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Study guide

Led by the Spirit

Congregations are energized by what God is doing in their midst

By Robert C. Blezard

For years the two primary measures of congregational vitality have been worship attendance and congregational income. But counting only “butts” (in the pews) and “bucks” (in the offering plate) can be misleading. Some wealthy and well-attended congregations may have a lackluster church life and no community engagement, whereas financially struggling congregations may exude a robust spiritual life and strong community ties. Recognizing these limitations, our denomination is now emphasizing the many ways that congregations can find life and vitality. Through stories, education and training, the ELCA is reframing our understanding of church vitality.

Exercise 1: Vitality to you

“Butts and bucks” has long served as not only the traditional measure of congregational vitality, but also in many instances the primary one.

- Why have these twin measurements served so long? What is useful about them? Why are they easy? What are their limitations?
- How would *you* define congregational vitality? What marks or signs would identify a congregation as vital? Make a list of them.
- What is the most vital congregation you can think of? How do you know they are vital? What are the indications? What makes them so special? What makes them “tick”? What do they have that other congregations lack?
- In what ways is your congregation vital? How is that vitality evidenced in church life? In outreach? In worship? In service?

Exercise 2: Vitality explored

The ELCA Conference of Bishops, which consists of all 65 synod bishops and Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, has crafted a useful “working definition” that is simple and descriptive: Vitality is found in “communities of Jesus that nurture life-changing relationships with God, one another and the world.”

- What is a “community of Jesus”? How would you know one if you encountered one? What would the signs be? How would you expect them to act? Relate to one another? Relate to the world?



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- Is every gathering of Christians a “community of Jesus”? Why or why not? Does a “community of Jesus necessarily have to be a congregation?”
- How would you describe a life-changing relationship? In what ways would it differ from an ordinary relationship? Can you give an example of a life-changing relationship?
- How does a church nurture “life-changing relationships”? How does *your* church so nurture? If a church is not nourishing life-changing relationships, can it truly achieve vitality? Why or why not?
- How can a relationship with God be life-changing? How has your life changed as a result of your relationship with God? If a relationship with God isn't life-changing, or at least moving in that direction, what does that say about it?
- How can a relationship be “life-changing” with our neighbors and the world? In what ways can a congregation nurture such relationships? In what concrete ways have you seen this take place? How does your congregation do this? Why is having life-changing relationships with our neighbors a mark of vitality?
- Looking at the bishops' definition, what are the external measures by which one would gauge vitality? Would money in the offering plates and people in the pews be a good measure?
- Why is relationship a key to vitality? Why is nourishing relationships a key to vitality? Why is it key that these relationships be life-changing?

Exercise 3: Love God and neighbor

Asked which was the most important of the hundreds of laws and commandments that some Jews of Jesus' day wrestled with, Jesus replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:30-31).

- Jesus' answer reveals God's two priorities for humankind. What are they? Think of the Ten Commandments and other directives expressed throughout the Bible. How do they relate to these two main priorities? Can't they be subsumed under one or the other?
- What are the external measures for loving God with our whole being? How do you know whether you are actually following this commandment?
- What are the external measures for loving our neighbor as ourselves? How do you know when you are obeying this commandment?
- What is the relationship between a congregation's vitality and their attention to these two commandments? How does the Conference of Bishops' definition of vitality (explored in the previous exercise) fit into God's two priorities for God's people?



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Exercise 4: Love God

We are to love God with all our being as the No. 1 priority for our lives. How does this happen? How and where do we learn to do this? What brings us closer to loving God with all we are?

Here's a chicken-and-egg question: Which comes first: loving God or having faith in God? What is the interrelationship between the two questions? If you have deepening faith, how does that lead to a greater love for God? If you have a growing love for God, how does that lead to a deeper faith? Which came first for you: faith or love of God?

In *Real Faith for Real Life* (Augsburg Fortress, 2004), Lutheran pastor and author Michael Foss describes six spiritual practices that will help Christians know and love God more fully:

- Pray daily.
- Read Scripture daily.
- Attend church weekly.
- Serve church and community.
- Cultivate spiritual relationships.
- Give a tithe and beyond.

Discuss:

- Which of these practices have you undertaken with regularity? What has been the result?
- How do these spiritual practices help us know and love God more fully?
- For which of them is belonging to a community of Jesus necessary?
- For which is belonging to a community of Jesus helpful?
- For churches, what higher purpose is there besides helping people to love God more fully?

Exercise 5: Neighborly

Over the years since its founding in 1948, Reformation Lutheran Church, in the old downtown section of Las Vegas, had lost touch with its community. It found new vitality when the congregation began to reach out to their neighbors, not only serving them but entering into partnership and relationship with the people near the church.

- How would you describe your congregation's relationship with nearby neighbors? Was it always as it is now, or was there a more robust relationship in years past? What happened? As the relationship with close neighbors changed, how did that affect congregational vitality?
- Through what ministries does your congregation serve its nearby neighbors? Looking at each serving ministry, would you characterize it as transactional or relational? (For instance, if you serve a community meal but your church volunteers mostly just stay in



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the kitchen, that is a transactional service. But if you have a meal where the church and community members sit together and have conversation, that is a relational.)

- Why is it easier to develop and maintain transactional service ministries than relational ministries?
- Would transactional service or relational service ministries be more conducive to congregational vitality? Why?

Exercise 6: Mission and purpose

Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey, El Paso, Texas, discovered vitality through its dedication to an important ministry in their context. Situated in a city alongside Mexico, *Cristo Rey* has found purpose in offering immersion experiences to Americans who want to see what is really happening on the Mexican border. They also work to assist Latin American refugees who make it to the United States and need help acclimating.

- Why would vitality come from a focused ministry that was critically important not only to the community but to the wider society?
- What ministries does your congregation support in your community or region? How important are they? How do they affect your congregation's vitality?
- What critically important community needs might your congregation meet—or better meet? Explain.
- How might that affect your congregational vitality?

Exercise 7: Vital partnerships

Working together, congregations often find they can do more, be more and achieve greater vitality than they would by working alone.

- What church partnerships have you seen work in your context? What have you observed?
- Does your church collaborate on any ministries? What are they? How has collaboration benefited the ministry and the church?
- Can vitality be learned? Modeled? Taught? How? Can it spread?
- “Anchor church” models work when larger congregations with more resources are able to walk alongside smaller congregations that may be struggling. Why does this work? In what ways can a mentor church provide a new vision for vitality, as well as a strategy for integrating vital practices?
- Looking at your context, what partnerships might help your congregation achieve greater vitality? In what partnerships might your congregation assist another in becoming more vital?

LED BY THE SPIRIT

Congregations are energized by what God is doing in their midst

By Robert C. Blezard

In a changing world, the ELCA is now focusing on congregational vitality, which the ELCA Conference of Bishops described by saying vitality is found in communities of Jesus that nurture life-changing relationships with God, one another and the world. The description is fluid and adaptable to the highly contextual nature of ministry.

This new way of looking at congregations came to be because the two traditional measurements for congregational health—people in pews and money in the offering plate—don't always tell a full story. Many congregations with tight budgets and slim attendance are vital, while others with plenty of people and money lack a similar level of energy.

“Congregational vitality is more [about] describing the ways in which the Spirit of God is providing life, energy, a sense of mission and direction and nourishment to the body of Christ,” said Ruben Duran, director for congregational vitality.

The concept is grounded in Lutheran theology, which holds that it's the Spirit that brings faith to people and gathers, sustains and leads the church.

“There are so many ways the Spirit gives life and sustains the church all over the world,” Duran said.

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Joel Rothe, pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church, Denver, and youth greet Delores Arndt during their December Las Posadas procession, which entailed participants visiting homes in the neighborhood, singing and commemorating Mary and Joseph's journey.

Photo: From the Hip Photo





The celebration of Las Posadas brought together members of Christ the King and its anchor church, Abiding Hope Lutheran in Littleton, Colo.

Photos: From the Hip Photo



Rothe (right) hopes Christ the King can be a place where authentic community can be formed among people of varied backgrounds.

Anchored in partnership

After her struggling congregation closed its doors in 2011, Mary Anne McKenzie joined Christ the King Lutheran in Denver, but it, too, faced serious problems of declining membership, tight finances and an aging building. Soon, Christ the King was weighing its final option. “We had gone as far as having a realtor come in to assess the facility,” she said.

A fresh start came in 2016 when the congregation partnered with Abiding Hope Lutheran, Littleton, Colo. A mega-congregation, Abiding Hope covenanted to be an “anchor church” and provide money and leadership to help Christ the King get back on its feet.

“That does not mean we take them over; it means we walk alongside them,” said Doug Hill, pastor of Abiding Hope, explaining the anchor church relationship it has with Christ the King and two other congregations. “It’s not transactional. It really is accompaniment. It’s partnership.”

Abiding Hope brought in strong pastoral leadership, administration assistance and volunteers, and guided Christ the King in forming a new vision.

The support took the pressure and workload off leaders, enabling them to catch their breath and refocus, McKenzie said, adding, “The people at Christ the King could get back into doing what they wanted to do, which was to minister—minister to the neighborhood, minister to ourselves—and kind of replant our feet and say, ‘OK, now where do we go from here?’ ”

Christ the King has been reconnecting with the neighborhood through initiatives such as

a community garden and a midweek Spanish-language service. It’s now renovating the fellowship hall into what its pastor, Joel Rothe, envisions as welcoming space for neighbors to gather.

“We want it to be a true space where community can be formed across many different lines of identity and ethnicity and belief,” he said. “We really want our campus to be a safe place for authentic community to be formed.”

“I really see this as the future of the church—making use of the resources, leadership and creativity of some of the larger churches to provide this stability needed for new mission starts, as well as struggling smaller churches.”

Being an anchor church is just one of many grassroots strategies bringing congregational vitality across the ELCA. In this new initiative, the denomination is focusing on sharing the ways that congregations are achieving vitality in their context.

“That’s the paradigm shift,” Duran said. “It is not another program of the church. It’s an emphasis. It’s taking a look at where we are, what we are based on, what the Spirit is already doing in our community.”

The hope is to help the ELCA become more of a learning community—sharing good ideas, best practices and successful models.

“I’m assuming, with joy, the responsibility of connecting all over the country, trying to gather descriptions of vitality already present in our church and then, as we do that, we will become more and more a learning community,” Duran said.

For instance, the church is teaching synodical leaders and pastors of large congregations how the anchor church model is successfully used by Abiding Hope and others, including Christ Lutheran in Charlotte, N.C, which is one church across three campuses.

“I really see this as the future of the church—making use of the resources, leadership and creativity of some of the larger churches to provide this stability needed for new mission starts, as well as struggling smaller churches,” said Scott Suskovic, a pastor of Christ Lutheran. They use a different anchor church model than Abiding Hope—adoption rather than accompaniment.

When Christ Lutheran “adopted” Family of Faith in nearby Concord, the struggling congregation transitioned to become Christ Concord. As one church with three campuses, Christ Lutheran upholds a common vision and identity but works with leaders from each campus.

Family of Faith gave up autonomy to enter the agreement, but it gained so much more, said Ralph Meyer, a longtime member. The congregation had been under constant stress and didn’t know what to do. When Christ Lutheran came into the picture, it seemed a godsend. “We were all in,” Meyer said.

As part of Christ Lutheran, the congregation draws from the resources of a larger organization, providing financial stability and greater expertise in leadership. Now free of anxiety about surviving, the congregation is able to focus on mission and ministry.

“Now we say, ‘All right, what can we do to serve this community? And we’re looking outward and not inward,’” Meyer said.

The anchor church model holds much promise as more and more larger congregations get involved, Duran said, but congregational vitality can be found in many contexts as the Spirit leads people to work in bold, creative, missional ways.

A significant call

Energy flows to a congregation when it’s involved in an invaluable ministry among God’s people. That’s the case for *Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey*, El Paso, Texas. On the border of Juarez, Mexico, *Cristo Rey* has found mission and purpose in helping refugees from Latin America and offering immersion experiences for North Americans to learn about immigration and the border, said Rose Mary Sánchez-Guzmán, its pastor.

Immersion participants meet refugees, undocumented migrants, U.S. Border Patrol officers, immigration lawyers and others involved in border culture. Through the chain-link fence that separates the countries, they talk with Mexicans about life in their country and working conditions in the U.S.-owned factories across the border. They learn about the poverty and hardship that is part of daily life for Mexicans, immigrants and refugees.

Cristo Rey partners with other churches and organizations to provide welcoming centers to assist refugees who arrive without means or connections. Border immersion, refugee assistance and an after-school program help the congregation stay spiritually connected and vital.

“Spiritually, it has changed our congregation,” Sánchez-Guzmán said, adding that although *Cristo Rey* is small in membership and its members aren’t

Children present projects during worship at *Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey*, El Paso, Texas. *Cristo Rey* has an after-school program that connects many families who start worshipping at the congregation. The program’s goal is to help kids graduate from high school.



Photo: J. Michael Nielsen

wealthy, they've opened their hearts and lives to their border neighbors. Despite long odds and big challenges, there always seems to be sufficient numbers of volunteers and resources.

"Part of it, I think, is just finding what God is calling us to do and just doing it, and not worrying about not being so big. We're not worrying about being in competition with any other congregation," she said. "I think it's just knowing who we are and what God is calling us to do."

Redevelop and reconnect

Reformation was the first Lutheran church in Las Vegas when it started in 1948 in the middle of the city, but the downtown's expansion—and prosperity—grew at the edges.

By 2014, Reformation was struggling in a struggling neighborhood when it partnered with the Grand Canyon Synod to be a redevelopment congregation. The agreement provided finances and other support, and it paved the way for Jason Adams to be called as redevelopment pastor, trained to help bring new vitality to a tired congregation.

"Redevelopment has always been about reconnecting in the community," Adams said. "I think that's what congregational vitality is—living out discipleship. How do we love God? Love one another? Serve our neighbor. That's vital! That's what being vital is!"

To reconnect to old downtown Las Vegas, Reformation renewed its ties with other churches, agencies and organizations. It started a daily meal program where isolated older adults find friendship, as well as nourishment. Reformation also opened its unused education rooms to RISE Education Resource Center, a home-school group, in one of many efforts to bring the community to the church.

"Over a dozen 12-step groups meet here, and we have 1,100 people who set foot on this campus every month," Adams said. "They may not always be worshiping with us, but they are certainly part of this community and affected by this church."

"I think it's just knowing who we are and what God is calling us to do."

Reformation continues its long-standing outreach and services, such as the Family Promise ministry for homeless families. At its volunteer-run thrift shop, Martin's Mart, people in need can get clothing and household necessities for much less cost than even other thrift stores.

"We have customers that come in and say that if Martin's Mart was not there, they could not live here and survive," said Judy Schacht, the Reformation member who manages the store.

Altogether, revitalization efforts have brought

For more than 40 years, members of Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, have helped operate Martin's Mart, a ministry that provides clothing and basic necessities at a low cost to people who need them.



Photo: Elizabeth Brumley/Las Vegas Review-Journal

visibility, energy, relevance and people to Reformation, Adams said. “We’re trusting in God’s promise that ‘I will be with you even to the end of the age,’” he said. “On our sign here, it says, ‘We are sharing the heart of Christ in the heart of the city.’”

Transformational ministry

The Indiana-Kentucky Synod is sharing with the wider church a revitalization course it developed for its congregations. The name describes the goal and process: Connect. Specifically, the course connects people and congregations to Jesus, one another and the world.

Connect brings together teams from congregations for a two-year process of training and education that teaches practices and principles in four segments called “links,” said Nancy Nyland, the synod’s director for evangelical mission. “In the first link we focus on spiritual transformation because we know if people in congregations aren’t transforming spiritually, no other transformation is going to take place,” she said.

In the Connect process, each team has homework, tasks to be accomplished and a coach who provides accountability. Having accomplished two cycles of training, the results are encouraging.

“The first kind of transformation that we’ve seen in all the congregations is that people are stepping into new roles,” Nyland said, adding that this raises the level of energy, leadership and volunteerism. “Other pieces of transformation that we are seeing are a willingness to change, a willingness to experiment and try some new things.”

Connect has made a big difference for Gethsemane Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, which four years ago was very inward-focused, running out of money and considering closing, said its pastor, Barbara Dahl.

But things are really moving now. Gethsemane is reaching out to bring together senior citizens who live in apartments on one side of the property with families and children who live in apartments on the other side. A group of people with cognitive disabilities also has begun meeting at the church.

Gethsemane has embraced a new spirit of welcome and opportunity. “It’s been a real turnaround as far as the attitude of the congregation,” Dahl said. “We rarely think about ourselves. We’re still running in the red, but, somehow, we’re still paying the bills and nobody seems to fret about that. It’s more, you know, how do we keep connecting with others?”

Transformation is at the heart of a similar project underway in Pennsylvania’s Lower Susquehanna Synod. R3—short for reFORM,



Photo: Elizabeth Brumley/Las Vegas Review-Journal

Judy Schacht, a member of Reformation, manages Martin’s Mart. The store is run by volunteers, and store proceeds are donated to charitable organizations every year.

reNEW, reVISION—brings together teams from 23 congregations for an 18-month process of education and training. Through discussion, coaching, accountability, sharing ideas and fellowship, leaders are encouraged to walk more deeply in their faith, understand how God is already at work in their lives and communities, and see new possibilities.

With renewed faith and new tools for ministry, people are noticing a difference. “People are really growing in their faith. They’re growing in their love for God and growing in their sense of joy,” said Richard Jorgensen, the synod’s director for evangelical mission for renewing mission. “I also see people who feel more connected to their congregations and people who are more connected to their communities where God has planted them.”

Judy Bomberger, an R3 team member from St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Lebanon, Pa., agrees: “God has lit fire to many hearts since we started the R3 training, and many are stirred to walking boldly in the direction God is leading them. We are going beyond our doors into the community in ways we have never gone before, letting others know we are willing to support their events, and showing up with a spirit of love and in service to others.”

Download a study guide for this article at livinglutheran.org by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab.



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