, p = .023$



In search of a stronger indicator, a reliable 5-point, 5-item scale was created out of all control questions. It had good internal consistency¹⁰ but when used in analysis, there was no significant difference between control and experiment groups¹¹.

Finally, a Chi-square test was done to compare control and experiment groups. These were also not significant.¹²

These findings suggest that there may be some merit to the hypothesis, but it is not glaring. There are many possible explanations for these results:

1. It is likely, given the responses to phone requests, that the congregations that participated were objectively among the more healthy/vital congregations. That fact may explain the weak differences between groups.
2. It is possible that a state of denial is only one of the many reasons that congregations rate themselves higher than their DEM would. These results suggest that while denial may be a factor, it probably isn't the most common reason.

Even with these considerations, it did appear that denial may play some role in self-evaluations for some congregations. While the experimental questions did not make pastors more likely to rate themselves un-vital, it may have improved their ability to rate themselves less than spectacular. This idea is worth further study.

Other findings suggest other possible explanations

Correlations among items were studied to understand how they relate to one another. In most cases correlations were not significant or had significant but low correlations ($r < .3$). These significant but low correlations suggest that while items are related, other factors may better explain the variance. Below only stronger correlations ($r > .3$) are reported.¹³

Comparing control questions to one another (questions about the congregation's vitality):

The following items appear to move together (It is impossible to say what causes which – maybe some other variable causes both.):

- “Members of this congregation are growing in relationship with God” & “This congregation is active in ways that bring people in our community into relationship with God” ($r = .53$)
- “Members of this congregation are growing in relationship with God” & “This congregation is active in ways that change lives in our community” ($r = .53$)
- “This congregation is active in ways that bring people in our community into relationship with God” & “This congregation is active in ways that change lives in our community” ($r = .63$)
- Congregations that said they were “always ready to try something new” were also more likely to say their members were growing in relationship to God ($r = .36$), that their

¹⁰ Internal consistency ($r = .743$)

¹¹ Control: control ($M = 4.19$, $SD = .598$), Experiment ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .544$); $t(242) = .979$, $p = .329$.

¹² (Control: $x(4) = 6.466$, $p = .167$ and Experiment: $x(3) = 6.514$, $p = .089$ respectively).

¹³ *The closer the r value is to 1.0 the more the two variables mirror one another. All reported items had statistical significance of $p > .01$ suggesting that there is a 99% chance that the relationship is not random.*



congregation was active in ways that bring people in their community into relationship with God ($r=.31$), and that they are active in ways that change lives in their communities ($r= .31$)

- Congregational vitality (relationships with God, each other and world) and Sustainability are also related ($r=.4$)

What this means is that the concepts of growing in relationship with God are associated with growing relationships with the neighbor and a willingness to engage the neighbor both in witnessing to the Gospel and to impacting their lives in other ways. Congregations focused on this mission are also more likely to be open to trying new things. It also means that often (but not always) a congregation's missional focus goes hand in hand with their sustainability. These findings are consistent with findings from the Congregational Vitality Survey.¹⁴

When the experiment (self-evaluation) items are compared with one another:

One of the highest correlations was between people who said it would be difficult to deal with an evaluation where they learned they were not as vital as they thought, and that they would feel personally shamed if the congregation learned it was not as vital as they thought ($r= .43$). *Helplessness and shame go together.*

Similarly, those who said, "It would be difficult for me to deal with an evaluation should I learn that this congregation is not as vital as I thought." were less likely to say, "There are things I should learn to improve the vitality of this congregation" ($r= -.41$) These are negatively related. Several of those who felt it may be difficult to deal with implications of a poor evaluation were *less* likely to say there are things they should learn to improve their vitality and vice versa. While not a high correlation, it does suggest that for some pastors, fear of the implications of evaluation may be a factor in their decision about whether or not to learn more about their vitality. Both of these questions address the pastor's perceived agency/helplessness regarding their ability to impact a congregation's vitality.

When asked the following, "Imagine you chose to learn more about vitality. How much do you anticipate regretting that decision later?" respondents gave similar responses as when they were asked "I would feel personally shamed if this congregation is not as vital as I thought" ($r= .43$). *Shame and regret go together.*

"I don't believe vitality assessment is particularly useful as this this congregation plans for its future" & "There are things I should learn to improve the vitality of this congregation" ($r= -.41$) These are inversely related.

Those who said: "There are multiple dimensions of vitality and I would be interested in reflecting on this congregation's vitality in new ways" more often said, "I would feel happy if I learned that this congregation is vital" ($r=.34$)

¹⁴ Linda Bobbitt, "Factors Contributing to Congregational Vitality by Life Stage," in *Religious Research Association Annual Conference* (Newport CA2015).



Another area of exploration looked into whether pastors valued input from other people in the congregation. Pastors who agreed there were things they should learn to improve the vitality of this congregation were more likely to say that volunteer leaders would provide valuable information ($r=.34$). Those who agreed that volunteer leaders could provide valuable information also said members would provide valuable information ($r=.69$).

It must be noted that, in this sample, most pastors' responses indicated a "healthy" response to the items. By "healthy", I mean that most pastors felt they could deal with a negative finding without a sense of shame. Relatively few pastors (6%) said they would feel shamed if they learned they weren't vital 13% gave a neutral response. Nine percent said it would be hard for them to deal with learning they were less vital than they thought and 15% gave a neutral response.

While most pastors gave "healthy" responses, relatively few gave strong healthy responses. By this I mean that they tended to agree or disagree with statements rather than strongly agreeing or strongly disagreeing. The implications of this are not clear. For example, is there a practical difference between those who agreed that they could successfully address issues that negatively impact vitality (64%) and those who strongly agreed that they could address those issues (8%)? Further research will need to take up that question.

In summary, the following concepts seem to go together:

- If some pastors are presented with the fact that their congregation is less vital than they thought, they would experience shame. Shame goes along with feelings of regret and the prospect of shame and regret appears to make some pastors feel less able to deal with information that their congregation is less vital than they think.
- When pastors are interested in intentionally improving their congregation's vitality they are more open to doing additional assessments and to involving lay leaders and members in the evaluation. These pastors do not appear to associate a less vital congregation with feelings of shame.

Self-Evaluation & Control items

When self-evaluation questions were correlated with control questions very few of them produced significant correlations.

- Pastors who felt that members were growing in relationship to God also said that volunteer leaders would provide valuable information about vitality ($r=.39$). This makes sense because it suggests that the volunteer leaders will be responding to vitality questions out of their strong relationships with God and it is reasonable to believe that healthy pastors would want that. It is also reasonable to believe that if pastors (healthy or not) feel like their leaders don't have particularly strong relationships with God, they may not be comfortable trusting what those members might say, particularly if there is stress in the relationship between pastor and leaders.



- Congregations with lower vitality scores were less likely to say they would be happy if they did an additional study of vitality in their congregation and learned they were vital ($r=-.30$). That was a bit surprising at first since one might think they would be happy to be proven wrong. It suggests that there is something bigger going on than ignorance. It is possible that pastors who already feel badly about their congregation's vitality don't want to be told that their perception of the congregation is off. That might suggest a problem within themselves or their perceptions rather than with the congregation.

Conclusions & Recommendations

All of this suggests that, while some of the responding congregations may have experienced some degree of denial resulting in slightly inflated estimates of vitality, this is probably not the primary cause of the DEM's observed overstatement of vitality on the annual reports. This study suggests that the primary cause may have more to do with fourth potential cause listed: "Pastors are aware that their congregation's vitality was lower, but intentionally misrepresented it on the annual report". This report suggests that at least some of those reasons may be related to a sense of personal responsibility, shame and helplessness. However, the pastors who are probably impacted the most by this condition were probably not the ones who responded to this survey.

While these results are not comprehensive enough to be conclusive, this study points toward a different hypothesis.

Emotions appear to be a very important part of what is going on. When pastors feel their congregation is less vital than they would like it to be, that they are in large part responsible for the congregation's vitality, and they do not think that their efforts can improve the situation, they are not likely to want to do any kind of assessment or even talk about vitality. For them, the easier road is to simply avoid the subject and hope no one calls attention to it. If DEMs are right, this problem may be present in hundreds or perhaps thousands of ELCA congregations. While the issue looks like denial, it does not act like the kind of subconscious denial associated with substance abuse. Rather this kind of denial is a bit closer to the surface and its borders are well defended by some pastors who may feel threatened by questions.

If that is the case, then it raises several substantial questions for the ELCA. The first question may focus on the pastors and what drives them to avoid the real issues that may be confronting their congregations as well as their own leadership style. No one wants to look at their own inadequacies or perceived failings. These feelings are compounded by the fact that pastors operate in a public area where they are very vulnerable to their communities' perceptions and where their livelihoods are at stake. It is natural for any person in this position to be deeply concerned about their vulnerability, particularly when most pastors are deeply impacted by how others perceive them (making them effective and empathetic while at the same time very vulnerable to personal attacks from their congregation). The church must ask how pastors can be encouraged to look honestly at their congregation's vitality as well as their own leadership.



The larger church (especially synods and seminaries) may want to wonder with pastors how they can engage questions of vitality (which may challenge both themselves and their congregation members) without jeopardizing their own self-esteem or their relationship with the congregation.

The larger church must further ask what it is about the ELCA's system that reinforces this kind of behavior? If pastors were more forthright on their annual reports, what kind of response would they get from synods and the churchwide organization? Over the years, on several surveys and in many conversations, pastors have expressed reluctance to be forthright with their synod. Reasons vary from fear of unwanted attention, fear of being looked down upon by a Bishop or synod staff or their colleagues, fear of not getting a future call, etc. Similarly, synods have expressed anxiety about how they are perceived by the churchwide organization and what impact that may have on everything from personal relationships to future grant applications. As long as trust throughout the ELCA's ecosystem is low and perceived failure of the church at large and congregations in particular is high, it is unlikely that we will see a substantial change in behavior in any expression of the church.

A final question must be asked about how people perceive God in all this. Prior research shows that how people perceive God has an impact on their behavior and how they judge their own congregations.¹⁵ Is God out there judging and approving or condemning us with the rest of the world? Is God rescuing or forgiving from a distance? Is God walking along side and within congregations as they struggle to find new ways of engaging God's mission in their communities? Each perspective on God's role evokes a different set of emotions and behaviors. Those concerned about God's judgement for perceived failure may be more reluctant to take risks than those who feel God will rescue them if they fall. Those who imagine God in the distance watching may be less willing to try new things than those who sense God's presence beside them as they walk forward in faith. Beyond impacting a congregation's willingness to risk, a sense of God's negative judgement can weigh heavily on pastors and congregations, stirring a sense of guilt or failure, and negatively impacting their willingness to do anything – much less do something new and risky. Any efforts to address the perceived vitality of congregations and how it is addressed will need to consider and potentially address how leadership understands and communicates God's role in their midst.

Given all this information, I suggest that following may be areas that can help move the church forward:

- Look for the ways perceptions of God's presence impacts people's behaviors and have open conversations about those observations. Help people examine their assumptions about God in relationship to the Biblical witness. Intentionally talk about God's active and presence among us here and now – in our congregations, synods, churchwide and in our communities.

¹⁵ "Competing Frameworks: How Theoretical and Theological Frameworks Influence Congregational Renewal Efforts and Color External Evaluations," Luther Seminary, Master of Arts Thesis, http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1038&context=ma_theses



- Stop reinforcing a success/failure model of congregations. Rather, adopt an attitude of experimentation that allows for and even expects failure, but expects to learn from it. Look for all the places this philosophy comes across in each part of the ecosystem and be intentional about shifting it.
- Use the Roxborough model of adaptive change to describe what is happening throughout the church.¹⁶ This model shifts blame for decline and perceived failure from the congregation alone to larger social shifts and the congregation's ability to adapt to those shifts. It also opens the door to talk about the need for adaptive change.
- Engage congregations in the steps of adaptive change. The ELCA has demonstrated through Campaign funded experiments that adaptive change practices (discernment, listening, experimentation, and reflection) allow congregations to let go of their guilt around failure and begin a new journey with God into the future.¹⁷
- Create various kinds of healthy forums/networks for pastors (and other congregational leaders) to have safe, honest conversations about their congregation's vitality and their own effectiveness. Encourage experimentation and support pastors and congregations in their failures as well as their successes.
- Find a way to get anonymous information about what is being learned in these forums so that groups can learn from one another and the entire church can grow and support one another in new ways.

While there are many reasons congregations may not share their most forthright assessment of vitality on annual reports, this report highlights and affirms what many leaders, teachers, and consultants have observed over the years. Emotions play a big role in pastors understand and engage their congregations in God's mission. They no doubt also play a large role in how the wider church responds to congregations and pastors as they engage or fail to engage in God's mission. Any efforts to improve congregational vitality (increase its engagement in God's mission) will need to intentionally address the role and impact of both negative and positive emotions.

¹⁶ Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, vol. 17 (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

¹⁷ Linda Bobbitt, "Campaign Funded Synod Strategy: First Year Update," <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/Research/Synod%20Strategy%20one%20year%20summary.pdf>.



Appendix 1: Interview questions

For the purposes of this survey, the definition of “vitality” is how much your church experiences God's active presence in every-day life and lives as disciples of Christ. That is, how much are you connected to God, each other, and the world.

(Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) There are multiple dimensions of congregational vitality and I would be interested in reflecting on this congregation's vitality in new ways.

2. I would feel happy if I learned that this congregation is vital.
3. I believe the vitality of this congregation is a clear indicator of my competency as a leader.
4. I don't believe a vitality assessment is particularly useful as this congregation plans for its future.
5. If a new assessment showed that this congregation is not as vital as I thought, I believe I could successfully address the issues negatively impacting its vitality.
6. I believe I have the ability to be very objective in assessing the vitality of this congregation.
7. It would be difficult for me to deal with an evaluation should I learn that this congregation is not as vital as I thought.
8. There are things I should learn to improve the vitality of this congregation.
9. Members of the congregation would provide valuable information needed to evaluate the vitality of our congregation.
10. I would feel personally shamed if this congregation is not as vital as I thought.
11. Volunteer congregational leadership would provide valuable information needed to evaluate the vitality of this congregation.

Rating Scale: (A lot, Very little, Neutral, Not at all)

12. Imagine that you chose to learn more about this congregation's vitality. How much do you anticipate regretting that decision later?
13. Imagine that you chose NOT to learn more about this congregation's vitality. How much do you anticipate regretting that decision later?

(Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) Members of this congregation are growing in their relationship with God.

15. This congregation is active in ways that bring people in our community into relationship with God.



16. This congregation is active in ways that change lives in our communities.

17. Please describe the social climate you are currently experiencing in this congregation using the following scale.

- This congregation's social groups live together in harmony.
- There is tension among different groups. It feels like there are sides being taken on issues.
- The sides in this congregation result in open but respectful disagreements.
- The sides in this congregation are in conflict that is harmful to the congregation at large.

18. Concerning the last question, had this changed in the last 6 months? (Yes/No)

19. This congregation is always ready to try something new. (*Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree*)

20. Please describe your congregation's overall vitality in terms of its relationships with God, one another and their neighbor.

- Becoming less connected with God, each other and neighbor.
- Weak
- Neutral
- Strong
- Growing deeper and/or wider with God, each other and neighbor.

21. We are interested in understanding the relationship between a congregation's connections to God, each other and their neighbor, and their resources. Given your congregation's current resources (people/money) describe the sustainability of this congregation.

- I am not sure this congregation will survive much longer.
- Losing ground, but still viable.
- Able to maintain ministry.
- Able to grow ministry.

22. How long have you been at this congregation?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 5-10 years
- Over 10 years



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