

Seven Marks of Vital Congregations



1

Lifelong Discipleship Formation vs. *complacent “Christian” piety; simply teaching good morals; or 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 which 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 judgement 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 down-trodden 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?



Empower Servant Leadership vs. The pastor's job; monopolized leadership; hiring the young energetic pastor; burning out good volunteers.

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; or 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 peoples' 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, 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 which challenge and enrich our wisdom in faith

D. Reflection Questions:

- What would you say are the fundamental principles 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?

6

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, decision-making process, health of pastors, stewardship of budget and resources, clarity in mission and ministries. Ecclesial health is about the people of God having a clear purpose; all people are stake-holders 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, 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; all opinions heard?
- Is your budget sustainable? How is it assessed? Who determines spending?