

Summary of Congregational Vitality Project Lessons Learned – 2017

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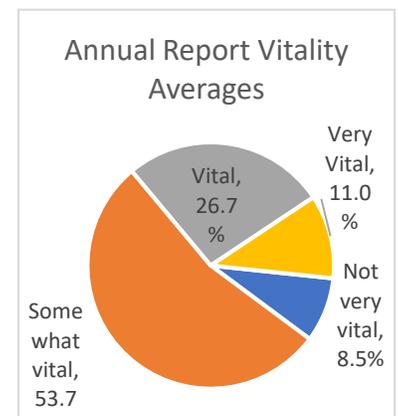
The Congregational Vitality Project was created to deepen the ELCA's understanding of congregational vitality: what it means, how vital we are now, how vitality can be cultivated, and how the ELCA can foster cultivation.

What is Congregational Vitality?

A vital congregation is one that has strong, mutual relationships with God, each other and the world. The same may be said of each expression within the church. It is through these relationships that the Holy Spirit flows as the church lives into the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

How vital are ELCA congregations?

- [2015 Annual report data](#) from congregations (completed in 2016) asked 15 questions about vitality. 75% of all congregations answered these questions. The items may be averaged to create a [vitality score](#) from 1 (poor) – 3 (somewhat) -5 (great). This is not a perfect measurement of the concept of vitality, but it does give us a baseline understanding of how leaders see their congregation's relationships with God, each other and the world. The pie chart shows all responding ELCA congregations grouped by scores. Very vital = over 4.5, Vital – 4.0-4.4, Somewhat vital – 3.0-3.9, Not very vital = <3.0. As the pie chart shows, less than 40% of ELCA congregations considered themselves vital or very vital. When this information was shared with Directors for Evangelical Mission (DEMs) across the country, the consensus was that this was optimistic.
- New ministries (organized for less than three years or still in development) have higher vitality scores. Unfortunately, many are very small and not able to financially support the current expenses of their ministries.
- [When individual items are examined](#), most congregations rated themselves “great” in having worship that nurtures faith and being a positive force in the community. Most said they were “somewhat” good or worse at equipping people to share their faith, incorporating newcomers into congregational life, seeking out and using the gifts of people of all ages, advocating for social justice, or being willing to try new things.
- African National congregations said they were significantly better at equipping people to share their faith than all other ethnic groups. Otherwise, multi-ethnic and ethnic specific ministries are not significantly different from White congregations in their average vitality scores.
- DEMs working to transform congregations observe that many lay and rostered leaders lack basic leadership skills and/or capacity to make necessary changes (e.g. decision making, deep listening, setting and achieving goals, collaboration, having difficult or emotional conversations, big picture thinking, etc.).
- The fact that leaders in most ELCA congregations do not feel that they do these mission critical functions well makes it clear that the ELCA is not responding to God's call as intended. While not universal, this lack of missional behavior in the church is pervasive. Technical changes have not been effective. It is time for genuine, intentional and strategic adaptive change throughout the ecosystem. As the Tiger Team report stated, “There is enough urgency when 75% of management is genuinely convinced that the status quo is more dangerous than launching into the unknown.” “This is not the time to tinker.”



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How can vitality be cultivated?

Twelve synods have been working intentionally with specific congregations over one or more years to teach them skills that will allow them to become more focused on their relationships with God, one another and the world. Below are initial findings based on follow-up with participating congregations.

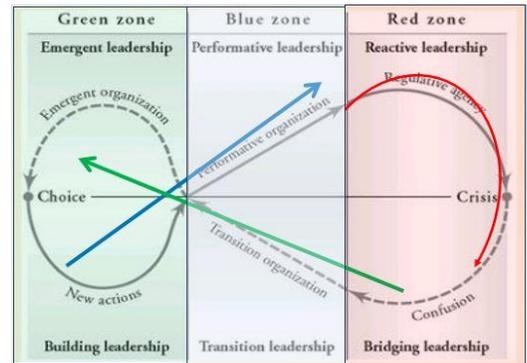
- The action-reflection model of learning seems to work with most congregations. This includes the cycle of listening (to God, each other and neighbor), reflecting, experimenting, reflecting. Learning happens through reflection on what happened during the action (listening or experimenting).
- Transformation only happens when it is done well. Congregations should follow the seven Is:
 - Investment: Invested in the process emotionally, spiritually, relationally and willing to put in the time and energy required.
 - Imagination: Open to, and expecting imaginations to be expanded.
 - Intentionality: Intentional this work, setting aside time and space, and holding themselves accountable to the process and expecting change to be an outcome.
 - Inspiration: See the Holy Spirit as guiding this effort and trust in the Spirit's agency.
 - Intimacy: Know one another and be invested in the wellbeing of each other.
 - Integration: In mutual relationships with the community.
 - Internal: Leadership and buy-in come from both lay and clergy within the congregation.
- Congregations that fail to fully engage discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting, using the seven Is, experience less transformation than those that fully engage the process.
- Some congregations fail to take spiritual practices seriously or see it as critical piece of their work. Without sound, spiritual practices little progress is made.
- Congregations must be intentional and work hard to get the lessons learned by the team into the regular practice of the larger congregation. Resistance is to be expected, intentionally planned for, and addressed repeatedly over time.
- Shifts in missional imagination appear to precede shifts in missional behavior.
- This process is slow. It may take years to see substantial shifts, especially in congregations that have stalled (see change cycle below). However, seeds planted early on do often bear fruit two or more years later. Patience is warranted. Nearly every participating congregation experienced positive impacts in attitudes if not behaviors.
- Congregations with low internal trust or dysfunctional patterns have difficulty succeeding and may be harmed by this process because the it requires intentional change which raises tension even in healthy settings.
- It is hard to keep the momentum going over the course of these strategies. It is hard for congregations to make this a top priority rather than one more thing.
- Even when congregations accomplish expanded missional imagination and increased missional behavior they do not necessarily gain increased sustainability in the form of more people or financial resources. Issues of sustainability may need to be addressed more intentionally and directly. In addition, it may necessary for the church to expand its imaginations about sustainability. We need to look beyond the current "box, book, preacher" model which requires a congregation of over 100 to sustain. Other models serve Lutheran churches around the globe and may be helpful to consider here.

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Adopt for a new theoretical/theological model of change

[A new theoretical and theological framework of change:](#)

For more than 20 years, the ELCA has relied on a model of congregational change that was developed by Rothauge in 1996. Since then research and theorists have developed new models based on the significant cultural changes of the past two decades. The three-colored graphic describes the cycle of adaptive change for congregations.¹ Changes in the larger culture push congregations (and denominations) continually around the cycle. There is no stage of “success” where a congregation remains. There is no stage of failure where the congregation goes if they don’t perform well. The key to vitality is how the congregation lives into their relationship with God at each stage. Transformation happens when congregations learn to hear the call of the Holy Spirit and allow themselves to be transformed by it as they move around the figure eight.



Congregations moving from green to blue (along the blue arrow) are building up their ministry based on their initial identity and sense of mission. Those in the red zone are realizing that their efforts no longer have the desired effect. They may have lost touch with their sense of call or their original mission may need to be reimagined. A vital congregation is one that asks, are we still called to ministry in this time and place and if so, why? The “crisis” represents the time when congregations come to terms with this question and begin to answer it. Sometimes, the answer is “no”, especially when the congregation is no longer sustainable. Then the congregation closes freeing up resources for the Spirit to use elsewhere. If the answer is yes for the sake of the community, then congregations start letting go of who they were and become open to who God is calling them to be next. This moves them along the green arrow. It is a time of forming a new identity through discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting.

DEMs have found that congregations in different stages need different kinds of support. Congregations along the red and green arrows often need more accompaniment than those moving along the blue arrow. Sometimes congregations stall at the top of the red zone, trying to rebuild their past and avoiding the missional questions until their resources run too low to move beyond the crisis. However, if congregations engage these questions while they still have resources and energy it is easier to move around the corner and build a new identity and ministry. There are many examples of this happening and many more of congregations waiting too long and running out of human and financial resources.

[How the ELCA can foster the cultivation of vitality](#)

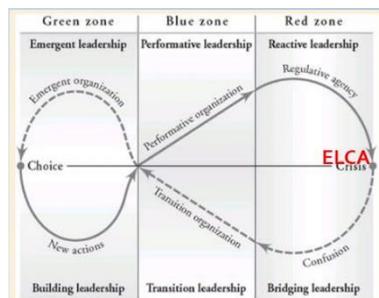
Questions matter! Asking the right questions helps us embrace a hopeful but different future.

If vitality scores are any indication, most ELCA congregations are approaching or at the top of the red zone. Many have been there so long that they are struggling to remain open. To get unstuck, congregations need to stop asking “church questions” (e.g. How do we fix the church?) and start asking “God questions” (e.g. “What is God doing and how do we join?”). Church questions limit their imagined solutions to past versions of what it means to be “fixed”. God questions allow them to see opportunities and imagine new, more contextually relevant image of success. Synods have seen that when congregations change their questions it is like getting new lenses in glasses. Opportunities that were always there are now visible.

¹ 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).

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The questions asked by the denomination's evaluator have a substantial impact on congregations. When denomination's focus on fixing the church by holding congregations accountable for numeric growth, stewardship, etc., most congregations will attend to these issues without addressing the deeper spiritual issues involved. However, if the evaluator asks God questions and holds congregations accountable for doing spiritual and adaptive work, then congregations begin looking forward toward what God is doing and see new opportunities. If the ELCA can begin focusing more on God questions, it will allow us to follow the adaptive process of letting go of the boxes that limit our imagination to see what new things God is creating.



Biblical and historical precedent for this cycle.

There is consensus that the changes facing the ELCA and all mainline denominations is brought about by societal changes including the secularization and anti-institution attitudes of western culture. But this is nothing new. There is biblical precedent for religious cultural identities shifting between a hierarchical identity (church is an institution at center of society) and an decentralized expression (church in relationships). Examples include

the Israelites going to the Holy Land, into exile, and then back to the Holy Land. Later, Jesus came in a Temple centered culture that shifted after the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD. In both cases, the established culture had become focused non-missional things and clung to ideals of the past, losing track of God's mission in favor of institutional traditions. The decentralized time was one of extreme creativity and the evolution of a new, stronger, God-centered identity. This time produced both Old and New Testament writings articulating new understandings of the relationship between God and God's people. These understandings became a new identity which later drove the ecclesial foundation of new institutional structures. Similar parallels may be drawn from the reformation and subsequent orthodox and pietism movements. Now the cultural pendulum is swinging again and the ELCA, like all mainline denominations is caught up in it. This is an exciting time when the Spirit is doing a new thing, sparking creativity in the margins that will inform a new call. We are privileged to be part it. The most faithful thing we can do now is to keep moving forward rather than attempting to reclaim a past that doesn't make since in today's culture.

Identity drives structure. Encourage the models for church that are rising on the edges.

Many of the ELCA's congregations are doing what they were designed to do: be a place where Lutherans gather for worship, have fellowship and do good things for their communities. That model made sense when Christian faith was part of the cultural air and everyone had it. People were claimed by God at birth and baptized into a family where faith was part of everyday life for nearly everyone. The church gathered and sent them into the world. For much of the USA, that world has past and rates of secularity continue to increase in the West.

In some places the Claimed, Gathered, Sent model is shifting to a Sent, Gathered, Claimed model. People (especially millennials) feel sent by a strong sense of passion into the world to work in areas like social and environmental justice. They wonder about the meaning and purpose behind their passion so they gather, often in small groups, to explore it. In these places, they sometimes learn about God's love for both them and the object of their passion. Through this exploration, they discover that they are claimed by God and have been serving as God's instrument all along. Some new and existing ELCA churches are already tapping into this phenomena by forming new small groups or new worshipping communities. In this way they are catching up with the Holy Spirit.

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There are many other models of church emerging. In some congregation's people ignited by the Spirit sell their building so that they can engage in mission in new ways. Some of these nest within others congregations or rent retail space. Other congregations look for more creative ways to use their facilities as assets for the community. They go beyond renting out space or allowing non-profits to use it. Instead they develop mutual relationships with the community where the building becomes one of their contributions to a larger collaborative effort. Some congregations are joining together in Area Ministry Strategies designed to collaboratively move mission forward in an entire community rather than through individual congregations. These are only some examples of the way the Holy Spirit is sparking the imaginations of people across this church.

Cultivating an adaptive denomination

The ELCA has an opportunity to embrace this exciting time by intentionally looking for what God is doing and allowing itself to be molded by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is already using adaptive change processes to evolve the ELCA's identity as it is experienced across the Church. This work must be cultivated and encouraged throughout the entire ecosystem simultaneously. It can't be controlled, managed, communicated or directed. The ELCA can learn to create an environment of discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting. To do that it will need to allow people time and space for this intentional process to occur.

The ELCA can learn how to become a learning organization where both knowledge and wisdom is cultivated and shared among practitioners. The Vitality Implementation Team is gathering experienced people from within and outside the church to discuss ways the church can learn how to learn. Specific suggestions for how the ELCA can create an environment that encourages adaptive practices will be forthcoming within six months. But it is critical that this work not be done in a silo (e.g. within Domestic Mission alone), otherwise any sparks generated will be snuffed out by the larger system. The seven Is apply to this effort as much as they do to congregations. Cultivating vitality begins by cultivating genuine trusting and mutual relationships with God, each other and the world.

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