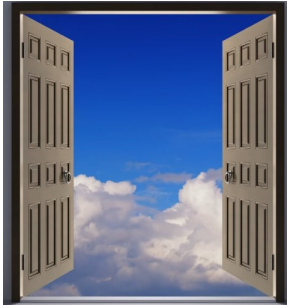




The
Episcopal Diocese
of New York



OPEN DOORS, NEW FUTURES

Vitality Practices and
Characteristics
of
Effective, Viable and Vital
Congregations

Vitality Practices and Characteristics

of

Effective, Viable and Vital Congregations



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Introduction

The characteristics of congregational health identified in this document have been developed to help build a shared vision across the Episcopal Church in our time. Experience has taught that the practices laid out here foster a common language of development. They are consistent and reliable marks of vitality across churches, regions and ministries, and are dependent neither on financial resources, nor on geography, nor on a congregation's size. An individual congregation need not carry out all of these practices in order to show vitality, but a vital congregation will always carry out at least some of those described in each section.

Viability and Vitality

Viable: vi·a·ble 'vīəb(ə)l/ *adjective* capable of working successfully; feasible.

Vital: 'vī-təl/ *adjective* 1 a : existing as a manifestation of life;
b : concerned with or necessary to the maintenance of life.

Vitality: vī'talədē/ *noun* 1. the state of being strong and active; energy

The chart below is a tool to help think through the current status of your congregation.



All churches encounter some form of static or unsustainable common life or find themselves ready to prune old growth and build a new cycle of growth in life together. Take a moment to think about where your congregation might be in relation to the above graph. The strategies in the following section can help open imagination, ignite longing and prayer, and lead to new life for your congregation moving you toward a vital and viable ministry. Viability of a congregation increases proportionately with its interaction with the surrounding community and many of the strategies below reflect outreach and dialogue. The practices and strategies in the following section can help you get there, both within the church and out into the world. The hope in writing this document is to help create movement towards deeper health and wholeness in all our congregations.

*To see the characteristics of Viable Congregations adopted
by Diocesan Convention of 2016, see Appendix (p.14)*

Welcome

*...be hospitable, a lover of goodness,
prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled.*
Titus 1:8 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Seeks new disciples and has a culture of community engagement and invitation.
- * Greets visitors warmly and makes them feel comfortable.
- * Reflects the language, ethnicity, and culture of its surrounding communities, practicing a welcoming environment. (Note that the Eucharist is celebrated in 16 languages throughout our Diocese.)
- * Builds authentic welcome strategies for various ethnic groups (i.e. Latino, French, Indian, African, etc.) by utilizing various diocesan resources (i.e. Hispanic Missioner; *New Camino*; *Nuevo Amanecer*; Congregational Development; etc.)
- * Has adequate outdoor lighting and clear, accurate, engaging, and readable indoor and outdoor signage.

Communications

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!
Romans 10:15 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Communicates not only in English, but in the language(s) of its surrounding communities (not only while, but also *before* members of those communities are represented in the congregation).
- * Has an attractive, engaging and easily navigable website.
- * Has a working and regularly-checked voicemail system.
- * Has a functioning and regularly-checked email address.
- * Uses the above, along with other appropriate electronic and print communications (newsletter, social media, etc.), to provide, at a minimum
 - contact information for the church office and clergy and lay leaders
 - the church's physical address and directions to it
 - up-to-date service times
 - the congregation's mission statement.
- * Where local conditions permit, has a media relations strategy that builds good relations with local media.

Mission Discernment and Accountability

*Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,
bearing with one another in love,
making every effort to maintain
the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

Ephesians 4:1-3 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Has a clear, concise, and broadly-known mission and/or vision statement, which both vestry and congregation review periodically.
- * Reflects its mission/vision statement in its ministry and mission.
- * Has achievable and measurable goals, strategies, and objectives which members know and support.
- * Engages in ongoing mission discernment to seek God's activity and blessing locally, within the diocese, and overseas, bringing together those within and those outside the congregation to make God's love and justice real.
- * Takes into consideration the changing communities around it, seeking leadership from locally-growing ethnic and language groups to build culturally appropriate congregational strategies.
- * Engages every two years in mutual ministry reviews among vestry and clergy that practice ongoing self-reflection, thereby building the capacity for honest conversation, for speaking the truth in love, for caring for one another, for building each other up into Christ's likeness, and for encouraging the achievement of the congregation's goals in the context of its participation in God's mission.

Education/Formation for Discipleship

*To equip God's people for works of service,
so that the body of Christ may be built up
until we all reach unity in the faith
and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,
attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Ephesians 4:12 - 13 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Develops the spiritual life of *all* its members as a primary task.
- * Clearly designates clergy and lay leaders responsible for planning and implementing education and formation programs.
- * Holds biblical literacy as a foundational goal and embeds the Bible in all formation, understanding that discipleship means learning to live our lives following the example of Jesus' life and teaching, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of our baptismal covenant.
- * Offers education and formation opportunities for discipleship to children, youth, young adults, adults and elders.
- * Has strategies for young adult ministry and for ministry to local colleges, building relationships with the present and future church.
- * Has a curriculum, educational programs, and/or resources that offer a global perspective and celebrate ethnic diversity and gender equality.

Evangelism and Reconciliation

*“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy,
always being prepared to make a defense to anyone
who asks you for a reason for the hope
that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”*

1 Peter 3:15 – 16 (NEB)

A Vital Congregation

- * Teaches its members ways to share the good news of God in Christ and how that good news is being lived out in their lives and congregation.
- * Enjoys congregational life that is marked by encouragement, candor, and kindness, moving people more deeply into the life of Christ.
- * Demonstrates and encourages forgiveness, the making of amends, and reconciliation as spiritual practice in both public and private congregational life.
- * Trains its members for the apostolic ministry of taking the good news of Christ in word and deed out into the world, and practices ongoing support for evangelism and conversion of life for new followers of Jesus.
- * Employs its power to convene to invite relationship building with other community groups, both ecumenical and interfaith, as well as to provide opportunities for conflicted groups in its surrounding communities to meet for supported dialogue and understanding.

Fellowship

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching
and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

Acts 2:42 (NIV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Gathers to celebrate, support, and care for each member inside and outside of the parish, practicing holy friendship.
- * Has opportunities for fellowship outside of coffee hour (for example: dinner groups, meals in the homes of parishioners, discussion groups, Bible study, prayer groups).
- * Uses fellowship opportunities to
 - deepen the discipleship of its members
 - deepen cultural competency and encourage love between language and culture groups, especially reaching out to growing Latino communities.
- * Includes intentional spiritual mentoring in its fellowship.

Worship

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your strength
and with all your mind;
and, Love your neighbor as yourself.*
Luke 10:27 (NRSV)

In a Vital Congregation, Worship

- * Is both vibrant and fresh in expression and rooted in the proclamation of the Gospel and the Christian tradition.
- * Energizes the people and inspires them for discipleship in daily life.
- * Invites participation and engages the creativity of the entire congregation: all age groups, newcomers and established members equally.
- * Expresses the language and cultural diversity of the congregation and neighboring communities.
- * Features the riches of the Episcopal tradition prominently and proudly in liturgy as a force for continued vibrancy.
- * Is accessible to visitors, with clear directions, bulletins and page announcements.
- * Takes place, when appropriate, at alternative times and venues.
- * Expresses a holistic understanding of stewardship in all its variety, including environmental, spiritual, and financial.

Gifted for Ministry

To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for common good.

I Corinthians 12:7 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Intentionally and systematically helps its members discern their gifts for ministry in the church, their families, their workplaces, their communities and beyond.
- * Helps its members understand where they are called to exercise their gifts, and encourages them to train for and pursue that call.
- * Builds diversity in relationships that reflect the Reign of God through mission initiatives that stretch its members by calling them to work alongside and on behalf of people who differ culturally, ethnically, in socioeconomic background, and/or in language.
- * Actively encourages its lay and clergy leaders to enhance their own skills for ministry through participation in diocesan, provincial, and national learning and training opportunities.

Stewardship

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

II Corinthians 4:7 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Pursues “stewardship” in a holistic way to include
 - Its financial and environmental dimensions, i.e., the stewardship of God’s creation
 - The operation and maintenance of church buildings, with regard both to energy efficiency and to the transition to renewable energy.
- * Has members who
 - Understand stewardship as their response to God's love and to God's call to tend and care for the whole of creation.
 - Understand that God’s gifts include ourselves, our possessions and "this fragile earth, our island home," so that they are led to build sustainable practices in the use of resources.
 - Practice the spiritual disciplines, rooted in gratitude to God, of simplicity of life and generosity in giving.
 - Are asked throughout the year to support the ministry of the church with their time, talents and treasure, especially through the practices of
 - ◆ proportionate giving or tithing
 - ◆ witnessing to God's work in their lives.
- * Seeks to identify and participate in the flow of God’s infinite variety of resources as they pass through the church to the world and through the world to the church, practicing the provision of the Reign of God.
- * Engages in regular and ongoing re-visioning of its resources, people, assets, and buildings, using tools/processes such as those offered by:
 - Episcopal Church Foundation (<http://www.episcopalfoundation.org/>)
 - Episcopal Church Building Fund (<http://www.ecbf.org/>)
 - RenewalWorks (<http://renewalworks.org/>)
 - Holy Currencies of the Kaleidoscope Foundation (<http://www.kscopeinstitute.org/holycurrencies1/>)

Outreach

They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Matthew 25:44-45 (NIV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Works towards dedicating at least ten percent of its budget, excluding the diocesan apportioned share, to be spent on outreach.
- * Has at least one signature effort of service, witness, or advocacy that includes a broad cross-section of its members and has the support of the entire congregation.
- * Looks for opportunities to engage in collaborative advocacy and ministry with other churches and faiths.
- * Makes training in community organizing available to its leadership, to help them discern and build new mission in dialogue and partnership with the congregation's surrounding communities and organizations.
- * Conducts creative outreach activities such as special events and collaborations with advocacy groups, non-profits, and community groups.

Congregational Leadership

What then is Apollos? What is Paul?

Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

*So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,
but only God who gives the growth.*

I Corinthians 3:5-7 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation's Clergy and Lay Leaders

- * Reflect the gifts and talents (including demographic, language and cultural considerations) of the congregation.
- * Embody the theology of servant ministry.
- * Are scripturally literate.
- * Delegate responsibilities and duties.
- * Encourage and empower others.
- * Communicate openly.
- * Make the congregation's budget and financial information available and transparent to the congregation.
- * Give members the opportunity to engage in a budget process that reflects the congregation's mission statement and values.
- * Participate in ongoing training, development and mentoring, with a focus on building the congregation's capacity to execute their strategic plan (including specific training for laity in church governance and administration, including wardens, treasurers, church secretaries and clerks of vestries).

Spiritual Life of Clergy and Lay Leaders

Fan into flame the gift of God that is in you from the laying on of hands.

2 Timothy 1:6 (NIV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Offers scripture study as an integral part of vestry training.
- * Provides its lay leaders with regular opportunities to participate in retreats and spiritual formation opportunities.
- * Regularly rotates its lay leadership to offer lay leaders opportunities for renewal and refreshment.
- * Gives its clergy (full or part time) time for spiritual retreats, study, and self-care.
- * Encourages its clergy to take vacation.
- * Offers its clergy support for continuing education and encourages them to take sabbatical time.
- * Builds capacity for congregational health and sustainability by consciously focusing on the spiritual growth of members, moving them from questioner/seekers to Christ-centered disciples.

Community Connections

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

“And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

Acts 2:4–5, 8–11 (NRSV)

A Vital Congregation

- * Has a visible presence in the community and is known to people in, as well as outside of, the physical bounds of the parish.
- * Keeps its community regularly informed of its activities and offerings.
- * Has clergy and lay leaders who are engaged in community activities and leadership.
- * Is visited by people in the community for worship as well as social engagement, (e.g. lectures, afterschool programs, day care, community discussions, etc.)
- * Has engaged a community issue during the past year.
- * Provides a steady presence with open doors, caring for and connecting to its surrounding communities.

Appendix

Characteristics of Viable Congregations

(as adopted by the 2016 Diocesan Convention)

Viability characteristics are those elements of congregational and diocesan life that are considered basic and essential. They represent the fundamental obligations and responsibilities that each congregation undertakes as a constituent part of this diocese. While these responsibilities rest largely with the vestry, clergy should work cooperatively with the vestry and congregation to maintain the viability of the parish in these areas.

- * Essential leadership positions (wardens, vestry, treasurer, clerk) are filled and have regular turnover per parish bylaws.
- * Clergy and staff salaries and pensions are paid in a timely manner and meet at least minimum diocesan recommended compensation levels.
- * The congregation is current with its financial obligations.
- * The congregation supports the mission of the Diocese through fulfilling their apportioned share.
- * There is an annual stewardship program.
- * A parish financial budget is prepared annually.
- * Major defects of church properties (buildings and grounds) are being addressed.
- * The congregation files an annual parochial report and a yearly audit and/or a modified audit report.
- * There are parish bylaws which are reviewed every decade.
- * All clergy and appropriate lay persons have received Safe Church training and Anti-Racism Training.
- * The vestry ensures that appropriate insurance coverage is in place: general liability, property, and Directors & Officers coverage. Coverage shall be, at a minimum, equal to the “New York package” as defined by the Church Insurance Company. Proof of up-to-date insurance coverage provided to the Diocese annually.