



Presbyterian Mission
**Theology, Formation
& Evangelism**

Vital Congregations Revitalization Initiative

A Handbook to Preparation





Handbook to Preparation for the Vital Congregations Initiative

Theology, Formation & Evangelism
Presbyterian Mission Agency

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Getting Started in Vital Congregations

Thank you for answering God's call to connect in covenant relationship and to engage in a process that seeks to live as vital congregations of Jesus Christ. The vision and purpose are clear — we believe the connectional church will be given vital life in love of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit and the will of God.

Vision:

By the power of the Holy Spirit, and in authentic relationships with mid councils, we seek to equip, nurture and support church leaders to empower their congregations to renew, recover and live more fully into faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ.

Purpose:

The purpose of the Vital Congregations Initiative is to work alongside mid council leadership, and leaders of existing congregations, in a process that seeks to help assess, discern and live into transformative actions that increase vitality. Through intentional spiritual practices and relational connections, this two-year process takes us deeper into following Jesus Christ, making disciples and being the vital community of Christ throughout particular communities and the world.

As we begin this work together, there is preparation and vision sharing that will help to equip, inspire and ready all people of God for the work ahead of us. The Office of Vital Congregations will provide resources, templates and opportunities to gather and share ideas as we plan and prepare together. Please make sure you have viewed and shared the following documents with your presbytery leaders and pastors:

1. The Vital Congregations Manual:

- The summary and full vision statements
- The summary and full Seven Marks of Vital Congregations descriptions
- The two-year Guidelines for Pastors and for Presbyteries
- A sample of the two-year Calendar Process

2. The Immediate Toolkit:

- Resource on the Life Cycle of Congregations
- Resource for an Emoji Assessment used for session or churches
- Bible studies on the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations
- Sample of the Vital Congregations Survey to be taken by church leaders and the session, as well as members and worshipers of the congregation
- A Neighborhood Analysis Exercise

3. The Basic Information Packet:

- Important Dates and Deadlines
- Presbytery Budget Template
- Facilitator Roles

Foundational Planning and Preparation

In order to discern the Spirit's call to revitalization, we must ready ourselves as disciples of Christ Jesus so that we might truly follow where Christ is already at work and calling us to join. Prior to the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative there must be intentional foundational planning and preparation in relationship to God and one another. This handbook is a guide to:

Prayer and faithfulness:	Centering our hearts and minds on Christ who is the giver of all vital life together;
Casting the vision:	Helping all to understand the two-year process;
(Re)forming intentional relationships:	Confession and reconciliation, where it is needed, and building covenant relationships together;
Preparations:	Planning and envisioning that is inspired by the wonder of God and hope in Christ Jesus.



Step 1: Prayer and faithfulness

But as for you, women and men of God, pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 6:11–13)

Rationale: Since God is the giver of all vitality of life, we must center our hearts and minds upon Christ in order to discern faithful paths forward as the people of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. This two-year initiative should constantly be rooted in the practice and discipline of prayer if we are to discern the will of God together. Therefore, presbyteries, pastors, church leaders and people of God should develop intentional patterns and plans for prayer together.

Objective: In the first month of Planning and Preparation, presbyteries, pastors and worship leaders should develop and practice an intentional discipline and focus of prayer; both individually and in community together.

Ideas:

- Use the Seven Marks Daily Prayer Card with presbytery leadership, pastors, church officers and worshippers.
- Use the Seven Marks Bible Studies in monthly session meetings, with presbytery staff and in church Bible study groups.
- Together as a presbytery, church or pastor group, write a prayer for vitality that can be used in liturgy for the Vital Congregations Initiative.
- Come up with a plan for presbytery committees and session of churches to pray daily for congregational vitality and life together.

Resources:

- Seven Marks Daily Prayer Litany
- Seven Marks Bible Study

Step 2: Casting the Vision

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11–13)

Rationale: We discern the will of God, and the call of Christ, when together we are connected in a vision and purpose greater than ourselves. This work is not just for some of us. It is not limited to the “stagnant” or “struggling” churches. Vital life together is for all churches that seek to follow the will and the ways of Christ in the “new thing” Christ is doing in the church. Together, we must all help to equip the people of God to faithfully understand, imagine, wonder and prepare for the necessary work of vital life together. This process only works when every presbytery leader, pastor, church officer, member and worship-goer understands and feels equipped, inspired and empowered to be a part of the initiative.

Objective: In the first three months, all presbytery leadership, pastors, church officers and people of God in existing churches should clearly understand: the vision of this work together; the Seven Marks of Vitality; the Three Revitalization Actions; and the guidelines for presbyteries and churches in this two-year initiative.

- i. Meeting with presbytery leadership
- ii. Meeting with pastors
- iii. Meeting with church officers and members
- iv. East Coast and West Coast Gathering of Presbyteries: leadership, pastors and clerk of session

Ideas:

- Presbytery newsletter articles introducing Seven Marks of Vitality;
- Pastors Retreat; Officers Retreat; Churchwide Retreat;
- Presbytery Meeting Workshops and Worship;
- Presbytery site visits and churchwide gatherings of exploration and conversation.

Example: As presbytery leadership, plan a gathering for pastors in a nontraditional gathering, break bread together and discuss what are we looking for when we talk about “vital churches.” Envision and lead Bible studies around the marks of a vital church, and what Christ is calling us to be a part of in this work together. Explain the scope of the two-year process. Allow time for pastors and leaders to write their hopes and prayers, their challenges and confessions, as you seek to discern this work together. (The same process can be used for intergenerational breakout groups in congregations.)

Resources:

- Summary and Full Vision Statements (Vital Congregations Manual)
- Summary and Full Seven Marks of Vital Congregations w/reflection questions (Vital Congregations Manual)
- Two-year process for churches and presbyteries
- Emoji Assessment; Life-Cycle of Churches; Neighborhood Exegesis (Vital Congregations Immediate Toolkit)
- May VC East and West Coast Gatherings: The Office of Vital Congregations will gather presbytery leaders, pastors and the clerk of session for a time of training, equipping, vision sharing and planning for all presbyteries preparing to walk through the two-year initiative.

Step 3: (Re)forming Intentional Relationships

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:31–5:2)

Rationale: The power of the Holy Spirit to (re)vitalize congregations and people requires an open and willing spirit of all who believe. In order for churches and presbyteries to walk faithfully in covenant relationship with God and one another, we must first confront, confess, repent and reconcile the places and times we have fallen short of the glory of God; only then can we celebrate the covenant and walk faithfully in the process together.

Objective: In the first three months, presbyteries should worship and engage pastors and leaders in conversations of “confession and reconciliation.” Covenant participation in the two-year initiative should be gathered and celebrated between presbyteries and churches, and between pastors/worship leaders and their congregations. Covenantal participation affirms that presbytery leadership, pastors, church officers and all people of God in the existing church community will show up in relationship, to God and to one another, and participate to the best of our ability in the two-year Vital Congregations initiative.

Ideas:

- Gather pastors for conversations and worship of confession and reconciliation.
- Host meetings that allow for safe-space in the presbytery and congregations to name, confess, reconcile and imagine together. Bring in synod mediators or support where it is needed.
- Host an event where churches ready to participate in the Vital Congregations initiative can share ideas, discuss the vital marks, worship in preparation together and agree to a covenant written among presbyteries and pastors to commit to this work together.
- Plan a Dreamers Day where pastors, church officers and members dream about the church of tomorrow, today.

Resources:

- Worship for Confession and Reconciliation
- Worship for Covenant Celebration
- Covenant Template

Step 4: Preparation

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Romans 13:11–12)

Rationale: The success of the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative is largely dependent upon the ownership, preparation and planning that presbyteries will engage in to ready the field for the Lord's harvest. The work of presbytery leaders, committees, pastors and people of God to envision and plan for this process together will greatly impact the outcome.

Objective: Prepare as a presbytery and congregations in planning and envisioning the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative.

Resources:

- Pastor Cohort Lessons
- Facilitator Description
- Two-Year Guidelines for Presbyteries; Two-Year Guidelines for Pastors/Churches

A. Forming Pastor Cohorts

- Presbytery leader(s) should form pastor cohorts for all interested church pastors. These cohort groups should meet no fewer than three times prior to beginning the two-year initiative. This should be a time of group building, idea sharing, biblical study and praying together. Three lessons will be provided by the PC(USA). Please note: During the two-year Vital Congregations initiative, pastor cohorts will meet monthly.
 - A pastor cohort can be formed based on geographical location and monthly meeting times. Presbyteries should prayerfully consider and discern the diversity of pastors within their presbytery.
 - Pastor cohorts should be self-led, perhaps assigning a member to send reminders to the group and rotating the group leader and meeting location for each gathering.

B. Identifying and Training Facilitators

- Presbytery leaders should discern and select a minimum of two facilitators from the presbytery to be trained by the Office of Vital Congregations in the PC(USA) in August 2019. The presbytery leader should plan to attend facilitator training with their selected facilitators. All names of those attending facilitator training should be turned in to vitalcongregations@pcusa.org no later than April 1, 2019.
 - Please see the resource on "Facilitator Descriptions" when discerning who is called to fulfill this role within your presbytery.
 - Presbyteries are encouraged to pay for the travel and registration of their facilitators for training. Additionally, we encourage a stipend in the amount of \$1,500 per facilitator for their role in the two-year process, and the reimbursement of any mileage and meals they might accrue during their two-year service.

C. Monthly Preparation and Planning in Prayer

- Monthly meetings should have time for presbyteries and church leadership to discuss the preparation for how the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative will work in your particular context.

This thoughtful envisioning and planning should be done in prayer, without ceasing: What does this look like for us? What do we hope for in this work? How might the Spirit call us forward into vital life together? What things do we need to prepare and plan? Please note: The hopes and plans of each particular context will be shared at the National Planning Conference.

- Pastors Resource for the Two-Year Vital Congregations Initiative with Planning Reflections
- Presbytery Resource for the Two-Year Vital Congregations Initiative with Planning Reflections
- Two-Year Workbook with all Resources for Pastors and for Presbyteries
- Two-Year Planning Calendar should be made for churches and presbyteries (a sample calendar is included in the Vital Congregations manual).

D. Connecting at the National Vital Congregations Planning Conference

- The Office of Vital Congregations will hold an East and West Conference in May 2019 for the presbyteries selected for the Vital Congregations Initiative. This is an opportunity for presbytery leadership, pastors and clerks of sessions to spend time with other presbyteries preparing to walk through this work together. It will be an opportunity to ask the national staff questions, to plan and prepare for this work together in our particular contexts, and to connectively join in worship and in prayer for the Spirit's revitalization of the Church.
 - West Coast: Denver — May 6–9, 2019
 - East Coast: Atlanta — May 13–16, 2019
 - Details and registration for these events will begin in February 2019. The deadline to register is April 1.

E. Quarterly Zoom Conversations

- The presbytery leader and Vital Congregations facilitators will have the opportunity to join in four Zoom meetings in 2019 with the Vital Congregations staff and the other presbytery leaders from the first wave of presbyteries preparing for the Vital Congregations Initiative. This will be an opportunity to check in, share stories, listen to stories from others who have gone through the initiative, ask questions, and continue to plan and pray together as the connectional Church.

Please note: A Doodle Poll will be sent after the presbyteries are selected in order to schedule the four Zoom conversations. **Please respond by no later than Feb. 28, 2019.**

Resources for Foundational Planning

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Presbytery Information Form





Presbytery Information

Presbytery Name: _____ Date: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Presbytery Leader: _____ Email: _____

No. of Pastor Cohorts: _____ No. of Churches Participating: _____

Cultural/Racial-Ethnic Diversity of Churches: _____

List Languages Spoken: _____

Church Participation

1. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

2. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

3. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

4. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

5. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
6. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
7. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
8. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
9. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
10. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

11. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
12. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
13. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
14. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
15. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
16. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

17. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
18. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
19. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
20. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
21. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____
22. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

23. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

24. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

25. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

26. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

27. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

28. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

29. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

30. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

31. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

32. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

33. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

34. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

35. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

36. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

37. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

38. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

39. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

40. Church Name: _____

Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____

Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

41. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

42. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

43. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

44. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

45. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

46. Church Name: _____
Pastor/Worship Leader: _____ Email: _____
Address: _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Membership: _____ Location (i.e., urban, rural, college town, etc.): _____

A Seven-Day Cycle of Prayer





A Seven-Day Cycle of Prayer

By David Gambrel

Based on the *Seven Marks of Vital Congregations*:

Living God, we give you thanks and praise for the new things you are doing among us ...

<i>Sunday</i>	<i>for the transforming presence of Christ</i>
<i>Monday</i>	<i>for your call to follow the way of Jesus</i>
<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>for the gift of your Word made flesh</i>
<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>or the good news of your holy realm</i>
<i>Thursday</i>	<i>or Jesus' example of humble service</i>
<i>Friday</i>	<i>or your great love for all the world</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>for our common ministry in Jesus' name</i>

Other joys and thanksgivings may be added.

Living God, by the gifts of your Spirit, help us to bear witness to the risen Lord ...

<i>Sunday</i>	<i>proclaiming the good news of salvation</i>
<i>Monday</i>	<i>growing in the image of Christ</i>
<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>offering your grace to others</i>
<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>sharing the hope that is within us</i>
<i>Thursday</i>	<i>loving and serving one another</i>
<i>Friday</i>	<i>extending your compassion to all</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>building up the body of Christ</i>

Other concerns and petitions may be added.

Living God, in the great mystery of our faith receive us each night and revive us each day, that we may be dead to sin and alive to you; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

<i>Sunday</i>	<i>Spirit-filled worship</i>
<i>Monday</i>	<i>Lifelong discipleship</i>
<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Outward incarnational focus</i>
<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Intentional authentic evangelism</i>
<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Servant-leader development</i>
<i>Friday</i>	<i>Caring relationships</i>
<i>Saturday</i>	<i>Ecclesial health</i>



Template for Covenant Commitment





Covenant Agreement of Ministries and Churches

The Presbytery

We, the Presbytery of _____, do hereby agree fully with the vision and purpose of The Vital Congregations Initiative of the PC(USA). We have reviewed the Vision and the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations, and shared the information about the Vital Congregations Initiative with the pastors and church leaders of the presbytery. Together, with the Office of Vital Congregations and the Presbyterian Mission Agency, PC(USA), we will strive to uphold the values of: courage, conviction and commitment to faithful discipleship; prayerful discernment; reliance upon Scripture; persistence that leads to an emboldened faith; honest assessment; resilience; intentional pursuits of reconciliation; and hopefulness in change. We will work toward the initiative objectives to: come together as the people of God; to pray — (re)turning to faithfulness in God; to inspire openness to the Holy Spirit's transformation and change; to honestly assess, discern and act; to resource, equip and support leaders and pastors; to practice missional evangelism and faithful discipleship; to equip vital congregations and develop a praxis of sustainability and ongoing assessment; and to capture congregational stories and develop new measurements of vitality as the people of God and disciples of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, we agree to participate to the best of our ability in the two-year initiative guidelines for presbyteries. We will show up in relationship to all pastors and congregations participating in this process of faithfulness. We will pray, support, equip and walk with these churches. We have prayerfully discerned

(a) _____,

(b) _____,

(c) _____,

(d) _____,

(e) _____,

(f) _____, to serve as Vital Congregations facilitators.

We will support, encourage and respect the voice and recommendations of these facilitators. We agree to budget \$ _____ as a presbytery for the purpose of the Vital Congregations Initiative.

The Pastor or Church Leader

I, _____, do hereby agree fully with the vision and purpose of (b) the Vital Congregations Initiative of the PC(USA). I have reviewed the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations and the guidelines for churches within the two-year initiative. To the best of my abilities, I will work alongside the people of God at _____ Church. Together, with the presbytery leadership of _____ and the Vital Congregations facilitators, I will strive to work toward the values and vision the Vital Congregations Initiative sets forth. With the grace of God, I will help lead people through honest discernment and assessment rooted in Scripture and prayer. Furthermore, I will seek the Holy Spirit's will in actions that lead to (re)vitalized life together in Christ Jesus, who is the head of the Church. I will accept the assistance and support of the presbytery, and will seek to be connected and committed to my pastor cohort and colleagues in ministry.

The Clerk of Session

I, _____, in full support and representation of _____ Church, do hereby express our consent and intent to fully engage and participate in the Vital Congregations Initiative. We agree to actively live into the guideline set forth for churches. With God's grace and guidance, we will seek to live into the purpose of the Vital Congregations Initiative to: "work alongside mid council leadership, and leaders of existing congregations, in a process that seeks to help assess, discern and live into transformative actions that increase vitality. Through intentional spiritual practices and relational connections, this two-year process takes us deeper into following Jesus Christ, making disciples and being the vital community of Christ throughout particular communities and the world."

Presbytery Leader: _____ Date: _____

Stated Clerk: _____ Date: _____

Pastor/Church Leader: _____ Date: _____

Clerk of Session: _____ Date: _____

Office of Vital Congregations: _____ Date: _____

Vital Congregations: A Service of Repentance and Reconciliation





Vital Congregations: A Service of Repentance and Reconciliation

By David Gambrell

The litany of confession and lament near the beginning of this service may be used or adapted as a stand-alone element of worship.

— Gathering —

GATHERING MUSIC

— *Instrumental music or congregational song may precede the service.*

OPENING SENTENCES

Joel 2:12–13, 28, 32

Even now, says the Lord our God,
return to me with all your heart.
The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Hear the promise of the Lord:
I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.
We will dream dreams and see visions;
we will call on the name of the Lord!

HYMN

LITANY OF CONFESSION AND LAMENT

— *The litany of confession and lament may be led at the baptismal font.*

O my people, O my church, says the Lord.
What more could I have done for you?

Holy One, have mercy on us.

See BCW 288

— *A leader may extinguish a candle for each of the seven marks.*

We have ignored and impeded
God's call to follow the way of Jesus.

Holy One, have mercy on us.

Lifelong Discipleship Formation

We have silenced and suppressed
the good news of God's holy realm.

Holy One, have mercy on us.

Intentional Authentic Evangelism

We have forgotten and forsaken
the gift of God's Word made flesh.

Holy One, have mercy on us.

Outward Incarnational Focus

We have ridiculed and rejected
Jesus' example of humble service.

Holy One, have mercy on us.

Empowering Servant Leadership

We have hidden and hoarded
the transforming presence of Christ.

Holy One, have mercy on us.

Spirit-Filled Worship

We have denied and disregarded
God's great love for all the world.

Holy One, have mercy on us.

Caring Relationships

We have abused and abandoned
our common ministry in Jesus' name.

Holy One, have mercy on us.

Ecclesial Health

— A time of silence follows. Then a leader relights each candle from the paschal candle.

Forgive us, God of grace.
Let us be reconciled with you
with one another, and with our neighbors,
so that your church may be a light to the world
and a vital sign of your redeeming love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

— Word —

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Holy God, by your Word and Spirit,
breathe life into our dry bones
so that we may be a vital sign
of the new life you offer to the world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

SERMON

— An ascription of praise, hymn and/or affirmation of faith may follow the sermon.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Living God, hear our prayers
for your church and your world.

— The following response may follow each petition:

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for the life of the church ...

Ecclesial Health

Support us in our weakness,
heal us in our brokenness,
and use us to do your will.

We pray for loved ones ...

Caring Relationships

Surround them with your care,
deliver them from danger,
and bless them with your grace.

We pray for the gifts of your Spirit ...

Spirit-filled Worship

Shape us through your Word,
wash us in your mercy,
and feed us at your table.

We pray for leaders ...

Empowering Servant Leadership

Awaken them to do justice,
teach them to love kindness,
and help them to walk humbly with you.

We pray for all who serve your mission ...

Outward Incarnational Focus

Move us with compassion for those in need,
send us out to share your gifts,
and make us good stewards of your creation.

We pray for all who share the gospel ...

Intentional Authentic Evangelism

Inspire them to proclaim good news,
equip them to show your way,
and empower them to speak the truth in love.

We pray for all who follow Jesus ...

Lifelong Discipleship Formation

Keep us faithful as Christ's disciples,
guide us in his way of life,
and strengthen us to serve you always.

— *Other petitions may be added.*

Holy One, let your church be a living sign
of your great love for the world,
until all may rejoice and give thanks
at the coming of your glorious realm;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

— Eucharist —

OFFERING

Matt. 11:28–30

Jesus said: Come to me,
all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
As the offering is gathered, the table is prepared.

GREAT THANKSGIVING

— *The introductory dialogue ("The Lord be with you ...") may be included here.*

Blessed are you, O Lord our God:
You are our shepherd; in you there is nothing we lack.
You make us lie down in green pastures.
You lead us beside still waters and restore our souls.
You lead us in right paths for your name's sake.

— *The Sanctus ("Holy, holy, holy ...") may be included here.*

Blessed is Jesus Christ, our Savior:
Jesus walks with us through the darkest valleys.
We fear no evil, for Jesus is with us.
He comforts us — even through his cross.
The words of institution are included here:
With thanksgiving, we remember how Jesus took the bread ...
With thanksgiving, we remember how Jesus took the cup ...
For your table of grace in the midst of sin and death,
for your oil of gladness, anointing our heads,
for your cup of blessing, overflowing in our lives,
we give you thanks and praise, O God.

— *The mystery of faith ("Christ has died ...") may be included here.*

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon this bread and cup;
make us one in the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Let your goodness and mercy follow us, O God,
all the days of our lives,
and let us dwell in your house our whole lives long.
Through the Lord Jesus Christ,
in the unity of the Spirit,
we bless you, God of glory,
now and forever. **Amen.**

— *The Lord's Prayer follows.*

BREAKING OF THE BREAD

John 10:10–11, 14–15

The bread is broken in silence.
Then the minister says:
Jesus said: I am the good shepherd.
I lay down my life for the sheep.
Jesus said: I am the good shepherd.
I know my own and my own know me.
Jesus said: I am the good shepherd.
I came that you might have life,
and have it abundantly.

COMMUNION

— *During communion, worshipers may also light candles as a sign of prayer or be anointed with oil as a sign of God's healing grace.*

— *Those who light candles may pray:*

Lord, you are my light and salvation;
whom shall I fear?

Ps. 27:1

— *Those who anoint others with oil may pray:*

May the Lord give you strength
and bless you with peace. **Amen.**

Ps. 29:11

— *After communion, all may pray:*

***We give you thanks and praise, O God,
for the presence of Christ in this place —
in the teaching and fellowship,
the breaking of bread and the prayers.
Send us out to tell of signs and wonders
and share the blessings we have received.
Day by day, use our witness and work
to add to the number you have saved,
until you gather us up in your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

Acts 2:42–47

— **Sending** —

HYMN

BLESSING AND CHARGE

John 13:34; Num. 6:24–26

As Jesus loves us, let us love one another.
This is Christ's new commandment.
The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord be kind and gracious to you.
The Lord look upon you with favor
and give you peace. Alleluia!

— *Worshipers may share signs of peace.*

SUGGESTED READINGS

Ecclesiastes 3:1–15

Isaiah 40:1–31

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Lamentations 1:1–4; 3:19–24

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Habakkuk 3:17–19

Matthew 5:1–16

Luke 4:14–21

John 21:15–19

Romans 12:1–21

1 Corinthians 12:12–31

2 Corinthians 5:16–6:10

Ephesians 2:13–22

1 Peter 2:1–10

1 John 4:7–21

Revelation 21:1–6

SUGGESTED HYMNS/SONGS

Come Now, O Prince of Peace

GTG 103

For Everyone Born

GTG 769

Help Us Accept Each Other

GTG 754; PH 358

I Love the Lord, Who Heard My Cry

GTG 799; PH 362

I Want Jesus to Walk with Me

GTG 775; PH 363

Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying

GTG 469

My Shepherd Will Supply My Need

GTG 803; PH 172

Spirit, Open My Heart

GTG 692

The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want

GTG 801; PH 170

There Is a Balm in Gilead

GTG 792; PH 394

There Is a Longing in Our Hearts

GTG 470

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

GTG 435; PH 298

Though I May Speak

GTG 693; PH 335

We Are One in Christ Jesus

GTG 322

We Cannot Measure How You Heal

GTG 797

When We Are Living

GTG 822; PH 400

Vital Congregations: A Service of Celebration and Commitment





Vital Congregations: A Service of Celebration and Commitment

By David Gambrel

The litany of commitment near the end of this service may be used or adapted as a stand-alone element of worship.

— Gathering —

GATHERING MUSIC

— *Instrumental music or congregational song may precede the service.*

OPENING SENTENCES

Isa. 43:1–2, 18–19

The Lord says: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

***When we pass through the waters, God is with us;
when we walk through the fire we will not be burned.***

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

***God is about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth!***

HYMN

CONFESSION AND PARDON

Through Jesus Christ, God has entrusted us
with the message and ministry of reconciliation.
Trusting in God's grace, let us confess our sin.

***Holy One, our great Redeemer —
you have created us to be your people;
you have called us from captivity to freedom;
you have delivered us from death to life.
Yet we have wandered in the wilderness;
we have failed to keep your commandments;
we have put our trust in false idols.
Forgive us, God of grace.
Fill us with hope, feed us with mercy,
and lead us into the land of your promise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.
The old life has gone; a new life has begun.
Know that you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.***

— *Worshippers may share signs of peace.*

— Word —

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Holy God, by the gift of your Spirit,
let us be grounded in your Word,
always growing in your wisdom
and bearing good fruit in your world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. ***Amen.***

SCRIPTURE

SERMON

— *An ascription of praise, hymn and/or affirmation of faith may follow the sermon.*

PRAYER FOR INTERCESSION

Living God, hear our prayers
for your church and your world.

The following response may follow each petition:

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the life of the church ...

Support us in our weakness,
heal us in our brokenness,
and use us to do your will.

Ecclesial Health

We pray for loved ones ...

Surround them with your care,
deliver them from danger,
and bless them with your grace.

Caring Relationships

We pray for the gifts of your Spirit ...

Shape us through your Word,
wash us in your mercy,
and feed us at your table.

Spirit-filled Worship

We pray for leaders ...

Awaken them to do justice,
teach them to love kindness,
and help them to walk humbly with you.

Empowering Servant Leadership

We pray for all who serve your mission ...

Move us with compassion for those in need,
send us out to share your gifts,
and make us good stewards of your creation.

Outward Incarnational Focus

We pray for all who share the gospel ...

Inspire them to proclaim good news,
equip them to show your way,
and empower them to speak the truth in love.

Intentional Authentic Evangelism

We pray for all who follow Jesus ...

Keep us faithful as Christ's disciples,
guide us in his way of life,
and strengthen us to serve you always.

Lifelong Discipleship Formation

— *Other petitions may be added.*

Holy One, let your church be a living sign
of your great love for the world,
until all may rejoice and give thanks
at the coming of your glorious realm;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

— **Eucharist** —

OFFERING

I appeal to you, by the mercy of God,
to present yourselves as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God.
This is our spiritual worship.

Rom. 12:1

— *As the offering is gathered, the table is prepared.*

— *The covenant for congregational vitality may also be presented at this time.*

GREAT THANKSGIVING

— *The introductory dialogue ("The Lord be with you ...") may be included here.*

Blessed is Jesus Christ, our Savior:

In the beginning, Jesus was with you as your Word,
and through him all things came into being.

In the fullness of time you sent him to dwell among us
as your Word made flesh, full of grace and truth.

— *The words of institution are included here:*

With thanksgiving, we remember how Jesus took the bread ...

With thanksgiving, we remember how Jesus took the cup ...

Though Jesus gave his own life for our salvation,
the darkness could not overcome his light.

On the first day of the week, you spoke again,
and raised him from death to life.

Now open our eyes to recognize him
in the breaking of the bread.

— *The mystery of faith ("Christ has died ...") may be included here.*

Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon this bread and cup;
make us one in the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Speak to us on this day, O Lord our God.

Breathe new life into our dry bones.

Help us to bear witness to the light of Christ
that all the world may know he is risen indeed.

In the fullness of time, bring to completion
the good work you have begun in us.

As you have been with us from the beginning,
be with us always, to the end of the age.

Through the Lord Jesus Christ,
in the unity of the Spirit,
we bless you, God of glory,
now and forever. **Amen.**

— *The Lord's Prayer follows.*

BREAKING OF THE BREAD

— *The bread is broken in silence.*

— *Then the minister says:*

John 11:25–26

Jesus said: I am the resurrection and the life.

Those who trust in me, even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

COMMUNION

— *After receiving communion, worshipers may be invited to sign their names
in a book or on a banner representing their commitment to congregational vitality.*

— After communion, all may pray:

**We give you thanks and praise, O God,
for the presence of Christ in this place —
in the teaching and fellowship,
the breaking of bread and the prayers.
Send us out to tell of signs and wonders
and share the blessings we have received.
Day by day, use our witness and work
to add to the number you have saved,
until you gather us up in your glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Acts 2:42–47

— Sending —

LITANY OF COMMITMENT

— The litany of commitment may be led from the baptismal font.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God,
do you renounce the power of death
and trust in the Lord of life? **We do.**

See BCW 409

Who is your Lord and Savior?

Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.

*Taking light from the paschal candle, a leader
may light candles for each of the seven marks.*

Will you seek to grow in the image of Christ
through lifelong discipleship formation?

Lifelong Discipleship Formation

We will, with God's help.

Will you share the hope that is within you
through intentional authentic evangelism?

Lifelong Discipleship Formation

We will, with God's help.

Will you offer the grace of God to others
with an outward incarnational focus?

Outward Incarnational Focus

We will, with God's help.

Will you love and serve one another
through empowering servant leadership?

Empowering Servant Leadership

We will, with God's help.

Will you proclaim the good news of salvation,
through Spirit-filled worship?

Spirit-Filled Worship

We will, with God's help.

Will you extend God's compassion to all
through caring relationships?

Caring Relationships

We will, with God's help.

Will you work to build up the body of Christ
in its ecclesial health?

Ecclesial Health

We will, with God's help.

Almighty and eternal God, by your grace
you have called us to this time and place
to be your servant people
as we follow our servant Lord.

BCW 461

Make your Holy Spirit move within and among us,
that together we may live a new life
in the crucified and risen Christ.
Bind us together in faith,
so that as we receive all spiritual gifts
needed to fulfill our calling,
we may support one another in common ministry;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

HYMN

BLESSING AND CHARGE

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all. **Alleluia!**

Go therefore and make disciples.
The Lord is with you always. **Amen.**

2 Cor. 13:13; Matt. 28:18–20

SUGGESTED READINGS

Exodus 14:10–31

Deuteronomy 6:1–9

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18

Isaiah 43:1–21

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Mark 1:9–20

Luke 10:1–11

John 4:7–15

Acts 2:1–21

Romans 6:1–11

1 Corinthians 3:1–23

Ephesians 4:1–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Colossians 3:1–17

1 Thessalonians 5:12–24

Revelation 21:1–6

SUGGESTED HYMNS/SONGS

Arise, Your Light Is Come!

GTG 744; PH 411

Called as Partners in Christ's Service

GTG 761; PH 343

Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation

GTG 394; PH 416, 417

Come, Labor On

GTG 719; PH 415

Come Sing, O Church, in Joy

GTG 305; PH 430

From the Nets of Our Labor

GTG 751

God, Bless Your Church with Strength!

PH 418

God the Spirit, Guide and Guardian

GTG 303; PH 523

Guide My Feet

GTG 741; PH 354

Here I Am, Lord

GTG 69; PH 525

Holy Spirit, Lord of Love

PH 524

How Clear Is Our Vocation, Lord

GTG 432; PH 419

Let Us Build a House

GTG 301

Live into Hope

GTG 772; PH 332

Longing for Light, We Wait in Darkness

GTG 314

Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song

GTG 737

Lord, When I Came into This Life

GTG 691; PH 522

Lord, You Give the Great Commission

GTG 298; PH 429

Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore

GTG 721; PH 377

Send Me, Jesus

GTG 746

Shout to the North

GTG 319

Song of Hope

GTG 765; PH 432

Step by Step

GTG 743

The Church of Christ Cannot Be Bound

GTG 766

The Church of Christ in Every Age

GTG 320; PH 421

The Church's One Foundation

GTG 321; PH 442

The Lord Now Sends Us Forth

GTG 747

Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples

GTG 757; PH 434

Together We Serve

GTG 767

We All Are One in Mission

GTG 733; PH 435

We Are Your People

PH 436

We Will Walk with God

GTG 742

Will You Come and Follow Me

GTG 726

Will You Let Me Be Your Servant

GTG 727

Additional Worship Resources for Congregations and Presbyteries in Transition





Additional Worship Resources for Congregations and Presbyteries in Transition

Litany of Praise

This is from the service for Vacating a Church Building (*Book of Common Worship* 2018, p. 551–2). It acknowledges the congregation's ministry in that place as faithful and cherished, even as it moves to a different location or comes to an end.

LITANY OF PRAISE

— *The moderator leads the people:*

Eternal God,
whom the highest heaven cannot contain,
much less a building made by human hands,
hear us as we pray:

we praise you, O God.

For the Church universal,
of which this building has been a symbol,
we praise you, O God.

For all the saints who,
in times past and present,
have formed a congregation of your people
and have met in this place
to offer their prayers and praise to you,
we praise you, O God.

For those who have been made your children
by adoption and grace,
who in this place were cleansed of sin,
buried with Christ in the waters of baptism,
and raised to new and eternal life,
we praise you, O God.

For your presence
whenever your word has been proclaimed and
your sacramental gifts of bread and wine received,
we praise you, O God.

For your blessing upon each of your children,
welcomed and nurtured here,
we praise you, O God.

For all who came to ask your blessing in marriage,
seeking to love with your love,
we praise you, O God.

For faithful stewards who have lived for others,
serving you by loving neighbors,
we praise you, O God.

For all who, having lived this life in faith,
were commended to your loving care
and now live eternally with you,
we praise you, O God.

For the knowledge that your church
and your ministry among us
will continue today, tomorrow and forever,
we praise you, O God.

All thanks and praise to you, O God,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
by the power of the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***

Prayer of Confession

This is prayer of confession from the service for the Uniting of Congregations by a Presbytery (*Book of Common Worship* 2018, p. 548–9), but could be used in other services of reconciliation at the presbytery level.

CONFESSION AND PARDON

— *Water may be poured into the baptismal font. The presider leads the call to confession.*

Acknowledging the unity we have in Christ,
let us confess with open hearts both our fear and our hope,
trusting in God's abundant mercy.

— *Following silent personal examination, all pray the following or another prayer of confession.*

God of grace,
in Jesus Christ you have broken down our divisions,
accomplished our unity,
and given us in love to one another.

***In humility, we confess our reluctance
to welcome your gifts,
to let go of our differences
and accept each other.***

In every way, we are creatures of earth,
fearful of change,
even as we yearn for the new things
you are doing among us.

***Forgive us, gracious God, and set us free
to embrace each other in your love.***

We acknowledge that we are also your children,
who hope in your promise and trust in your love.
In confidence, we confess our hope
that your love can transform us,
that the gifts you give us are for our good,
that the bonds you forge among us
will free us for strong and joyful service.

***In all things, loving God, grant us your grace,
that we may live fully into the gift of our baptism,
and welcome the new life you bring to birth in us,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

— *The moderator declares the assurance of God's forgiving grace.*

Hear the good news of the gospel!
You are no longer strangers and aliens,
but members together of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles,
with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.
In him the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.
Christ himself is our peace;
in his flesh he has made us into one.

Eph. 2:19–21, 14

In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

Amen or Thanks be to God.

— *Lifting water from the font or pool, the moderator addresses the people:*

Remember your baptism and be thankful!

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.
For to this peace we are called
as members of a single body.

Col. 3:15

The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

And also with you.

— *The people may exchange with one another, by words and gesture, signs of peace and reconciliation.*

Litany of Confession

This is a comprehensive confession of sin (*Book of Common Worship* 2018, p. 452–4) that might be used for a communal service of wholeness and healing, whether at the congregational or presbytery level. It emphasizes our baptismal unity while acknowledging our failure to live into the promises of our baptism.

CONFESSION OF SIN — A LITANY

— *Water may be poured into the baptismal font. The presider leads the call to confession.*

Sovereign God,
in baptism you called us to turn from sin
and to turn to Jesus Christ;
but we stray from his ways
and do not heed your call.

— *Silence*

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

In baptism you joined us to Christ in his death
that we might be raised with Christ in new life;
but we cherish old ways
and fail to embrace the risen life
of righteousness, justice and love.

— *Silence*

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

In baptism you united us with all the baptized
who confess your name;
but we foster division in the church.

We refuse to live as one people,
and so fail to witness to your reconciling love before the world.

— *Silence*

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

In baptism you call us to ministry
in all realms of life;
but we refuse the struggle to know your will.
We do not nurture the ways of peace.
We allow enmity and hatred to grow among us,
putting neighbor against neighbor,
and nation against nation.
We abuse the earth you entrust to our care,
and live in discord with all you made.

— *Silence*

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

In baptism you sent us to serve with compassion
all for whom Christ died;
but we ignore the suffering of the oppressed
and the plight of the poor.
We take bread from the hungry,
and will not listen to cries for justice.

— *Silence*

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

In baptism you gave us the Holy Spirit
to teach and guide us;
but we rely on ourselves,
and refuse to trust your direction.
We spurn your eternal wisdom,
preferring the luring ways of the world.

— *Silence*

Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

Lord, have mercy on us.
Remember the promises you made to us in our baptism,
forgive our sinful ways
and heal our brokenness.
Set us free from all that enslaves us,
and raise us to new life in Jesus Christ,
that we may be your faithful servants,
showing forth your healing love to the world,
to the glory of your holy name. **Amen.**

Hear the good news!

In baptism you were buried with Christ.
In baptism also you were raised to life with him,
through faith in the power of God
who raised Christ from the dead.

Col. 2:12; 2 Cor. 5:17

Anyone who is in Christ
is a new creation.
The old life has gone;
a new life has begun.

I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ,
you are forgiven. **Amen** or **Thanks be to God.**

Litany of Confession and Repentance

This litany of confession and repentance was written by the Rev. Warren Lesane Jr. for a gathering of African-American congregations in the Presbytery of Charlotte in 2011. It may be abbreviated, adapted or used as a model for other acts of confession and repentance.

Leader: We confess that —

Clergy: *as teaching elders, we are not equipped
to lead our congregations faithfully into the 21st century,
nor have we sought the necessary opportunities
to learn new skills in order to become better leaders.*

Leader: We confess that —

Elders: *as ruling elders, we have repeatedly adopted the same old vision,
programs, budgets and ministries, year after year,
and our churches are no better off.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *we have depended we have depended on the presbytery, synod,
and General Assembly to take care of us —
while failing to rise up as the people of God
we were created to be.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *leadership at every level in the church is highly resistant to change.
We quickly resort to sabotaging ministries
to prevent change from occurring.
Further, we are guilty of financially blackmailing the church
if the change affects us.*

Leader: We confess that —

Clergy: *too many times, we failed to admit that the sun has set on our ministry
and we have refused to open a door for others
on whose ministries the sun is beginning to rise.*

Leader: We confess that —

Elders: *as ruling elders, the Book of Order has been our Bible,
while the Old and New Testaments sit at home accumulating dust.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *we depend on others to take care of our churches,
while we use our personal resources to take vacations,
buy larger homes and entertain ourselves,
while only giving to God's ministries a few dollars here and there.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *We are comfortable being the object of mission through which someone else is always doing for us, yet we reject every opportunity to engage in mission whereby we can do for others.*

Leader: We confess that —

Clergy: *As teaching elders, some of us are guilty of hogging power for selfish purposes, failing to mentor, nurture and help raise up a new cadre of church laity and professionals for leadership positions.*

Leader: We confess that —

Elders: *Our sessions are trapped in malaises of apathy, conflict and dysfunction. Our attention has been on self, survival and having our way instead of God having God's way — hence the church has lost its credibility and influence in the community.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *While we are grateful to the Board of National Mission, the Freedman Bureau and other agencies of the PC(USA) that helped establish African-American educational institutions and planted new congregations and provided staff and financial resources, this era has ended and we are living in a new day.*

Leader: We confess that —

Clergy: *as teaching elders, we have failed to lead God's people with our whole heart, mind and soul, and we recognize that our lack of leadership has contributed significantly to the current state of our congregations.*

Leader: We confess that —

Clergy &

Elders: *as teaching and ruling elders, we are missing from the life of our presbyteries, where our unique insight is needed on commissions, committees, work groups and at presbytery meetings. Even when we show up, we arrive late and leave early. We sit around the tables of discussion and decision-making with voice and vote but refuse to use either effectively.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *we have fallen asleep on the job. Our buildings are in disrepair, which reflects the spiritual state of our lives. Worship is old, stagnated and dry, and we cling to a hope that someday God will rescue our church because we have been faithful to the end.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *our perceived personal power and positions in the church are far more important than submitting our lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *we are unwilling to reach out to strangers and give them our seats.
We become irate when someone sits on our pew.
Yet our congregations are dying, some rapidly, some moderately,
while others appear OK but are aging rapidly.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *our congregations claim to want strong and visionary pastoral leadership,
but when pastors lead us into prophetic ministry opportunities
where we have no control,
sessions and members revoke pastors' leadership privileges.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *we allow families with money, position and power to hijack God's church —
hence no ministry has a chance of success without securing their permission.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *our worship services have lost their joy.
We go through the motions of worship,
listening to unrehearsed choirs struggle with selections,
watching members habitually enter worship late and,
in the end, God's people return into the world
untouched by the saving grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *we seldom live up to our ordination vows
of being a friend among our colleagues in ministry, working with them,
subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit.*

Leader: We confess that —

All: *many congregations, sessions and search committees are sexist.
We invest heavily in nurturing, recruiting, educating
and training women for the office of teaching elder,
yet our churches refuse to call them as pastors because of gender.*

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: *And also with you.*

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: *It is right to give our thanks and praise.*

Leader: We give thanks, Eternal God,
for you nourish and sustain all living things by the gift of water.
In the beginning of time, your Spirit moved over the watery chaos,
calling forth order and life.

People: *In the time of Noah, you destroyed evil by the waters of the flood,
giving righteousness a new beginning.*

Leader: You led Israel out of slavery, through the waters of the sea,
into the freedom of the promised land.

People: *In the water of Jordan,
Jesus was baptized by John and anointed with your Spirit.
By the baptism of his own death and resurrection,
Christ set us free from sin and death, and opened the way to eternal life.*

Leader: We thank you, O God, for the water of baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.
From it we are raised to share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.

People: *Lord, send your Spirit to move over this water
that it may be a fountain of deliverance and rebirth.
Wash away the sin of all who are cleansed by it.
As we reaffirm our baptism, raise us to new life
and graft us to the body of Christ.
Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us
that we may have the power to do your will,
and continue forever in the risen life of Christ.*

All: *To you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God,
be all praise, honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.*

Leader: We promise with God's help to participate in creating
a climate of openness and willingness to experience deep change.
Therefore, we declare our congregations and ourselves ready:

People: *To let go.*

Leader: We are ready to be surprised or dismayed, challenged or judged,
changed to new ways or confirmed in ancient ways,
any way God addresses us.

People: *To let God.*

Leader: We are ready to risk our heritage, our tradition and our survival
in order to discern the new directions in which God would lead us.

People: *To consider all options.*

Leader: We are ready to consider any change or sacrifice, any opportunity or cost,
even the relocation or closure of our congregation,
for the sake of our walk with Jesus Christ.

People: *To share all ministries.*

Leader: We are ready to share equal responsibility
so that all may have time to deepen their spirituality
and listen for the call of God.

People: *To stretch our imaginations.*

Leader: We are ready to listen to crazy ideas, consider the impossible,
taste the distasteful, converse with strangers
and experiment with what is nontraditional,
so that God can help us to grow and change.

People: *To laugh.*

Leader: We are ready to tolerate odd personalities,
go to extremes of diplomacy and offer the maximum generosity.
We are prepared to laugh at ourselves and laugh with others.
We are eager to try, fail, learn and then try again and again and again.

Litany of Commissioning

This litany for commissioning from the Thrive Project of the Presbyteries of Grand Canyon and De Cristo was written by the Rev. Dr. Brad Munroe, drawing on Scripture and the *Book of Order*. It may be abbreviated, adapted or used as a model for other acts of commissioning.

LITANY

There are different gifts.

But it is the same Spirit who gives them.

There are different ways of serving God.

But it is the same Lord who is served.

God works through different persons in different ways.

But it is the same God who achieves the divine purpose through them all.

Each one is given a gift by the Spirit to use for the common good.

Together we are the body of Christ and individually members of him.

We are called out by God to be the Church of Jesus Christ,
a sign in the world today of the new life that God intends for all.

In our life together, we are to display the new reality
that sin is forgiven, reconciliation accomplished,
and the dividing walls of hostility torn down.

As the living body of Christ, the church is called

***to proclaim the good news of salvation,
to present the claims of the gospel on human lives and
to demonstrate Christ's love in service to the world.***

We are called to undertake this mission even at the risk of life,
trusting God in all things.

Therefore, in faith we embrace

***a new openness to what God is doing in our time,
a renewed obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ and
a new joy in our common worship and work.***

Today we reclaim our historic calling
and remember the Great Ends of the Church:

***the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.***

To those present whose sessions have covenanted with the presbytery
to participate in the Thrive Project:

Do you desire for your church to experience
renewed commitment to Christ's mission
renewed openness to the Spirit's leading
and deeper faithfulness to God's call upon your life together?

We so desire.

Do you promise to seek the will of Christ,
to be led by the Holy Spirit,
and to glorify God in all you do?

We so promise.

Do you covenant to pray together,
to listen to one another,
and to welcome the support of your brothers and sisters in Christ
from the presbytery
as they walk with you through the Thrive Project?

We so covenant.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lord God of our salvation,
by your Word you called creation into being
and made us in your image to love and serve you.
By your saving love you sent Jesus Christ to live among us,
to redeem your people and establish your peace.
By your Holy Spirit you shower gifts on your children,
opening hearts and worlds to your grace,
empowering us to live holy and joyful lives.
We praise you, Eternal One,
for the Church throughout the world,
born of your love, saved by your grace,
and sustained by your Holy Spirit.
Make us the community you have called us to be,
a holy people, your very own people,
gifted to proclaim your marvelous love. **Amen.**

Litany of Leave-Taking

This is from the service for the Dissolution of a Pastoral Call (*Book of Common Worship* 2018, p. 528–30),
but could be used or adapted for other situations between presbyteries and congregations.

LITANY

— *A representative of the presbytery or session leads all present:*

Let us pray for the saving presence of our living Lord:

In your world,
be present, Lord.

In this congregation,
be present, Lord.

In this community,
be present, Lord.

In this presbytery and the whole church,
be present, Lord.

In the homes and hearts of all your people,
be present, Lord.

— *The pastor may lead this portion of the litany:*

Let us pray for the mercy of the Lord:

For work begun but not completed,
Lord, have mercy.

For expectations not met,
Lord, have mercy.

For wounds not healed,
Lord, have mercy.

For gifts not shared,
Lord, have mercy.

For promises not kept,
Lord, have mercy.

— *A session representative continues:*

Let us give thanks for our journey together in this place:

For friendships made,
for joys celebrated
and for times of nurture and growth,
thanks be to God.

For wounds healed,
expectations met,
gifts given and promises kept,
thanks be to God.

For our fellowship in Jesus Christ,
and for the love of God, which has sustained us,
thanks be to God.

— *The presbytery representative prays:*

Loving God, Alpha and Omega,
you are both beginning and end.
Our endings and our beginnings
are rooted in your love.
Whether near or far,
we are held close by your love,
and kept safe from any lasting loss.
Let our time together end with your blessing.
Touch all memories with your grace and peace.
Help us to live with courage and gladness
in the future you present us.
In every time and place,
may we offer you our highest and our best;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Alleluia! or Amen.

Vital Congregations Initiative Calendar





Vital Congregations calendar — January track

Year 1: Relational

Authentic Relationships and the Honest Assessment and Discernment of Congregations

January	<i>Casting Vision — Presbyteries with pastors and church leaders; Pastors with churches</i>
February	Prayer and Planning Meetings, Introductions of Pastor Cohorts, Opening Celebration
March–April	<i>Exploring Seven Marks of Vital Congregations</i> (seven-week churchwide study during Lent)
May–July	Break for Summer
August	Prayer, Planning and Training for Fall
Sept–Nov	<i>Checking Our Marks — Three-session Congregation and Presbytery Assessment</i> (three months)
Nov–Dec	<i>“Show Your Marks” — Report/Capturing Congregational Stories</i>

Year 2: Incarnational

Revitalizing Church in Three Actions: Re-forming, Missional Clustering, Death and Resurrection

January	Prayer and Planning for Vital Congregations
Feb–March	<i>Plotting the Course Think Tanks and Seven-week Study of Rethinking Seven Marks of Vitality</i> (two months)
April	<i>Pray</i> (one week)
April–Oct	<i>Changing Our Marks — Three Actions of Revitalizing Churches</i> (six months)
Nov–Dec	<i>Final Vital Congregations Assessment and Report: “Show Your Marks”</i> (two months)

Vital Congregations calendar — Fall track

Year 1: Relational

Authentic Relationships and the Honest Assessment and Discernment of Congregations

June	<i>Casting Vision — Presbyteries with pastors and church leaders; Pastors with churches</i>
July–Aug	Prayer and Planning Meetings, Introductions of Pastor Cohorts, Opening Celebration
Sept	<i>Exploring Seven Marks of Vital Congregations</i> (seven-week churchwide study)
Oct–Dec	Break for Advent
Jan	Prayer, Planning and Training for Spring
Feb–April	<i>Checking Our Marks — Three-session Congregation and Presbytery Assessment</i> (three months)
May	<i>“Show Your Marks” — Report/Capturing Congregational Stories</i>

Year 2: Incarnational

Revitalizing church in Three Actions: Re-forming, Missional Clustering, Death and Resurrection

June–July	Prayer and Planning for Vital Congregations
Aug–Sept	<i>Plotting the Course Think Tanks and Seven-week Study of Rethinking Seven Marks of Vitality</i> (two months)
Sept	<i>Pray</i> (one week)
Oct–March	<i>Changing Our Marks — Three Actions of Revitalizing Churches</i> (six months)
April–May	<i>Final Vital Congregations Assessment and Report: “Show Your Marks”</i> (two months)

Template of two-year Vital Congregations Initiative calendar for pastors/church leaders — January track

Planning Year

January–February: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April 1: Covenant Commitment to presbytery

May: East Coast or West Coast Gathering

June–August: Summer Break/Vital Congregations Facilitators Training

August–October: Initiative Planning and Bible Study of Vital Congregations Seven Marks

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: Advent Celebration of Vital Congregations

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year I

January–February: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

March–May: Seven Marks Churchwide Study

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Summer Break

Fall: Checking Our Marks (Three-Month Assessment)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year II

January: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

February–March: Seven Marks Churchwide Study

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

February–March: Plotting the Course (Action Plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April: Week of Prayer

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Summer Break

Fall: Changing Our Marks (Six-Month Implementing Action Plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: Debriefing and Final Assessment

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Template of two-year Vital Congregations Initiative calendar for pastors/church leaders — Fall track

Planning Year

February–May: Sharing the Vision and Seven Marks of Vital Congregations

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April 1: Covenant Commitment to presbytery

May: East Coast or West Coast Gathering

June–July: Summer Break/Vital Congregations Facilitators Training

August–October: Initiative Planning and Bible Study of Vital Congregations Seven Marks

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: Advent Celebration of Vital Congregations

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year I

June–August: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

September: Seven Marks Churchwide Study

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Advent Break

January: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

February–April: Checking Our Marks (Three-Month Assessment)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

May: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year II

June–August: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

September: Seven Marks Churchwide Study

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

August–September: Plotting the Course (Action Plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

September: Week of Prayer

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

October–March: Changing Our Marks (Six-Month Implementing Action Plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April–May: Debriefing and Final Assessment

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

May: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Template of two-year Vital Congregations Initiative calendar for Presbyteries — January track

Planning Year

February–May: Sharing the Vision and Seven Marks of Vital Congregations

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April 1: Covenant Commitment to presbytery

May: East Coast or West Coast Gathering

June–July: Summer Break/Vital Congregations Facilitators Training

August–October: Initiative Planning and Bible Study of Vital Congregations Seven Marks

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: Advent Celebration of Vital Congregations

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year I

January–February: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

March–May: Seven Marks Churchwide Study

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Summer Break

Fall: Checking Our Marks (Three-Month Assessment)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year II

January: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

February–March: Presbytery Meetings (during Seven Marks Churchwide Study)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

February–March: Presbytery Envisioning: Plotting the Course (Action Plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April: Week of Prayer

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Summer Break

Fall: Presbytery Prayer Tour (during Changing Our Marks six-month implementing action plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: Presbytery Debriefing and Final Assessment

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Template of two-year Vital Congregations Initiative calendar for Presbyteries — Fall track

Planning Year

February–May: Sharing the Vision and Seven Marks of Vital Congregations

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April 1: Covenant Commitment of Churches and Selecting Facilitators

May: East Coast or West Coast Gathering

August: Vital Congregations Facilitators Training

August–October: Initiative Planning, Forming Pastor Cohorts and Bible Study of Vital Congregations Seven Marks

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

November–December: Advent Celebration of Vital Congregations

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year I

June–August: Prayer and Planning

September: Site Visits (during Seven Marks Churchwide Study)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Advent Break

January: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

February–April: Checking Our Marks (Three-Month Presbytery Assessment)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

May: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Year II

June–August: Prayer and Planning

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

September: Presbytery Meetings (during Seven Marks Churchwide Study)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

August–September: Presbytery Envisioning: Plotting the Course (Action Plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

September: Week of Prayer

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

October–March: Presbytery Prayer Tour (during Changing Our Marks Six-Month Implementing Action Plan)

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

April–May: Debriefing and Final Assessment

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

May: “Show Your Marks” Campaign

Dates: _____ Activities: _____

Dates: _____ *Activities:* _____

Dates: _____ *Activities:* _____

Dates: _____ *Activities:* _____

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Three Lessons for Forming Pastor Cohorts





Preparation Year: Pastor Cohort Sessions

Overview

These three sessions are designed to foster relationship-building and trust among pastor cohort groups. Together, pastors will explore the vision of vital congregations while reflecting and sharing about their particular ministry experience and context. This time will also allow pastors the opportunity to envision and share ideas with colleagues and friends as they prepare their congregations for the Vital Congregations Initiative.

Session 1: Getting to Know You

Session 2: The Vision for Vital Congregations and the Seven Marks

Session 3: The Vital Congregations Initiative

Preparation

Once pastor cohort groups have been formed by the presbytery, a time and location should be determined among the groups. A facilitator should be selected to lead each session. Pastor cohort groups may also choose to designate a person to handle communication reminders and updates on pastor cohort gatherings.

Prayer

God of our lives, by the power of your Holy Spirit, we have been drawn together by one baptism into one faith, serving one Lord and Savior. Do not let us tear away from one another through divisions or hard argument. May your peace embrace our differences, preserving us in unity, as one body of Jesus Christ our Lord (*Book of Common Worship: Daily Prayer*).

Bless our time together as pastors, called and equipped; as humans, flawed and forgiven. May our time of faithfulness with gathered colleagues and friends be pleasing in the sight of our redeemer and Lord. May we share openly, dialogue in compassion, study in truth and open ourselves to the wonder of God in every session. Lord, open us to the new thing in Christ Jesus our Lord, that together we might follow your will and walk in your ways, from this day forward until forevermore.

O God, you are the giver of life. We pray for the church in the world. Sanctify her life, renew her worship, give power to her witnessing, restore her unity. Give strength to those who are searching together for that kind of obedience which creates unity. Heal the divisions separating your children one from another, so that they will make fast, with bonds of peace, the unity which the Spirit gives (A prayer from the Democratic Republic of Congo, *Book of Common Worship: Daily Prayer*).

Lesson 1: Getting to know you

Opening Prayer

It is God who has called us forth, gathered us in, set us down and brings us here; for that we stop and give you praise, O Lord of our lives. For your mercy that joins Christ's pastors together, and reminds us we are not alone, we give you thanks, O God. For your grace that unites us in prayer and Scripture, dialogue and compassion, our gratitude is given unto you. Lord, may this space be filled with your Holy Spirit. May our conversations and collegiality be pleasing in your sight. May we, your pastors, and people of humble faith dwell in your Word and wonder this day and always. Amen.

Opening Exercise

Each participant should take a few moments to introduce themselves to the group. How you define yourself, what is important to your identity and the things you choose to share are entirely up to you. Beyond labels and culturally driven descriptions, our personal testimony is important. Be sure to listen and hear one another in this time of sharing.

Dwelling in the Word of God

Read Isaiah 43:1–21 aloud. Take a few moments to allow the Word of God to speak to you individually through the power of the Holy Spirit. Write down key words or phrases. Let the Word of God dwell in you and listen for God's word to you. After silent reflection, the group may choose to highlight anything they would like to share with the larger group.

Why are you here?

As a group, take time to reflect and dialogue about the following questions. You may not get to them all in your session, but they are necessary food for thought as you move forward together and prepare for the work of the Vital Congregations Initiative.

1. What brought you, personally, here today? What are your hopes for this group?
2. How did you enter this session today? How is your particular ministry going? How are you feeling about the Vital Congregations process?
3. As you think about the "new thing" Christ is doing in the Church, what do you believe your call as pastor will be in this process? What is God's calling to you? How might it be transformed, challenged and inspired in this work together?
4. In your particular ministry, are there things you need to let go of, burdens in ministry you carry, relationships that need to be reconciled and issues that need to be addressed in order for you to open yourself to God's calling for Vital Congregations?

Closing Prayer

How can we hold one another in prayer today, both in our personal lives and in the context of our particular ministries? A volunteer may close in prayer, or you may lead a group prayer to lift up one another.

Take Away

- A. As you look ahead to Session 2, pastors are encouraged to bring responses to the statements below. This continues to help build group dynamics and foster an environment of trust in sharing together.
 - The Scripture that most defines my ministry is ...
 - The biblical character I most relate to is ...
 - The earliest memory I have of someone teaching me the faith is ...

- To sum up my call to ministry in one phrase it would be ...
- My favorite part of ministry is ...
- The person/people who keep me most rooted in the faith is/are ...
- When ministry challenges me, I tend to ...
- If I had to pick a single moment in ministry that affirms my call to parish ministry, it would be ...
- I maintain my spiritual health by ...
- I maintain my emotional health by ...
- I maintain my physical health by ...
- I experience play when I am enjoying ...
- My sacred space where I experience God's presence most clearly is ...
- My greatest life challenge has been ...
- The time I questioned God most is when ...
- My daily spiritual practices are ...
- I have seen the living God today in ...
- I give thanks to God for ...

B. Be sure to read through the **Vision Statement** and the **Seven Marks of the Vital Congregations Initiative** in preparation for Session 2.

Next Gathering will be

Date _____ Location _____ Time _____



Vital Congregations Vision

“True religion must come first, to direct our minds to the living God. Thus, steeped in the knowledge of God, they may aspire to contemplate, fear and worship his majesty; to participate in God’s blessings; to seek God’s help at all times; to recognize, and by praise to celebrate, the greatness of God’s works — as the only goal of all the activities of this life.” — John Calvin

“A post Christian mission should leave behind all attempts to become a Christian culture again. Mission is not a project. Evangelism is not to grow the church. Conversions are not instruments to change the world, but are a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. They are good things in and of themselves: evangelism and mission. Even if they do not bring back a Christian culture, they offer beauty to our world. Mission is about the glory of God before anything else. God is simply good, not just good for something. Evangelism and serving the poor are good, not just good for something.” — Ray Jones

“Courageous faith knows there is no assurance of comfort and ease to the life of discipleship in Jesus Christ. Our Savior’s crucifixion taught us that. Yet those who boldly dare to passionately follow know that this is a living faith in a living God, a living Gospel that was always meant to be on the move! Christ’s followers are always reforming and revitalizing because they understand that is what resurrection and redemption are all about.” — Kathryn Threadgill

re-vi-tal-i-za-tion / noun

*“The act or an instance of bringing something back to life, public attention, or vigorous activity.”
(Webster’s Dictionary) “The action of imbuing something with new life and vitality.” (OED) Synonyms:
reanimation, rebirth, regeneration, rejuvenation, renewal, resurgence, resurrection, resuscitation, revival.*

Vital Congregations

Who are vital congregations? It is the woman who joyfully joins her church for worship because there is a new energy and a genuine compassion present there. It is the people who do the difficult work of letting go of what they have always understood their congregation to be in order to minister to the needs of their community. It is the untrained young mother, supported by her pastor and church, who has a passion for reaching out to young African-American girls, or the earnest leader who imagines with others about how to be a living sanctuary amid gang violence outside the doors.

*Everywhere you turn, God, in Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit is doing this new thing for the church!
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19)*

Now is the time that God longs to reveal in wonder the revitalizing of the Church in our communities, our cultures, our nation and throughout the earth! The question is — do we perceive it? Do we wait expectantly ready, hope-filled and faithful to experience the transforming wonder God has planned, or are we fearfully anxious, indifferent and paralyzed to change? Are we merely existing in “glory days” gone by, or are we courageously emboldened to live as disciples of Jesus Christ today?

By redirecting our mind to the living God, by reforming and being re-formed in Jesus Christ, and by reinvesting in genuine relationships, we can faithfully follow as disciples of Jesus Christ. We can join in the revitalizing power of the Holy Spirit with existing congregations. We can be a small part of God’s redemptive plan, until we worship in the fullness of the kingdom. The vision: By the power of the Holy Spirit, and in authentic relationships with mid councils, we seek to equip, nurture and support church leaders to empower their congregations to renew, recover and live more fully into faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ.

The Vital Congregations Initiative of the PC(USA) is not a quick-fix, one-size-fits-all program; it is not a guarantee that all existing congregations will survive in their current forms. It is not our aim or intent to assume we know every particular church, nor presume it is our job to tell them what to do. What we can do is humbly walk in trusting relationships grounded in love for God and for one another. We can show up and seek to faithfully discern; we can do the necessary, joyous and difficult work of change, in order to live into the will of God together. We can be the church of Jesus Christ.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1–2)

The triune God is the giver of vitality and life, and the Holy Spirit is powerfully working to revitalize the Church in the fullness of Christ's resurrection and reign. The Vital Congregations Initiative of the PC(USA) seeks to discern the Spirit's path forward for existing congregations, so that all might become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in word and identity, in action and in worship. Our hope is to unite the people of God, to walk together in seeking God, experiencing transforming wonder, and living into faithful discipleship to our God who is not finished yet.

Then God said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:9–14)

There is no denying that we live in critically anxious times. A nation plagued with race riots is reminiscent of a scarring past never truly reconciled. Words like "Christian" and "religion" have been marred for over a decade, leaving 64 percent of adolescents claiming they find no need for the church today. Mounting fear permeates an ever-growing decline in the PC(USA) and all denominations, as churches everywhere seek relevance and strive for resilience. Scholars attest that we are entering the next Great Awakening. Some say it is an uphill battle, a crisis of faith, a heart problem. Sunday worship remains the most segregated hour in America. Our churches have become inwardly focused corporate institutions of programmatic systems. Our faith has become good morals derived from a therapeutic and distant God. Our questions are about maintaining buildings, rather than addressing why no one is coming to them. Is it any wonder, as people in our culture search for meaning, they do not see the church as offering any significant help for the journey? Since many have experienced the church as being against them and too political, they have given up on the church, or feel the church has given up on them. Since they have not seen a lifestyle worthy to follow, they continue to look for a way that will satisfy their deepest desires and longings. Yet, we know the victory in Christ Jesus is sure!

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." (Revelation 21:3–6a)

Christ's home is with us. Christ's life-giving Spirit is making all things new. God wants to be known. God wants to be in relationship with us from the day God walked with humanity in the garden, to the day God called Hagar by name in the wilderness, to the day God revealed the Son, Jesus Christ, in human flesh. God wants to reveal the awesome mystery of God's wonder to us all. We just have to perceive it. We have to open ourselves to receive it. Therefore, we believe that if we walk together, and we look to the God who longs for us, then perhaps we might encounter the wonder of God that transforms all things and changes us forever.

Then maybe we will do church, share church and indeed be church in ways different than ever before. Maybe we will have the courage and conviction to do the necessary work to be transformed and to change, so that Christ's light shines through us and needs are met. Maybe we will have the reconciling conversations and come together in ways we have never known by the power of the Holy Spirit. Maybe we will engage again the practices that take us deeper into God's love, our love for one another and our love for the people around us. Maybe we will transcend culture and reflect the kingdom of God with rich diversity of every kind, and all who are lost and broken and searching in this world might find their place in the family of God. The boldly daring part about this initiative is the fact that we dare to dream and imagine that God might allow us to be a still-small part of the coming kingdom; the new thing that Christ is doing; the home that God is building among mortals. And perhaps all it takes is the people of God coming together and calling out to God. Perhaps it is as simple as loving God and loving one another, in order for us to see God's kingdom coming and God's will being done in the most wondrous ways.

It starts by showing up; by entering into relationship together and seeking the triune God revealed in wonder. The vision is simple: the denominational center leaders, showing up with mid council leaders, who show up with pastors, who show up with parishioners, and seek the will of God and the Spirit's direction in calling all disciples of Jesus Christ to follow. In relationship together, we will prayerfully discern, honestly reflect and share in the rich histories of congregations, while confronting harsh realities of brokenness and sinfulness. We will look to confess who we have been and where we are as congregations. In looking at our past and naming our present, we can more honestly discern, in spirit and in truth, where God is leading us to be in the future.

The second year of the initiative will be about living into three revitalizing actions of missional clustering, re-forming the ways we are church, or witnessing to resurrection as we experience death. We will seek to faithfully walk with courage and hope into the new thing Christ is doing. Each context is different, each church is particular, and so the PC(USA) will attempt to resource and train Vital Congregations facilitators and coaches who can help mid council leaders and pastors address the discerning needs of particular congregations and walk with them in their actions of revitalization, as they seek to follow as faithful disciples in God's plan.

We will also help to capture stories. For every church that is facing the reality of death and remembering its legacy of life, we hope to support you in capturing your story and sharing in the grace and promise of resurrection and new life in Christ. For those whose mission has become unclear and their community has changed around them, and they discern the Spirit's movement to revitalize in mission and ministry, we want to help share your story. We want to convey a church that faithfully follows the Lord in great hope, whether it is witnessing in death, changing into revitalized life, or completely transforming from all it used to be into an entirely new chapter and life. Each church, each member, has a story to tell, and it is one this culture and the world needs to hear.

As we seek faithfulness and dare to imagine where God is leading us to follow, we will offer resources that will help plant new roots and build sustainable new systems to tend to the people of God and carry out mission and ministry together. We will encourage pastors in cohorts to pray and discern together, so relationships of support remind us that we are not alone. During this two-year initiative, we hope it

will be a beginning, a fresh start to the denomination coming together at every level and supporting one another as a part of the Church of Jesus Christ. We will be present together as difficult realities are faced, as churches face death and begin to mourn. We will walk together with those who are doing great things and have hit the peak of growth and ministry, and those who are starting to see that taper off and decline. We will help one another dare to re-envision and reform where the Spirit is leading them, and how they are being called to be church together in their ever-changing context. Together, we will celebrate revitalization of people and places that have truly experienced the wonder of God, and we will sit together when efforts fail and hope is wavering. Truly, we believe that the time of Great Awakening is now. Christ is doing a new thing. Do we perceive it? Are we open to it? And will we have the courage to faithfully follow as disciples of Jesus Christ? That is our prayer and our hope!

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Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality

① ***Lifelong Discipleship Formation vs. complacent “Christian” piety; simply teaching good morals; offering the latest programs***

Lifelong Discipleship Formation is about daily life. It’s about how we claim and proclaim our identity as followers of Christ. It’s about how we practice our faith; how we grow in faith, cherish faith, and share faith in the world. Beyond mere words, how do people know we are disciples of Jesus Christ? No matter the age, it’s about daily seeking and living in relationship with the living God. We are called to be righteous, to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. Thus, lifelong discipleship formation is about how we live into that right relationship with God, with all God’s people, and all of creation. It’s about growing in the community of God’s grace, the church, and interpreting faith in our everyday life; confronting brokenness and sinfulness when we fall short of the glory of God and shining a bold light of Christ for all to see. Lifelong discipleship formation requires an awakened and engaged commitment to God, and to all people whom Christ loves. It is about the call to daily take up our cross and follow Christ.

A. Biblical References:

Acts 2:42–47; Luke 8:11–18; Philippians 3:9b; Romans 8:1–17; Matthew 5:1–16; Deuteronomy 11:13–21

B. Objectives:

- An intentional plan for discipleship formation of all ages; from the cradle to the grave theology (including, but not limited to, family systems and intergenerational discipleship where applicable)
- A regular practice of Bible study, prayer, and other spiritual habits, inside and outside where we gather
- Church teaches rituals and faith traditions, biblical literacy and spiritual practices to all members
- Church equips and empowers all people to interpret faith in daily life. It engages in, not hides from, difficult conversations of society and cultures today. (i.e., sexism, racism, classism, ageism and all other “isms” that divide)
- Fostered environments of diversity that help enhance and deeply enrich biblical study, worship, and communal life

C. Potential Outcomes:

- People learn to think critically and interpret Scripture in their daily lives. They have the biblical literacy and the faith language to engage in necessary conversations
- They practice a living relationship, to a living God, responding to the call to follow as true disciples of Jesus Christ
- Move beyond committee meetings and program attendance, and identity in Christ becomes central to life
- Genuine sense of joy, energy, commitment and passion to being the community of God
- People “outside the church” glean a new understanding of what it is to follow Christ and be church
- The church begins to transcend culture and be about God’s work of reconciliation, love and peace

D. Reflection Questions:

- Does Christian formation in your church lead people to change the way they live? (i.e., schedule time, spend money, give resources, see different people, serve, spend time with family, have conversations with friends?)
- Are people of all ages being challenged in assumptions, growing in understanding, and learning the language of faith?
- Does the study of Scripture influence the mission and ministry of your church?
- Are faithful habits being translated to daily living?
- Does the Word of God permeate all aspects of life together? Name some examples.
- Do all people feel welcome to share their voice, opinion, story without judgment or fear?
- What difficult conversations of faith and culture does your congregation need to have together? Whose voices are missing from the conversation to take place?

- As a disciple, what uncomfortable things do you need to let go of, truths do you need to be aware of, places you are afraid to follow, things you are afraid God might call you to do? (i.e., injustice, oppression, hatred, evils, suffering, inequalities to confront)?
- How can faithful discipleship become our daily identity instead of just religious piety? How do others know we are disciples of Jesus Christ?

2 ***Intentional Authentic Evangelism vs. “Jesus freaks”; “Christian” hypocrisy; a committee responsibility***

Evangelism is simply sharing the Good News. It is authentic and it is intentional, not merely expressions of kindness or good moral ethics. We all have Good News to share in our lives; it is a part of our identity. And when we share this news, it is with intentionality and with people with whom we have relationships. We don't have to be trained to share the good news of a new job, baby or puppy! We simply share what is beautiful and dear to us. Therefore, evangelism must be connected to lifelong Christian formation. It is through intentional spiritual practices in the faith community that we meld God's story with our story, and we share that story with people in our daily lives.

A. Biblical References:

John 4:1–41; 2 Corinthians 4:7; Galatians 2:19b–20;
Mark 4:1–20; 1 Peter 3:13–22; Matthew 4:19–20;
Psalm 96; John 3:11–21; Romans 10:1–17

B. Objectives:

- To recognize that all disciples are called to evangelism, not just committees and leaders; it is an authentic part of their life
- To empower and equip all people to enter relationships unashamed and unafraid to share the Good News
- The church recognizes that evangelism should be need-based (meets needs of un-churched/de-churched)
- The church develops practices for people to share their story and give witness to Good News in their lives

C. Potential Outcomes

- Hospitality is not viewed as a substitute for evangelism
- Evangelism is viewed as a way of life, not as a program or function of a few
- The mission focuses on sharing the Good News
- The people of God meld and claim God's story within their lives; living unafraid to share it
- Develop authentic relationships founded in Christ; image of Christ is shared

D. Reflection Questions:

- When did the news of Christ become Good News in your life?
- Does your church authentically allow individuals to come as they are, with their particular stories, and hear the Good News? Why or why not?
- In your church, how do people share their stories and connect it to the Story of God's redeeming love?
- How is your congregation equipped, empowered and encouraged to intentionally share the Good News in daily life?
- Do you have an evangelism committee? If so, what are they tasked to do? How do you practice sharing the good news vs. growing membership?
- What keeps us from sharing the Good News in our daily relationships?
- Can we call it “Good News” if we do not share it in our authentic relationships?
- Name a time when sharing the Good News was good for someone who needed to hear it.

3 ***Outward Incarnational Focus vs. inward institutional survival; closed communities of assimilation/exclusion***

If discipleship formation is about learning/understanding/living the Good News, and authentic evangelism is about intentionally sharing the Good News in relationships, then outward incarnation is about not limiting where and to whom we share the Good News. Outward incarnational focus is about being the gathered community of Christ sent out! We go not because we have a strategy for new membership; we go because we have a Savior

who commanded us to be on God's mission. We go because God's saving love in Christ cannot be inwardly contained in our buildings when we live with neighbors in need and a hurting world. The Good News is meant to transform and transcend. The church is meant to be a beacon of Christ's grace, justice, freedom and love. Outward incarnational focus means we daily take up our cross and follow to the marginalized of society, the poor among us, the suffering and sick, the stranger and enemy, the downtrodden and "the least of these." We do not just focus on bringing similar or like-minded people inside to assimilate to our way of doing things; nor do we just go to people and places that are familiar and comfortable. Outward incarnational focus requires an emboldened faith that goes because Christ is already present and calls us to join.

A. Biblical References:

Matthew 25:31–46; Romans 12:1–21; Matthew 7:14; Luke 19:1–10; Matthew 8:18–23; Luke 6:27–36; 2 Peter 1:16–21; Luke 9:1–6, 23–27; Luke 10:1–12

B. Objectives:

- Conduct community analysis to ascertain the needs, fears, hopes and pressure points in the community, so that the church's ministry and mission can address them
- The church practices genuine hospitality (more than being warm and friendly, it is about attempting to anticipate the needs of others; practicing inclusion; stepping out of the comfort zone; loving and nurturing others; it's about them, not you)
- Join on Christ's mission with the lost, weak, suffering, lowly, least, marginalized, oppressed, outcast; working towards forgiveness and reconciliation
- Faithful engagement in rich relationships of all diversity
- Church becomes a living being sent to follow the Spirit and join where Christ is already present; not still/static

C. Potential Outcomes:

- The congregation is a noted presence in the community (i.e., needs are met, people feel welcomed, reconciliation and diversity help transcend culture)
- The community is viewed as being more important than the church building; we take up God's mission
- Transformation and renewal of congregations that reflect the rich diversity of the kingdom of God
- Shifts from "bringing in young people and young families" to sending out, showing up, being present where God is already at work; many come to know Christ their Savior

D. Reflection Questions:

- Who is at the margins of your community? Your congregation?
- How does your congregation show up outside your building and share the love of Christ?
- What would your community say about your church's identity?
- Where is Christ at work and inviting you to join? Does your congregation have an emboldened spirit to follow Christ?
- What prevents you from going where God may send you? What are your fears? What leaves you focused inward?
- Does your church welcome the lost, help the doubting, sit with the grieving, lend aid to the poor, help the downtrodden, offer forgiveness to the sinner, clothe the naked, support the suffering and sick, strengthen the faint-hearted, respond to the skeptic, help bind up the broken-hearted, stand up for the weak, give voice to those silenced, pray with those in pain, and otherwise live into the incarnate spirit of Christ our Savior? If so, in what ways? If not, why?
- Do you feel like your church equips you in the faith to have difficult conversations of racial oppression, social injustice, white-privilege, racial profiling, sexual and gender inequality, terrorism, and/or stereotypes and prejudices of any kind?



Empowering Servant Leadership vs. the pastor's job; monopolized leadership; hiring the young, energetic pastor

All people of God, in the image of Christ, are given fruit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts meant for building up the Church. In this way, we are all called to serve the Lord, to do our part in membership of the body of Christ. Every part is necessary. Every part is valuable, and every voice is important. Every person should be equipped, nurtured, and supported to use their gifts to glorify God, through servant leadership; not just cliques of powerful people or continual burnout of the same leaders. In keeping with true discipleship formation, churches are called to help all members to be empowered to use their gifts in servant leadership. And, God calls and equips some for the particular task of pastoral ministry, which must be cultivated, nurtured and trained. Ministry can never be about a single pastor, but it is about identifying, equipping and empowering those servant leaders God puts in our midst.

A. Biblical References:

John 13:2–17; Ephesians 4:1–16; 1 Timothy 4:6–16; Matthew 9:37–38; 1 Samuel 3:2 Timothy 2:14–26; John 13:1–20

B. Objectives:

- The church encourages members, when appropriate, to be “ministers” (priesthood of all believers)
- The congregation provides tools and a healthy environment to train and support leaders
- The staff and other leaders model servant leadership principles
- Develop methods in which voices, ideas, opinions are shared; people are empowered in their faith
- Congregation assists people in discerning spiritual gifts for use in service to church and community

C. Potential Outcomes:

- Shared power and fresh ideas generated in worship and ministry, not staff or program-driven
- The church has healthy expectations of leadership; nurture and support is a shared responsibility
- Empowered servant leaders committed and passionate in mission and ministry of the church
- Servant leadership is diversified by age, race, gender, etc., as all people identify spiritual gifts and are trained in their call to serve

D. Reflection Questions:

- How does your church identify, equip, train, and support its leaders?
- Who is the leadership in your church? Is leadership a shared power? Do the same people lead everything?
- Is your leadership diverse? Are different ages, genders, races, beliefs, views represented?
- What practices does your congregation have that ensure the health of your servant leadership? How are they practically supported? What do you do when someone is burned out?
- How does your church handle monopolized cliques of leadership?
- What spoken and unspoken expectations do you have for your pastor(s)?
- How does your church help members discern spiritual gifts? How are voices/ideas heard?
- How are people empowered and encouraged to serve?
- What does your church do if the wrong people are leading?



Spirit-inspired Worship vs. self-gratifying worship; stale ritual divorced of meaning; consumer entertainment worship

Spirit-inspired worship is a gift of God's wonder! Six days we labor and toil, and on this Holy Sabbath day we get to come into the presence of God; we get to encounter the awesome mystery of the God who longs to be known in relationship with us. We worship because, through prayer and supplication, through the Word proclaimed and the sacraments celebrated, through the songs of praise and passing of peace — God meets us there. Worship is our lifeline to the Holy God. Our worship should be active participation into the living relationship with the triune God; thus, all should feel welcome and have a place. Worship should challenge, teach, transform, convict and call us into deeper relationship with God and one another; not gratify our comforts and entertain our desires.

Worship is an encounter with God that we understand and do not understand. It is an act filled with mystery and awe, but in worship we have the opportunity to express our deepest desires to God and listen for God's voice. In worship, we also experience the call to serve and be in mission.

A. Biblical References:

Isaiah 6:1–13; Isaiah 29:13; Hebrews 12:28–29;
Luke 24:13–35; Exodus 3:1–6; Deuteronomy 12; Philippians 2:1–11; Hebrews 5:1–10; 1 Chronicles
16:7–36; Revelation 22:1–7; Matthew 21:12–17

B. Objectives

- Prayerful discernment of members actively participating in all aspects of planning and leading worship
- There is thoughtful and sound biblical preaching
- Intentional worship does not cling to rituals, but is open to filling sacred space with new rituals
- Engages all people, of all diversity, and enables them to be active participants in the experience
- Creates space for people's stories; not afraid of silence
- Communal connectivity to one another, and connection to God
- Challenges and sends the people of God beyond their pew into daily life
- There should be awe, expectation and anticipation in coming into the presence of God

C. Potential Outcomes:

- Worship helps people deepen their relationship with God and nurtures faith
- Worship strengthens our communal ties as stories are shared and we intimately experience God
- Worship becomes an expression of relationships to God and to the household of God
- Worship opens us to experience the wonder God longs to reveal and wonder transforms our lives and ministry, never leaving us the same, but leading us to even deeper questions
- Worship enlivens us and emboldens us to be a people of God in our communities and our world
- Blessing of rich diversity as people share new rituals, traditions, ways of interpreting that challenge and enrich our wisdom in faith

D. Reflection Questions:

- What would you say are the fundamental principles as to why you gather for worship?
- What would a visitor say about your worship?
- How does your congregation practice spirit-inspired worship — allowing space for lament, praise, confession, questions, wrestling contemplation with the Word?
- Is worship collaborative in your church? Are people of all ages/backgrounds included?
- Does your congregation explain, teach and educate people on the rituals and traditions?
- How does your worship challenge, ignite, educate and transform people?
- Does worship meet people where they are and allow for active participation?
How do people share their stories?
- Name times when God's wonder was experienced in worship.
- How open is your congregation to change in worship? Do they seek new ways to ritualize the sacredness of worship, or do they hold on sacredly to their rituals and traditions?
- Do all cultures, races, languages, genders, ages, all diversity find a sacred place to worship?
Is worship enriched by their unique traditions and styles?



Caring Relationships vs. any other social club; facades, hypocrisy and judgments of the "church" and "religion"

Caring relationships seems an easy mark of vitality. We all want a place to belong; people who care about us. Many congregations would argue: "this is why we come together; we welcome and care for each other." Yet, caring relationships in Christ requires true agape love — a sacrificial, self-emptying, perfect love. Although we are imperfect, it is about striving to see all people the way Christ sees them; not from judgments or preconceived perceptions. It is about helping walk with others, responding to their needs, desiring their well-being. It is about walking with people in tragedy, and rejoicing in their triumphs. Caring relationships of God is about allowing people to be real in their stories, without hiding or holding back, and loving every imperfect part of them.

Church should be the one place where the God who already knows, encounters our honest confession, and allows us to give testimony. It should be the place where conflicts are confronted, crucial conversations of forgiveness and reconciliation are had, and people of God are transformed by agape love. Caring relationships is about vulnerability and trust. It is about meeting all people of God where they are, and sharing our One Savior, Jesus Christ. Caring relationships don't come through hospitality and welcoming committees, they come through a carefully cultivated environment that is genuine and sincere in being the household of God.

A. Biblical References:

Acts 6:1–7; John 21:15–19; Romans 12:9–18; Galatians 6:1–10; John 13:35; Hebrews 10:24–25; John 8:1–12; Romans 15:1–6

B. Objectives:

- Cultivates an environment of true caring relationships through genuine opportunities to share testimony
- The church seeks to strengthen ties within the household of God; fostering relationships between demographics, with members on the margin, people who are missing or who have been hurt
- The church seeks to build and rebuild relationships of conflict or strain; clear process of conflict resolution
- The church develops caring relationships in the neighborhood and community (i.e., other churches, community organizations, health and human services, advocacy groups, presbytery)
- Evaluate and envision ways of sharing the love of Christ in new relationships

C. Potential Outcomes:

- The church provides lasting community of agape — a love where all people belong
- Faith is strengthened; accountability and commitment grows
- People find belonging, lay burdens down, share needs, experience Christ
- Collaboration with other churches and community organizations becomes easier
- Growing connectional relationships throughout the presbytery, the denomination and beyond

D. Reflection Questions:

- What practices of caring relationships does your congregation cherish most?
- What would a neighbor/community visitor say about the environment of caring relationships?
- How does your congregation respond in caring for the sick, marginalized, grieving, lonely?
What about the alcoholic, the racially profiled, the abused child?
- Are people free to share their story and feel comfortable being authentic?
- What stops us from truth-telling in God's house? What are the fears?
- How might you foster a genuine environment of caring relationships and true agape?
- How does your church handle conflict?
- What relationships in the church need to be reconciled?
- How do you foster and nurture lasting relationships in your community, with your presbytery and beyond?

7 Ecclesial Health vs. unhealthy dysfunction; toxic environments; obsolete and irrelevant buildings

Ecclesial health is about: 1) Why we gather as a church community 2) How we practice being church together. It is about whether our mission, vision and values match up with the ways we live together. It requires continual attentiveness, awareness and assessment in asking “are we who we say we are?” And more importantly, “are we who God is calling us to be?” Prayer and discernment are at the heart of ecclesial health! There are several factors to ecclesial health: prayerful discernment, the decision-making process, health of pastors, stewardship of budget and resources and clarity in mission and ministries. Ecclesial health is about the people of God having a clear purpose; all people are stakeholders invested in being a part of this community of faith. There are shared core values, a clear mission and commitment and loyalty to the life we gather in as church. Yet, they also know that this is a living faith. So, they dare to dream and understand that change is inevitable. With ecclesial health, there is joy and gratitude in coming together; people, not programs or properties are valued. People gather and are sent to be Christ's Church.

A. Biblical References:

II Corinthians 5:11–21; Matthew 15:1–9; 1 Corinthians 12:14, 24b–25; Romans 6:1–14; Luke 24:13–35; John 2:13–25; John 17; Colossians 2:1–19; 1 Timothy 6:11–21

B. Objectives:

- A communal life centered on prayer and discernment of God's will
- Clarity in Vision, Mission, Core Values; budget reflects these core principles
- Continual attentiveness, awareness and assessment to mission and practices of being church
- Pastor(s) and staff are regularly evaluated using best practices
- Pastor(s) and staff, all servant leaders, are nurtured and supported in health; clear expectations
- Stewardship and tithing are taught year-round; accountable giving in gratitude
- Transparent in spending; continual discernment of budget sustainability
- All are stakeholders, committed to fiscal responsibilities, active participation, and necessary voices in envisioning, dreaming and decision-making

C. Potential Outcomes:

- Congregations practice a living faith, ever-changing, where prayer is central to existence
- People are the church sharing core values, mission, vision
- Authentic joy, desire, commitment in being the church
- There is a culture of accountability and risk taking, openness to new things
- Sustainable budget, tithing responsibility, stewardship center on generosity to being church
- Pastor(s) and leaders are cared for, evaluated, and supported

D. Reflection Questions:

- How would you describe the ecclesial health of your church?
- Do you feel like your church centers life with prayer at the heart of all things?
- What is the mission of your church? Who wrote it? How does your church live into its mission? How does your budget reflect your mission?
- What are the core values and vision of your church? Does everyone know and share them?
- Does your congregation do well to embrace change?
- When was the last time a dream led to incredible new vision and ministry in your church?
- Are people stakeholders in being a part of your church? Do they feel committed to values and mission? Do they feel they are necessary in dreaming/envisioning the decision-making process?
- What are the policies for pastor(s) and staff in your church? How are they evaluated? Supported?
- How does your church teach stewardship and tithing?
- Who makes decisions in your church? Are they transparent? Do all get buy-in? Are all opinions heard?
- Is your budget sustainable? How is it assessed? Who determines spending?



Lesson 2: Vision for Vital Congregations and the Seven Marks

Opening Prayer

Loving God, though we represent different church contexts and people of so many different faith journeys; though we all have different gifts and unique life stories of our own; we gather as pastors called by one Lord and one faith. May we gathered here find refuge in the one true and living Christ. May we find compassion among our colleagues and may this space become sacred sharing in your Spirit's power. Take this time, our sharing, our lives and may they be pleasing to you, O God, our Redeemer and our Rock. Amen.

Opening Exercise

From your Session 1 "Take Away" exercise, take a few moments to share from your list. It does not have to be the entire list, but it should help to continue to get to know one another.

Dwelling in the Word of God

Read Ezekiel 37:1–14 aloud. Take a few moments to allow the Word of God to speak to you individually through the power of the Holy Spirit. Write down key words or phrases. Let the Word of God dwell in you and listen for God's word to you. After silent reflection, the group may choose to highlight anything they would like to share with the larger group.

Vital Congregations and Seven Marks

As you read through the Vision and the Seven Marks of the Vital Congregations Initiative, and you dwell in the Word of God from Ezekiel, discuss the following questions:

- 1) What does the valley of dry bones, the household of God and your church today have to do with one another?
- 2) Come up with a working definition of a "vital" church.
3. What part of the Vision Statement for Vital Congregations resonates with you and your particular context for ministry? What part seems the most challenging or difficult?
4. Which of the Seven Marks do you think your congregations does well? Which might you be called to revitalize in the Spirit's power?
5. What fears and anxieties do you have as you look at the Vision and the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations? What excites you, inspires you and emboldens you about the Vision and Seven Marks?
6. What do you imagine is the "new thing" Christ is doing in the Church? What about your particular church? How do you hope the breath of God will breathe new life into your midst?

Closing Prayer

How can we hold one another in prayer today, both in our personal lives and in the context of our particular ministries? A volunteer may close in prayer, or you may lead a group prayer to lift up one another.

Take Away

- A. In preparation for Session 3, read through the process of the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative for pastors and churches. You may also choose to read through the Presbytery Guidelines as well.
- B. In preparation for Session 3 Opening Exercise, write a part of your own faith journey where it was clear that God was working out a "new thing," where the Spirit of God brought about changes to your life, and where you felt the clear vitality of life in Christ.

Next Gathering will be

Date _____ Location _____ Time _____

Year 1: Building Intentional Relationships and Honest Assessment of Congregations

Objective

Year 1 is about genuine relationships where existing congregations engage in confessional assessment and faithful discernment in where the Spirit is leading them to follow. It will explore the congregational life story of who they have been, in order to discern who they are called to be moving forward. Finally, it will explore beyond the walls in a Neighborhood Analysis.

- I. **Vital Congregations Initiative** (January and February) — Like presbyteries ritualizing and preparing pastors to walk through this process, pastors will walk with church leadership to envision, imagine and plan how best to walk through the Vital Congregations Initiative.
 - The Vital Congregations Initiative should include an opening and closing worship service; this allows for the entire initiative to be framed in worship, prayer and renewing sacred rituals. It also enables congregations to make this commitment to one another to take part in assessing and faithfully seeking vitality together. Note: The same worship/liturgy used by the presbytery could also be used within congregations.
 - Pastors should meet with session elders and deacons to plan how they might best walk through the initiative gathering members, including shut-ins, children, youth, college students and any others on the margins of participation. (Note: Vital Congregations facilitators should be introduced to congregations at this time.)
 - Pastors may choose to hold a Session Retreat in order to covenant build, outline the initiative, set goals and plan.
 - Pastor(s) and session should engage in a Neighborhood Exegesis experience and debrief findings
- II. **Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: A Churchwide Study** (Lenten study) — This is a seven-week Bible study and prayer around each of the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations. As congregations study the Word of God around these Seven Marks, the hope is that the Spirit of God will lead them to wonder that transforms and encourages them to faithfully change and follow as disciples of Jesus Christ. *Note: Resources are provided by the PC(USA).*
- III. **“Checking Our Marks” Assessment** (Three months, Fall) — Church assessment is both quantitative and qualitative research. It includes data/stats, surveys, labels and charting a congregation, but it is also honest reflection and prayerful discernment. This is an opportunity for members and leadership to share, address conflict, name vitality, look at history, explore practices, and to focus on mission and ministry in life together.
 - 1) *Telling Our Story (Month 1)* — Focuses on historical mapping of particular churches.
 - 2) *PC(USA) Marks of Vitality Survey (Month 2)* — Survey taken by congregations and session members. Based upon the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations. The survey is scored by the PC(USA) and returned to presbyteries and pastors/session. Engage in a Neighborhood Analysis and plot the life cycle of the church.
 - 3) *Revitalization Assessment (Month 3)* — With survey results in hand, Neighborhood Analysis experience and presbytery reports, congregations will explore who they have been and the necessary discernment of who they are being called to be.
 - Pastors, in consultation with the session, should prayerfully determine the best method in which to walk congregations through these assessment sessions. For example, you might break the congregation up into home groups, and determine that a pastor not attend, so that members feel free to share more openly.
 - Vital Congregations facilitators, selected by the presbytery and trained by the PC(USA), are available to assist in the Third Session to help congregations do the honest confession and necessary discernment of the journey ahead: 1) Legacy in death in witness to the resurrection

2) Missional clustering of small church communities 3) Re-envision and re-form how we are called to be church.

- PC(USA) will provide MissionInsite information to compare the findings of Neighborhood Analysis.

IV. “Show Your Marks” Campaign (November and December) — After the initial Congregational Assessment, pastors should work with the session in capturing their story, reporting their assessment, reporting findings of Neighborhood Analysis and sharing their hope in journeying forward. Through video testimony, photographs, storytelling and more, the congregation should gather together to give witness to vitality and life in Christ.

- Reports should be handed in by the new year to the presbytery, who will share them with the PC(USA) office. These stories will be used to report on churches beyond membership numbers and budgets. They will serve as future case studies and testimony to the denomination of God’s vitality and life given to the people of God. They will bear witness to all who have not seen or heard.
- Reports provided by the PC(USA)
- The session, in consultation with the pastor, should develop a plan for continual ongoing assessment of the congregation. This may look like continued congregational cohorts during monthly meals, or a ritual time and space in worship, or an annual congregation meeting, or quarterly open town hall forums, etc.

Year 1: Resources

- 1) Vital Congregations Liturgy
- 2) Three-Session Congregation Assessment
- 3) Three-Session Presbytery Assessment
- 4) 12 Sessions for Pastor Cohort Gathering
- 5) Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: A Churchwide Study
- 6) “Show Your Marks” Campaign
- 7) Neighborhood Analysis Exercise
- 8) MissionInsite — Community Data

Year 1: Vital Congregations Facilitators

In consultation with presbytery leadership and the Office of Vital Congregations in the PC(USA), Vital Congregations facilitators can be consulted and/or deployed however they contractually determine and plan. The PC(USA) encourages the use of the Vital Congregations facilitators during the Third Session of Congregational Assessment. Facilitators will administer gifts for:

- 1) Asking difficult questions for Confessional Discernment
- 2) Pastoral support and compassion in change
- 3) Conflict Resolution within the church

Year 2: Exploration — Revitalizing Church in Three Acts

Objective

Year 2 is *Exploration*: Re-envisioning how we are called to be church. Re-forming the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations and sharing the Good News with all people. After Year 1 assessment and discernment, Year 2 is about living into a new discipleship — opening to the transforming wonder God longs to reveal and boldly following the Holy Spirit into the new things God is doing. In courageous faith and hope, churches will live into: 1) *Re-forming church — revitalizing the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations*, 2) *Clustering churches — revitalizing by clustering congregations into new communities of worship, support and ministry*, 3) *Re-envisioning church — revitalizing by grace and gratitude in the death and legacy of a congregation, and in witness to the resurrection*.

I. Prayers and Planning for Vital Congregations (January)

- Pastors in consultation with elders and deacons should envision and plan how to implement the *Two-Month Plotting the Course Think Tank* (below), and all other aspects of Year 2 of the Vital Congregations Initiative. For example: a churchwide study; worship series focus; continue house gatherings from Year 1.
- Pastors and session should also be exploring and planning the way forward, gathering input from the Neighborhood Analysis, MissionInsite, Show Our Marks report, presbytery report and congregation think tanks. Clear goals and hopes should be adopted by church leaders in consultation with presbytery leadership and Vital Congregations facilitators (as necessary).

II. Plotting the Course to Revitalizing Actions (Two months, February–March) — Based upon churches' "Show Your Marks" Reports and discernment (Year 1), this time is intended to re-envision and plot the practical ways to live into one of the Three Actions of revitalizing: re-forming, missional clustering communities, or death and resurrection in its various forms. Congregational think tanks should allow for every idea to be heard, every voice represented and every opportunity shared.

- Vital Congregations facilitators trained in the Three Actions of Revitalizing will be able to assist in walking congregations through the next steps of planning. Presbyteries will have a toolkit of resources for Three Actions.
- At the end of seven weeks, the congregation should decide through guidance of the session which initiatives to try; which goals should be set; and an Action Plan should be made for how and when these new initiatives will be launched!

Please note: This time should be highly engaged and faithful as we return our focus to how God is working and showing us wonder that transforms us more and more into who we are called to be and how we are joining Christ in the work of redemption in our communities and throughout the world. Do not be afraid to dream!

III. Re-Envisioning Our Marks (Two months, February–March) — seven-week churchwide study on revitalizing the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations.

- The PC(USA) will provide a seven-week resource to re-think the Seven Marks, to re-envision how a congregation is being called to change or implement these seven marks of vitality, and to strategize how to practically implement these ideas. This is preparation for intentional experiential praxis — ideas leading to action.

IV. Prayer for Revitalization (One week of prayer) — The end of the two-month series, after the seven-week study. Pray for the initiatives your congregation will embark upon. Pray for the leaders and all people who will offer gifts to bring about the efforts of vitality. Pray for the people God will send you forth to meet, the plans God has for Christ's church, and the ways in which you will experience the wonder of God that transforms you. Pray!

- Examples: Set up a weeklong prayer vigil at your church; have members sign up for hours to come in and pray. Plan intentional worship opportunities to pray. Have children, youth, families, older adults, shut-ins, college students and all members responsible for praying throughout the week for a particular Vital Congregations Initiative.

V. Changing Our Marks (After Seven-Week Series and Week of Prayer, Six Months of Revitalizing) — Pastor(s) and church leaders should walk with congregation in Three Actions: *Re-forming, Missional Clustering, Death and Resurrection*. The courage to believe the living God of wonder is calling us to transform in faithful discipleship; to join the Spirit at work; and to live into the new thing Christ is doing. The goal is to do the necessary, hope-filled and difficult things to reform the ways we are church together, and boldly act in new practices in mission and ministry. *Note: This is not merely new programs or ministries to impact membership numbers; this is a new beginning, a new chapter of God transforming church. Transformation is for individuals, churches, communities, neighbors and all who we are called to share the love of God. (Please see the full description of the Seven Marks and Three Actions outlined in the Vital Congregations Manual.)*

- Pastor(s) and session should pray with and inform presbytery leaders of their Action Plan moving forward. Presbytery leaders will plan site visits and a prayer tour over these initiatives with each congregation.
- Churches should creatively record/document/capture the story of Changing Marks and Vital Congregations.
- Pastor(s) and session should ensure that all new initiatives are at the forefront, with transparency and updates on how things are going and opportunities for storytelling and congregational input.
- Pastor(s) and presbytery leaders should call upon Vital Congregations facilitators when necessary.

Note: All things should be centered on prayer. All new initiative joys and successes should be celebrated; fellowship and play are vital parts of the body of Christ. All failures and struggles should be confessed and documented; this is life together.

VI. Final Assessment and “Show Your Marks” Report (Two months, Year 2) — This is an opportunity for churches to share their re-envisioned Marks of Vitality, assess the process, set goals for the future and plan for sustainability. These reports will be collected during the Final Assessment of the Vital Congregations Initiative and turned in to presbyteries and the PC(USA) staff to mark a new measurement of vital congregations.

- **Session Vitality Assessment** — (one month, Year 2) — Leadership of the church, operating in healthy systems and fueled by the input and stories of the people, should be ready to debrief and assess, plan and set goals for sustainable vitality.
 - The PC(USA) will provide final assessment tool and resources for ongoing vitality.
 - The final “Show Your Marks” reports should be shared in the final worship celebration of the presbytery. Presbytery leaders will share final reports with the PC(USA) staff to measure congregational vitality in new ways beyond membership trends and budgets.

Note: This assessment will mark standards of measurement such as: How have we been transformed? How have we experienced God’s wonder? How will we ensure vitality moving forward? Do we have a clear vision moving forward? How will we work to continue to discern the will of God? How and when will we know if it is time to begin new worshiping communities? Going forward, how will we continue to gather congregational input? Where do we go from here? How will we remain faithful in our following of Christ and be open to the wonder of God?

- **Vital Congregations Assessment** — (one month, Year 2) — This will be an intentional time of reflecting, engaging in important conversations and assessments of the Vital Congregations Initiatives. Instead of a time of conclusion, this time should be centered around how we continue the initiatives that brought about vitality, and how to continue prayerful discernment of new visions of faithful discipleship. Yet, it should also be a time of joy-filled celebration, storytelling, gratitude and play as we delight in all the Lord is doing in our midst!

- Pastor(s) and session determine how to go about Vital Congregations Debriefing. For example: Offer reflection assessment surveys and plan a special worship where revitalization stories can be shared and surveys/assessments can be offered. Home groups may plan presentations and share stories of revitalization and experiences of wonder while offering a prayer to paths of sustainability moving forward, and center it around a family fun night of celebration.
- From this debriefing should come tangible ways forward and covenant promises to be kept, envisioning plans that will continue to discern and seek the Spirit's leading into new vital mission and ministries.
- Plan ways to allow your congregation and hopefully new "strangers now friends" to share their stories of hospitality, yes, but namely of how God showed up in the person or people of this church and revealed God's amazing wonder and love. These are the faithful stories that make vital congregations.

Note: Pastors and churches should be sure to invite presbytery leaders to see, hear and be a part of debriefing and assessment, and concluding rituals/celebration of the Vital Congregations Initiative.

- "Show Your Marks" Campaign — (Final Month, Year 2) — The "Show Your Marks" Report is to help congregations capture a new and transforming story of vital congregations for the presbytery. This report will be shared with the PC(USA) staff.
- The final "Show Your Marks" Report should be submitted during the Closing Vital Congregations Celebration.
- A guide to creatively sharing these reports can be found in the Revitalization workbook.

Year 2: Resources

- 1) 12 Sessions for Pastor Cohort Gathering
- 2) Rethinking Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: A Churchwide study
- 3) Final Debriefing and Congregation Assessment
- 4) Final Presbytery Debriefing and Assessment
- 5) "Show Your Marks" Campaign Report

Year 2: Vital Congregations Facilitators

In consultation with presbytery leadership and the Office of Vital Congregations in the PC(USA), Vital Congregations facilitators can be consulted and/or deployed however they contractually determine and plan. The PC(USA) encourages the use of the Vital Congregations facilitators during the Third Session of Congregational Assessment. Facilitators will administer gifts for:

- 1) Re-forming** — Helping congregations to re-think and re-envision how to carry out vital marks in new ways.
- 2) Missional Clustering** — Helping congregations live into new community clusters in ministries, resources and staff.
- 3) Death and Resurrection** — Helping congregations live into death with gratitude and memorial, while preparing for resurrection and new life in various forms — through new life as a new worshipping community or thriving without a building.

Looking Ahead

Remember, the end of the Vital Congregations Initiative is hopefully a new beginning. In faith and hope, churches will witness seven marks of vitality coming to life, in a faithful new way of being church, and following as disciples in every aspect of our lives, communities and the world. The people of God will see recommitment to who Christ is in our life, how God is on the move in this world, and how the Spirit beckons for us to join, and the denomination will have new reports containing new measurements and stories of our life together in Christ. Remember, God brings about all vitality in life together, as we remain open and expectant to the wonder God longs to reveal to all. If we pray and faithfully walk in relationships together, if we seek the will of God together, and rely upon the image of Christ we share, then we believe that the Spirit of God will revitalize the hearts and lives of existing congregations to new vitality and life forevermore. Revitalization is witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ! And we look forward to being in relationship with you.

- **The PC(USA) will continue to walk with presbyteries by:**
 - Creating continuing Vital Congregations Resources (outlined below)
 - Offering Continued Presbytery Leaders Gatherings (UPN or Evangelism Conference time)
 - Continuing to pray with and for you
 - Continuing to highlight congregational vitality through the sharing of “Show Your Marks” Reports
- **Future Resources:** After the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative
 - Resources for ongoing congregational vitality
 - Christian Formation — particularly daily spiritual practices
 - Curriculum for ongoing faith matters and discipleship equipping
 - Resources for empowering congregational leaders, particularly those called to ministry
 - Resources to celebrate diversity — sex, gender, age, race, etc.; curriculum that engages cultural issues in making faith applicable
 - Ongoing book studies for pastors and continuing education opportunities
 - Vital Congregations Conference to gather all pastors who have been through the Vital Congregations Initiative to share stories and debrief together
 - Resources to help existing congregations looking to create new worshiping communities

Next Gathering will be

Date _____ Location _____ Time _____



Lesson 3: The Vital Congregations Initiative

Opening Prayer

Merciful God, sustainer and giver of all vital life together, we come into your presence in the company of our colleagues and pray you pour out your grace upon our time together. Give us hearts ready to receive your truth, spirits that dwell in the very Spirit of Christ, and courage to seek your will. Grant to us a living faith that boldly follows as disciples of Jesus Christ. Forgive us for the countless times we fall short of your glory; putting our way and our will before your own. Create in us a clean heart that passionately seeks to give you praise. Guide us in paths of righteousness that we might help guide your beloved people. Revitalize our whole being this day, that we might live into the Spirit's power to revitalize Christ's church. For this we pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Opening Exercise

From your Session 2 “Take Away” exercise, share your personal journey of faith moments where you experienced vital life in Christ, and the breath of the Holy Spirit.

Dwelling in the Word of God

Read Romans 12:1–21 aloud. Take a few moments to allow the Word of God to speak to you individually through the power of the Holy Spirit. Write down key words or phrases. Let the Word of God dwell in you and listen for God's word to you. After silent reflection, the group may choose to highlight anything they would like to share with the larger group.

Two-Year Vital Congregations Initiative

As you read through the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative, and you dwell in the Word of God from Romans 12, discuss the following questions:

- 1) *What is the message for your church today as it pertains to Vital Congregations? What does it mean for your role as pastor?*
- 2) *Discuss the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative. What do you feel about the process? Which parts seem especially challenging? Which parts spark your imagination and lead you to hope for the church?*
- 3) *What does this process practically look like in your church? What things do you envision will need to be adapted for your ministry context?*
- 4) *What do you hope for your congregation? For yourself? For your community? For creation?*
- 5) *Imagine 10 years after your church has walked through the Vital Congregations Initiative. What does the life of the church look like to you?*
- 6) *What practical things can you do to prepare hearts, minds and spirits for the process of the Vital Congregations Initiative?*

Closing Prayer

How can we hold one another in prayer today, both in our personal lives and in the context of our particular ministries? A volunteer may close in prayer, or you may lead a group prayer to lift up one another.

Continuing to Gather

Your pastor cohort may continue to gather together as you continue to prepare your congregations to walk through the Vital Congregations Initiative.

As the initiative begins, you are encouraged to meet on a monthly basis through the two-year process. The office of Vital Congregations of the PC(USA) will provide 24 sessions during the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative.

- *Year 1 will help pastor cohorts to delve deeper into biblical study around the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations. These sessions were written by the Vital Congregations Team of the PC(USA).*
- *Year 2 sessions will center on the Wonder of God, discovered in the Word of God, that will help pastor cohorts to engage in imagination and inspiration around the transformation that Christ is doing in the church. These sessions were written by Dr. William P. Brown, Old Testament Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, based on his book, Sacred Sense.*

Next Gathering will be

Date _____ Location _____ Time _____

Discernment of Vital Congregations Facilitators





Discernment of Vital Congregations Facilitators

Facilitate — “to make easy” or “ease a process.” What a facilitator does is plan, guide and manage a group event to ensure that the group’s objectives are met effectively, with clear thinking, good participation and full buy-in from everyone who is involved. Your key responsibility as a facilitator is to cultivate this group process and an environment in which it can flourish.

Objective

Presbyteries should identify and elect a minimum of two members to be trained by the PC(USA) for the role of Vital Congregations facilitator. These facilitators should be trusted leaders among the presbytery with gifts for helping congregations. Facilitators should be objective — without conflict of interest in assisting churches. They will be trained, by the Office of Vital Congregations, and utilized at the discretion of presbyteries in consultation with pastors, or a session for churches without a pastor. They will also be supported/mentored by a liaison from the PC(USA) Vital Congregations Team and have quarterly video meetings with other facilitators around the country.

Rationale

In order to support congregations who are walking through the Vital Congregations Initiative, presbyteries should have trained leaders who can help congregations in the assessment, discernment and planning stages. These leaders should not be “sent in” from the PC(USA), but should be called from the contexts in which they live. These leaders should be equipped to support congregations and pastors in faithful and difficult conversations and help them navigate the challenging and hope-filled work of being a more vital congregation. They will serve as trained support to presbyteries, pastors and congregations long after the two-year initiative.

Facilitators should be able to help:

- Share the vision of Vital Congregations
- Assist pastors and/or session of church
- Ask good, sometimes difficult, questions
- Mediate conflict resolution and reconciliation
- Facilitate assessment dialogues for churches
- Facilitate the process of discernment and decision-making
- Engage in problem-solving, visioning and planning

Gifts

- Faithful
- Positive attitude; encouraging
- Lead and navigate group dynamics
- Relational and trustworthy
- Good communication skills; honesty
- Adaptive leadership: Assertive/visionary/democratic/inspiring
- Pastoral/peace-maker
- Emotional intelligence

Calling Upon Facilitators

We envision that facilitators will be used for two key points in the two-year initiative:

- 1) Year 1 — during the Assessment Review and Discernment stage for congregations
- 2) Year 2 — as congregations envision and map a plan for action.

These facilitators will be deployed at the discretion of the presbytery, in consultation with pastors (if a pastor is present) and the PC(USA) Office of Vital Congregations. Examples:

- Facilitators gather with pastors and session members of congregations discerning a plan to do missional clustering in various ways.
- Facilitators walk with a congregation without a pastor who needs assistance with conflict resolution and reconciliation.
- Pastors and congregations want assistance from a facilitator in looking at the mark of vitality — Outward Incarnational Focus — and discern ways they can engage their neighborhoods.
- Facilitators gather with pastors and sessions of congregations faced with difficult discernment and pray together, walking them through the challenging questions and conversations.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: *How many facilitators per presbytery?*

A: Presbyteries should have a minimum of two facilitators for the Vital Congregations Initiative. However, presbyteries may elect more than two depending on presbytery size, the number of churches without pastors, ethnic-cultural diversity and languages.

Q: *What do facilitators cost?*

A: Presbyteries should cover all costs associated with the facilitator training conference by the PC(USA). In addition, presbyteries may elect to pay their facilitators a stipend for the two-year initiative. Finally, we encourage the reimbursement of mileage and meals as these facilitators serve.

Q: *What is the time commitment of a facilitator?*

A: For each presbytery the demands of a facilitator's time will be dependent on how and when they are utilized. Facilitators will spend four days being trained by the Vital Congregations Office of the PC(USA). Facilitators will attend quarterly video meetings, lasting approximately one hour, as an opportunity to check in with facilitators around the country, to share ideas, discuss case studies and pray together.

Discernment

- Who in our presbytery is respected, trusted and valued by church leaders, officers and members?
- Who has the gifts to facilitate necessary conversations and help in crucial discernment?
- Who can walk with a variety of churches in particular situations and adapt her/his facilitator role accordingly?
- Who does well to solicit honest conversations, navigating between pastor and prophet when necessary?
- Who will serve the people of God with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?
- Who can have complicated conversations and will not shy away from conflict?
- Who can be a voice and a listening ear to people of God in particular contexts?

Name _____

Name _____

Name _____

Name _____

pastor/church leader and congregation planning and envisioning

J





Pastor/Church Leader and Congregation Planning and Envisioning

Year 1: Building Intentional Relationships and Honest Assessment of Congregation

Objective

Year 1 is about genuine relationships, where existing congregations engage in confessional assessment and faithful discernment in where the Spirit is leading them to follow. It will explore a congregational life story of who they have been, in order to discern who they are called to be moving forward. Finally, it will explore beyond the walls in a Neighborhood Analysis.

A. Vital Congregations Initiative (January and February) — Like presbyteries ritualizing and preparing pastors to walk through this process, pastors will walk with church leadership to envision, imagine and plan how best to walk through the Vital Congregations Initiative.

- The Vital Congregations Initiative should include an opening and closing worship service; this allows for the entire initiative to be framed in worship, prayer and renewing sacred rituals. It also enables congregations to make this commitment to one another to take part in assessing and faithfully seeking vitality together. Note: The same worship/liturgy used by the presbytery could also be used within congregations.
- Pastors should meet with session elders and deacons to plan how they might best walk through the initiative gathering members, including shut-ins, children, youth, college students and any others on the margins of participation. (Note: *Vital Congregations facilitators should be introduced to congregations at this time.*)
- Pastors may choose to hold a session retreat in order to covenant-build, outline the initiative, set goals and plan.
- Pastor(s) and session should engage in a Neighborhood Exegesis experience and debrief findings.

Planning Reflections

- What might your church need to do to honestly assess and faithfully discern the Spirit's path forward?
- What challenges do you foresee in your congregation?
- What things might you be called to change?
- What do you hope in this process? How can you maintain hope, instead of operating in anxiety or fear?
- What does your neighborhood say about your church? What is your mission together? Why has God put you in this particular place and time?
- What sort of opening and closing worship service should we plan?
- How do we get everyone in the church involved in this vision and process together?

B. Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality Churchwide Study (Lenten study) — This is a seven-week Bible study and prayer around each of the Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality. As congregations study the Word of God around these Seven Marks of Vitality, the hope is that the Spirit of God will lead them to wonder that transforms and courage to faithfully change and follow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Note: Resources are provided by the PC(USA).

Planning Reflections

- What do we need to do to prepare for the seven-week church study?
- Who will lead these studies?

- What new, creative ways can you implement the church study together, along with what your church already does?
- How will you implement the resources provided by the PC(USA) in your church?
- What additional resources and materials will your church need?
- What are ways you can gather information, debrief and capture each mark?
- How will your worship liturgy center around these seven marks? What worship planning needs to take place?

C. Checking Our Marks (Three months, Fall) — Church assessment is both quantitative and qualitative research. It includes data/stats, surveys, labels and charting a congregation, but is also honest reflection and prayerful discernment. This is an opportunity for members and leadership to share, to address conflict, to name vitality, to look at history, to explore practices, and to focus on mission and ministry in life together.

Month 1: *Telling Our Story* — Focuses on historical mapping of particular churches

Month 2: *PC(USA) Marks of Vitality Survey* — Survey taken by congregations and session members. Based upon the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations. Scored by PC(USA) and returned to presbyteries and pastors/session. Engage in a Neighborhood Analysis and plot the life cycle of the church.

Month 3: *Vital Congregations Assessment* — With survey results in hand, Neighborhood Analysis experience and presbytery reports, congregations will explore who they have been and the necessary discernment of who they are being called to be.

- Pastors, in consultation with the session, should prayerfully determine the best method in which to walk congregations through these assessment sessions. For example, you might break the congregation up into home groups and determine that a pastor not attend, so that members feel free to share more openly.
- Trained and specialized PC(USA) Vital Congregations facilitators will be offered in the third session to help congregations do the honest confession and necessary discernment of the journey ahead:
 - 1) Legacy in death in witness to the resurrection
 - 2) Missional clustering of small church communities
 - 3) Re-envision and re-form how we are called to be church.
- PC(USA) will offer MissionInsite information to compare the findings of Neighborhood Analysis.

Planning Reflections

- How will you split your church into groups? How will you lead the three-month assessment?
- How many church surveys will you need? How will you gather surveys of those who are not present to take it?
- How will you conduct the Neighborhood Analysis exercise? How will you plan to debrief the exercise?
- How will you gather the thoughts and discernment of the congregation for your session discernment and action plan?
- What sorts of planning and preparation will you need to do in order to do the three-month assessment?
- Who will facilitate the conversations during the assessment?
- What preparation do you need to plan for in these assessments?
- Who will gather facts about your church's history?
- What creative ways will you capture your church's story?
- How will you lead the congregation to faithful truth-telling and discernment? How can you help ensure this work is done from a place of celebration and faithfulness, and not a place of fear and anxiety?

D. “Show Your Marks” Campaign (November and December) — After the initial Congregational Assessment, pastors should work with the session in capturing their story, reporting their assessment, reporting findings of Neighborhood Analysis and sharing their hope in journeying forward. Through video testimony, photographs, storytelling and more, the congregation should gather together to give witness to vitality and life in Christ.

- Reports should be handed in by the new year to the presbytery, who will share them with the PC(USA) office. These stories will be used to report on churches beyond membership numbers and budgets. They will serve as future case studies and testimony to the denomination of God’s vitality and life given to the people of God. They will bear witness to all who have not seen or heard.
- These reports should be turned in every two years. The session, in consultation with the pastor, should develop a plan for continual ongoing assessment of the congregation. This may look like continued congregational cohorts during monthly meals, or a ritual time and space in worship, or an annual congregation meeting, or quarterly open town hall forums, etc.

Planning Reflections

- How does your church plan to creatively share their vital marks?
- How can you take what your church already does and capture these marks?
- When do you plan to celebrate these marks in your church? In what ways will you celebrate?
- What plans do you need to make in capturing all the marks from all members and worshipers?
- Who will fill out the report for “Show Your Marks”?
- How will this information be shared with the whole church?
- When will this report be turned in to be shared with the presbytery and the Office of Vital Congregations?
- What resources, materials and preparation will your church need to gather?

Year 2: Incarnational — (Re)vitalizing Church in Three Acts

Objective

Objective: Year 2 is Incarnational: Re-envisioning how we are called to be church. Re-forming the seven marks of congregational vitality, and living the Good News with all people. After Year 1 assessment and discernment, Year 2 is about living into a new discipleship — open to the transforming wonder God longs to reveal, and boldly following the Holy Spirit into the new things God is doing. In courageous faith and hope, churches will live into: **1) Re-forming church** — *revitalizing the Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality*, **2) Clustering churches** — *revitalizing by clustering congregations into new communities of worship and ministry*, **3) Re-envisioning church** — *revitalizing by grace and gratitude in the death and legacy of a congregation, in witness to the resurrection*.

A. Prayers and Planning for Vital Congregations (January)

- Pastors in consultation with elders and deacons should envision and plan how to implement the Two-Month Plotting the Course Think Tank (below), and all other aspects of Year 2 of the Vital Congregations Initiative. For example: a churchwide study; worship series focus; continue house gatherings from Year 1.
- Pastors and session should also be exploring and planning the way forward, gathering input from the Neighborhood Analysis, MissionInsite, Show Our Marks report, presbytery report and congregation think tanks. Clear goals and hopes should be adopted by church leaders in consultation with presbytery leadership and Vital Congregations facilitators (as necessary).

Planning Reflections

- Who will draft our assessment report and action plan for the church?
- How will we conduct think tanks or gather congregational ideas and input to our revitalizing actions?
- What plans do we need to make to live into the action plan?
- What goals do we want to set for ourselves?
- How can we hold ourselves accountable in this time of trying a new thing?
- Where is the wonder of God leading us to explore?
- What are truths we must confront? Difficult things we might have to do?
- What might stand in our way of trying something new?
- How can we encourage the congregation in this time of exploration and wonder?
- What resources, leadership and support do we need for this important year of work?
- What do we pray will happen to us as a congregation? What do we dream?
How can we share this vision with the whole congregation?

B. Plotting the Course to Revitalizing Actions (Two months, February–March) — Based upon a church's "Show Your Marks" Report and discernment (Year 1), this time is intended to re-envision and plot the practical ways to live into one of the Three Actions of Revitalizing: re-forming, missional clustering communities, or death and resurrection in its various forms. Congregational think tanks should allow for every idea to be heard, every voice represented and every opportunity shared.

- PC(USA) Vital Congregations Facilitator Teams specializing in the Three Actions of Revitalizing will assist in walking congregations through the next steps of planning. Presbyteries will have a toolkit of resources and case studies around the Three Actions and Seven Marks.
- At the end of seven weeks, the congregation should decide through guidance of the session which initiatives to try; goals should be set; and an action plan should be adopted for how and when these new Vital Congregations Initiatives will be launched!

Please note: This time should be highly engaged and faithful as we return our focus to how God is working and showing us wonder that transforms us more and more into who we are called to be and how we are joining Christ in the work of redemption in our communities and throughout the world. Do not be afraid to dream!

Planning Reflections

- What do we practically need to plan for think tanks and conversations of discernment to happen?
- What are the logistics we need to plan?
- Who will be responsible for what in the action plan?
- How will we handle celebrating success and confronting failures?
- What outside support and resources will we need to do the necessary actions that lead to transformation?
- What challenges or obstacles do we foresee? How can we confront them?
- Who will look through the full toolkit for resources and information?
- How will we share these action plans and empower the whole church to take part?
- What are our goals?
- What are our deadlines, time frames and process?

C. Re-Envisioning Our Marks (Two months, February–March) — Seven-week churchwide study on revitalizing the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations.

- The PC(USA) will provide a seven-week resource to re-think Seven Marks, to re-envision how a congregation is being called to change or implement these seven marks of vitality, and to strategize how to practically implement these ideas. This is preparation for intentional experiential praxis — ideas leading to action.

Planning Reflections

- What do we need to do to prepare for the seven-week church study?
- Who will lead these studies?
- What new, creative ways can you implement the church study together, along with what your church already does?
- How will you implement the resources provided by the PC(USA) in your church?
- What additional resources and materials will your church need?
- What are ways you can gather information, debrief and capture each mark?
- How will your worship liturgy center around these seven marks? What worship planning needs to take place?

D. Prayer for Vital Congregations (One Week of Prayer) — This marks the end of the two-month series, after the seven-week study. Pray for the initiatives your congregation will embark upon. Pray for the leaders and all people who will offer gifts to bring about the efforts of vitality. Pray for the people God will send you forth to meet, the plans God has for Christ's church, and the ways in which you will experience the wonder of God that transforms you. Pray!

Examples: Set up a weeklong prayer vigil at your church; have members sign up for hours to come in and pray. Plan intentional worship opportunities to pray. Have children, youth, families, older adults, shut-ins, college students and all members responsible for praying throughout the week for a particular Vital Congregations Initiative.

Planning Reflections

- How can we plan for the entire congregation to pray together?
- Who will write prayers? How can the congregation be empowered to write prayers?
- What plans and materials do we need to gather?

- Who will be in charge of preparing this? How will we invite the congregation to participate?
- What creative ways can we share and capture those prayers as part of our story?
- What logistical details do we need to work out?

E. Changing Our Marks (After the seven-week series and week of prayer — Six Months of Revitalizing) — Pastor(s) and church leaders should walk with the congregation in Three Actions: Re-forming, Missional Clustering, Death and Resurrection. The courage to believe the living God of wonder is calling us to transform in faithful discipleship; to join the Spirit at work; and to live into the new thing Christ is doing. The goal is to do the necessary, hope-filled and difficult things to reform the ways we are church together, and boldly act in new practices in mission and ministry. *Note: This is not merely new programs or ministries to impact membership numbers — this is a new beginning, a new chapter of God transforming church. Transformation is for individuals, churches, communities, neighbors and all who are called to share the love of God.*

- Pastor(s) and session should inform and pray with presbytery leaders of all actions moving forward. Presbytery leaders will plan site visits and a prayer tour over these initiatives with each congregation.
- Churches should creatively record/document/capture the story of changing marks and Vital Congregations.
- Pastor(s) and session should ensure that all new initiatives are at the forefront, with transparent updates on how things are going. They should also provide opportunities for storytelling and congregational input.
- Pastor(s) and presbytery leaders should call upon revitalization facilitators when necessary.

Note: All things should be centered on prayer. All new initiative joys and successes should be celebrated; fellowship and play are vital parts of the body of Christ. All failures and struggles should be confessed and documented; this is life together.

Planning Reflections

- What leadership needs to be established to carry out the action plan?
- How will you inform and update the congregation?
- What financial, time, planning and preparation needs to be considered as you plan for new actions?
- How will you determine the length of time for actions? Measurements of success?
- How can you encourage and empower, support and resource the leaders of new actions?
- If actions are difficult but necessary, what will you need to have in place? How will you plan for the challenges?
- What assistance do you foresee from the presbytery or Vital Congregations facilitators? What additional support might be helpful for your church?

F. Final Assessment and “Show Your Marks” Reports (Two months, Year 2) — This is an opportunity for churches to share their re-envisioned Marks of Vitality, assess the process, set goals for the future and plan for sustainability. These reports will be collected during the Final Assessment of the Vital Congregations Initiative and turned in to presbyteries and the PC(USA) staff to mark a new measurement of vital congregations.

- **Session Vitality Assessment** (One month, Year 2) — Leadership of the church, operating in healthy systems and fueled by the input and stories of the people, should be ready to debrief and assess, plan and set goals, for sustainable vitality.
 - The PC(USA) will provide final assessment tools and resources for ongoing vitality.
 - The final “Show Your Marks” Reports should be shared in the final worship celebration of the presbytery. Presbytery leaders will share final reports with the PC(USA) staff to measure congregational vitality in new ways beyond membership trends and budgets.

Note: This assessment will mark standards of measurement such as: How have we been transformed? How have we experienced God’s wonder? How will we ensure vitality moving forward? Do we have a

clear vision moving forward? How will we work to continue to discern the will of God? How and when will we know if it is time to begin new worshiping communities? Going forward, how will we continue to gather congregational input? Where do we go from here? How will we remain faithful in our following of Christ and be open to the wonder of God?

- **Congregation Vitality Assessment** (one month, Year 2) — This will be an intentional time of reflecting, engaging in important conversations and assessments of the Vital Congregations Initiatives. Instead of a time of conclusion, this time should be centered around how we continue the initiatives that brought about vitality, and how to continue prayerful discernment of new visions of faithful discipleship. Yet, it should also be a time of joy-filled celebration, storytelling, gratitude and play as we delight in all the Lord is doing in our midst!
 - Pastor(s) and session determine how to go about Vital Congregations Debriefing. For example: Offer reflection assessment surveys and plan a special worship where revitalization stories can be shared and surveys/assessments can be offered. Home groups plan presentations, story-sharing of revitalization and experiences of wonder, while offering a prayer to paths of sustainability moving forward, and center it around a family fun night of celebration.
 - From this debriefing should come tangible ways forward and covenant promises to be kept, envisioning plans that will continue to discern and seek the Spirit's leading into new vital mission and ministries.
 - Plan ways to allow your congregation and hopefully new "strangers now friends" to share their stories of hospitality, yes, but namely of how God showed up in the person or people of this church and revealed God's amazing wonder and love. These are the faithful stories that make vital congregations.

Note: Pastors and churches should be sure to invite presbytery leaders to see, hear and be a part of debriefing and assessment, and concluding rituals/celebration of the Vital Congregations Initiative.

- **"Show Your Marks" Report** (Final Month, Year 2) — The "Show Your Marks" Report is to help congregations capture a new and transforming story of vital congregations for the presbytery. This report will be shared with the PC(USA) staff.
 - The final "Show Your Marks" Report should be submitted during the Closing Revitalization Celebration.
 - A guide to creatively sharing these reports can be found in the Revitalization workbook.

Planning Reflections

- Who will fill out Final Assessment reports? Who will capture our marks?
- How will we gather honest input and feedback from officers? Church members and worship-goers?
- When will we assess our goals? When and how will we make plans moving forward as a church?
- How will we determine and set new goals, further work needing to be done and additional help we might need?
- What timeframe do we need to set for ourselves on work moving forward?
- How can we celebrate the work of our officers, church members and leaders who have walked through this two-year process together?
- How will we celebrate our successes, give thanks for our life together in Christ and capture our vitality?
- How will we confess where we still fall short or what we still need to work on and change?
- How will we determine further steps of faithfulness moving forward?

Prayer for Vital Congregations Initiative:

Hopes for Vital Congregations Initiative:

Goals for Vital Congregations Initiative:

Presbytery Planning and Envisioning





Presbytery Planning and Envisioning

The Journey Together

Foundational Planning and Preparation

In order to discern the Spirit's call to revitalization, we must ready ourselves as disciples of Christ Jesus so that we might truly follow where Christ is already at work and calling us to join. Prior to the Two-Year Vital Congregations Initiative, there must be intentional foundational planning and preparation in relationship to God and one another. Please see the "Getting Started in Vital Congregations" Handbook as a guide to:

- **Prayer and faithfulness:** Centering our hearts and minds on Christ, who is the giver of all vital life together
- **Casting in the vision:** helping all to understand the two-year process
- **(Re)forming intentional relationships:** Confession and reconciliation, where it is needed, and building covenant relationships together
- **Preparations:** Planning and envisioning that is inspired by the wonder of God and hope in Christ Jesus.

Planning Reflections

- What might your presbytery need to do to honestly assess and faithfully discern the Spirit's path forward?
- What challenges do you foresee in your presbytery?
- What do we need to confess and reconcile before this work begins?
- What things might you be called to change?
- What do you hope in this process? How can you maintain hope instead of operating in anxiety or fear?
- What is your mission together? How will we support churches in this work?
- What is the Vital Congregations Initiative going to require of us?
- What sort of opening and closing worship service should we plan?
- How do we cast the vision and inspire churches in this process together?

Year 1: Building Intentional Relationships and Honest Assessment of Congregation

Objective

Year 1 is about genuine relationships where existing congregations engage in confessional assessment and faithful discernment in where the Spirit is leading them to follow. It will explore the congregational life story of who they have been, in order to discern who they are called to be moving forward. Finally, it will explore beyond the walls in a Neighborhood Exegesis. Relationships are outlined in two sections:

1) Presbytery leaders with pastors and **2) Pastors with their session and congregations.**

A) Pastor Cohorts — Presbytery leaders have formed pastor cohort groups. These groups will begin to meet monthly during the two-year initiative for prayer, biblical and theological reflection, support and fellowship, case study and conversations around their particular ministry context.

- For suggestions on forming pastor cohorts, see the Handbook on Getting Started in Vital Congregations.
- PC(USA) Resource: 12 sessions will focus on the assessment of particular congregations and Seven Marks. (See Resource Information)

Planning Reflections:

- What might your church need to do to honestly assess and faithfully discern the Spirit's path forward?
- What challenges do you foresee in your congregation?
- What things might you be called to change?
- What do you hope in this process? How can you maintain hope, instead of operating in anxiety or fear?
- What does your neighborhood say about your church? What is your mission together? Why has God put you in this particular place and time?
- What sort of opening and closing worship service should we plan?
- How do we get everyone in the church involved in this vision and process together?

B. Presbytery Meetings — Presbytery leaders should plan time for debriefing, dialogue and checking in during regular scheduled presbytery meetings. Worship and prayer should invite time for the reflection of pastors' contexts.

- Presbyteries may choose to plan workshops/seminars on the Seven Marks at each presbytery meeting.
- Presbyteries practice and train pastors in conducting a Neighborhood Exegesis and walking congregations through assessment and discernment (described in II).

Planning Reflections

- How can we equip pastors and officers in this process? What training do we need to lead?
- How can we support pastors in this initiative?
- Who will help lead this process?
- What are creative, new ways we can engage pastors during presbytery meetings in this work?
- How can we ensure Vital Congregations stays at the focus?
- Where do we need to build trust, navigate challenges and strengthen connections as a presbytery?
- How do we create space and time in presbytery meetings for genuine reflection and conversation?

C. Presbytery Site Visits — Presbytery leaders should plan a site visit to each congregation in Year 1. An intentional time of prayer should be offered with each congregation. Time for reflection, assessment, questions and sharing needs should be encouraged.

Planning Reflections

- Who will do the site visits?
- When will site visits take place?
- What will site visits entail?
- What planning, scheduling and arrangements need to be made for site visits?
- How will you encourage congregations during site visits?

D. Presbytery Prayer — A time of prayer should be incorporated in the daily practices of presbytery leaders. Presbytery leadership should offer prayers for the pastors and congregations and walk through the Seven Marks Devotional.

- This can be a ritualized practice in a particular time and space, or leaders can be assigned a list of congregations to pray for on their own each day.

Planning Reflections

- What will daily prayer look like for your presbytery leadership?
- Who will be involved?
- What planning needs to take place?
- How will you incorporate the Seven Marks study?
- How will you split the congregations participating in the Vital Congregations Initiative?
- What liturgy or resources need to be gathered or written?

E. Presbytery Leaders Cohort — Presbytery leaders are invited to attend the Evangelism Conference where time will be devoted to dialogue with other presbytery leaders and PC(USA) staff. Presbytery leaders and Vital Congregations facilitators will take part in quarterly Zoom meetings with PC(USA) staff and the other presbyteries walking through the Vital Congregations Initiative.

F. Checking Our Marks (March–May) — Presbytery leaders should walk through an assessment of: 1) Historical mapping 2) Exploring our mission and ministry 3) Identifying our congregations. Congregational assessment should be cross-referenced with congregations' own assessment from the "Show Your Marks" Campaign.

Planning Reflections

- Who will facilitate the presbytery assessment?
- Who will participate?
- What planning needs to take place?
- Who will gather information about the history of the presbytery?
- Who will fill out reports on churches participating in the two-year initiative?
When will these reports be done?
- What are our goals together during this process?
- How will we confront challenges? Name honest truth? Celebrate our story together?
- How will we be transparent with the presbytery about our assessment? How will we share?
- What do we need to do to have honesty and open dialogue as we map our story and assess our mission?
- How will we gather information from pastors and leaders within the presbytery for our assessment?

G. "Show Your Marks" Campaign (November–December) — This campaign offers an opportunity for congregations to report their assessments, report findings of Neighborhood Exegesis, and share their particular stories. Congregations will be asked to capture the vitality of the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations. Stories, videos and photos of existing congregations turned in to presbyteries every two years should mark a new type of denominational reporting. Beyond membership attendance, the vitality of life together should be highlighted throughout the denomination. The PC(USA) should share the stories of congregations who exist in joy and hope, in love and justice for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This message needs to be reported louder than anxiety and fear over numbers and budgets.

Presbyteries may choose to ritualize receiving these reports in some way. For example, an Advent/Christmas Worship Service might invite the whole presbytery to bring their reports as an offering to God.

Planning Reflections

- Why is it important for churches in life together to “Show Your Marks”? What are the benefits of seeing our strengths and weaknesses, our vitality and our struggles?
- How will we collect “Show Your Marks” Reports from participating churches?
- Who will collect these? When will they be collected?
- How will we use these to celebrate our life together and connect churches to one another?
- When will we share these stories with the whole presbytery? How will we share them?
- When will we pass these along to the Office of Vital Congregations?
- How will we use the stories from “Show Your Marks”?
- What planning needs to take place?
- How will you respond to churches after receiving their “Show Your Marks” Reports? What is the follow-up that will take place?

Year 2: Incarnational — Revitalizing Church in Three Acts

Objective

The objective of Year 2 is Incarnational: Re-envisioning how we are called to be church. Re-forming the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations, and living the Good News with all people. After Year 1 assessment and discernment, Year 2 is about living into a new discipleship — open to the transforming wonder God longs to reveal, and boldly following the Holy Spirit into the new things God is doing. In courageous faith, churches will live into: **1) Re-forming church** — revitalizing the Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality, **2) Clustering churches** — revitalizing by clustering congregations into new communities of worship and ministry, **3) Re-envisioning church** — revitalizing by grace and gratitude in the death and legacy of a congregation, in witness to the resurrection.

I. Presbytery and Pastors — Presbytery leaders have formed pastor cohort groups. These groups will begin to meet monthly during the two-year initiative for prayer, biblical and theological reflection, support and fellowship, case study and conversations around their particular ministry context.

A) Pastor Cohorts — Pastor cohorts will continue to meet monthly.

- A 12-session resource will be provided by the PC(USA). This will be further biblical/theological discussion centered on helping pastors re-envision and re-form church in today's context and culture.
- Pastor cohorts will take turns sharing Neighborhood Exegesis of their particular context. The PC(USA) will offer data analysis of contextual neighborhoods. (MissionInsite)

Planning Reflections

- The resource for the Year 2 pastor cohort is about the wonder of God in Scripture. How can you encourage pastors to explore the wonder of God in Scripture together?
- How can you connect with pastor cohort groups in gleaning from their time together and using that energy within your presbytery?
- How will you check in on your pastor cohort groups?
- What benefits are you seeing in your pastor cohort groups? What challenges or issues need to be addressed?
- What can be gleaned from pastor cohorts meeting together?

B) Presbytery Meeting — Presbyteries should allow time for pastors to share and pray for revitalization efforts. Seminars/workshops should be offered to help pastors move congregations into action of: **1) Re-forming church** — revitalizing the Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality, **2) Clustering churches** — revitalizing by clustering congregations into new communities of worship and ministry, **3) Re-envisioning church** — revitalizing by grace and gratitude in the death and legacy of a congregation, in witness to the resurrection.

- The PC(USA) will provide a toolkit with resources for Seven Marks and Three Actions moving forward.
- The conclusion of Year 2 will allow presbyteries and pastors to ritualize their Vital Congregations experience in celebration and thanksgiving to God. This might be a worship service together, a time of festival sharing, storytelling or some other gathering event.

Planning Reflections

- How can we equip pastors and officers in this process? What training do we need to lead?
- How can we support pastors in Year 2 as they discern and form action plans?
- Who will help lead this process?
- What are creative, new ways we can engage pastors during presbytery meetings in this work?

- How can we ensure Vital Congregations stays at the focus?
- How will you address the needs that arise as these churches discern their “Course of Action”?
- How do we create space and time in presbytery meetings for genuine reflection and conversation?

C) Presbytery Prayer Tour — Presbytery leaders should support and pray with each congregation as they embark on their “action plan” into new revitalization efforts and experiences. Leaders may choose to be present to witness new initiatives, or to pray with session as they work on mission and ministry statements.

Planning Reflections

- Who will be a part of the prayer tour?
- When will you tour?
- What are the goals of your tour? What will time together with churches look like?
- What liturgy do you need to have or write for the prayer tour?
- What planning needs to take place?
- How will you share the action plans of churches with the whole presbytery?
- How will you address issues, share honestly and help churches to discern, pray with and for congregations?
- What challenges do you foresee in this part of the process?

D) Presbytery Debriefing Assessment and Envisioning — Presbytery leaders will gather to discern how they will continue to faithfully support congregations in their vitality. How will the presbytery continue to equip and inspire pastoral leadership? How will they continue to empower and encourage congregations? A practical way forward should be outlined and adopted by the presbytery and pastors.

- Presbytery leaders will have the opportunity to envision and share ideas with other presbytery leaders and PC(USA) staff at the annual Evangelism Conference.

Planning Reflections

- What are the benefits to a continual process of debriefing and envisioning as a presbytery?
- Who will be a part of debriefing and envisioning reports for the presbytery?
- How can you ensure honest dialogue and encourage a spirit of imagination in envisioning?
- How will you handle conflict and ongoing issues as they arise?
- When will you do the Debriefing and Envisioning Assessment?
- What plans need to be made?
- How will you gather the input of pastors and church leaders?
- What external assistance might you foresee?
- How will you adopt a plan for continual assessment and envisioning to take place moving forward?

E) “Show Your Marks” Campaign — Through joy and sorrow, success and failures, the Spirit of God will bring forth revitalization as we faithfully walk together. As Christ brings us into the story of faith, we are called to capture and tell others the story. Presbyteries should plan a way in which to share their story of the Vital Congregations Initiative. In this way, the denominational narrative shifts from anxiety to hope, from fear to faithfulness.

For example: Presbyteries may choose to assemble a video of congregational vitality highlighting the vital marks in different congregations. They may choose to offer a pastor retreat where pastors can share stories of vitality to be compiled and turned into a resource. Presbyteries may want to put together a digital slideshow of congregational vitality and revitalized mission and ministries throughout their presbytery to share with people who are seeking.

Planning Reflections

- Why is it important for churches in life together to “Show Your Marks”? What are the benefits from seeing our strengths and weaknesses, our vitality and our struggles?
- How will we collect “Show Your Marks” Reports from participating churches?
- Who will collect these? When will they be collected?
- How will we use these to celebrate our life together and connect churches to one another?
- When will we share these stories with the whole presbytery? How will we share them?
- When will we pass these along to the Office of Vital Congregations?
- How will we use the stories from “Show Your Marks”?
- What planning needs to take place?
- How will you respond to churches after receiving their “Show Your Marks” Reports? What is the follow-up that will take place?

Prayer for Vital Congregations Initiative:

Hopes for Vital Congregations Initiative:

Goals for Vital Congregations Initiative:



Presbyterian Mission
**Theology, Formation
& Evangelism**

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