

Pastor and Church Guidelines Vital Congregations Initiative

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Pastor and Church Guidelines Vital Congregations Initiative

I. Year 1: Relational

Building Intentional Relationships and Honest Assessment of Congregations

A. Year 1 Objectives:

- (Re)build genuine relationships among presbyteries, pastors and churches.
- Engage, as a presbytery and as individual churches, in confessional assessment and faithful discernment to where the Spirit is leading.
- Explore the congregational life story: who have we been, where are we now, and where is God moving us forward?
- Finally, explore beyond the walls in a Neighborhood Analysis Exercise.

B. Year 1 Description:

1. Vital Congregations Initiative Session, Staff, Pastor and Church Planning — (two months)

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.

- **Officer Preparation:** 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.

- **Church Preparation:** Pastors should meet with officers and staff to plan how they might best walk through the initiative gathering members, including shut-ins, children, youth, college students and any others on the margin of participation. The vision and work should be shared with the congregation. (Note: Vital Congregations facilitators should be introduced to congregations at this time.)

- **Vital Congregations Kickoff:** The 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.)

2. Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: A Church-wide Study — (seven weeks) 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 courage to faithfully change and follow as disciples of Jesus Christ. (Note: Resources are provided by the PC(USA).)

3. “Checking Your Marks” Assessment — (three months) — 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 focus on mission and ministry in life together.

• **Telling Your Story — (Month 1) —** Focuses on historical mapping of particular churches.

• **PC(USA) Marks of Vitality Survey — (Month 2) —** A survey taken by congregations and session members. This is based upon the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations and scored by the PC(USA)

and returned to presbyteries and pastors/session. This time will involve engaging in a Neighborhood Analysis and plotting the life cycle of the church.

- **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.

Notes:

- 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 findings of Neighborhood Analysis.

4. **“Show Your Marks” Campaign — (two months)** — After 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.

Notes:

- 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 are 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.

C. Year 1 Resources:

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

D. Year 1 Vital Congregations Facilitator Role:

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

II. Year 2: Incarnational

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

A. Year 2 Objectives:

- Re-envisioning how we are called to be church.
- Openness to see God already at work, and courage to follow the Spirit into “new things.”
- Renewed discipleship in sharing the Good News with all people.
- Transformation in faithful actions:
 - 1) Re-forming churches --revitalize the 7 Marks of Vital Congregations
 - 2) Missional Clustering of churches -- revitalize 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.

B. Year 2 Description:

1. Prayers and Planning for Vital Congregations — (Month 1)

- Officer and Staff Preparation and Planning: Pastors, in consultation with elders and deacons, should envision and plan how to implement the two-month Plotting the Course (see number three below), and all other aspects of Year 2 of the Vital Congregations Initiative. For example: a church-wide 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 Your 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).
- Resources: Each presbytery will be given access to a full toolkit from the Office of Vital Congregations. This toolkit, centered on the Seven Marks and Three Actions, has case studies from other churches, resources from PC(USA) staff, book/video recommendations and more.

2. Re-Envisioning Your Marks — Seven-week Church-wide 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.

3. Plotting the Course to Revitalizing Action Plans — (Month 1 and 2) — Time to work on the “how?” This is an intentional action plan designed to try something new. This action plan, produced by the officers, staff and pastor(s), should be based on the Year 1 assessment and discernment. The action plan will be developed during the seven-week Re-imagining Your Marks Church-wide Study. Churches should re-envision and plot practical ways to live within the Three Actions of revitalizing: re-forming, missional clustering communities, and/or death and resurrection in its various forms, as well as the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations.

Notes:

- Congregational think-tanks should allow for every idea to be heard, every voice represented, every opportunity shared. The final action plan should be shared with the whole church.
- 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.
- Resources provided from the Office of Vital Congregations are meant to help churches think through the development of their action plan. Also, review the full toolkit your presbytery leaders have been given.
- This time should be highly engaged, with faithfully bold actions. This is the “new thing” God is doing

and calling your church to join. Do not be afraid to dream! Remember that this is a process. Something may fail; transformation may take several tries; there may be many more actions that transpire, but the point is to develop a church praxis to the process of faithfully moving into revitalizing actions of the Spirit.

- 4. Prayer for Revitalization — one week of prayer** — This is 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!

Ideas:

- Set up a weeklong prayer visual at your church; have members sign up for hours to come in and pray. Plan intentional worship opportunities to pray. Have children, youth, families, elder-adults, shut-ins, college students and all members responsible for praying throughout the week for a particular revitalization initiative.

Notes:

- The PC(USA) staff and leadership and Vital Congregations team members offer their prayers with and for your church during this time. This resource will continue to expand, as presbyteries going through the Vital Congregations Initiative are asked to offer their prayers for all churches who perceive and follow Christ into action of a more vital church.

- 5. Changing Your Marks — (six months of living into our revitalizing action plan)** — Pastor(s) and church leaders should walk with the congregation in the action plans, based on the Seven re-envisioned Marks and within the Three Actions: Re-forming, Missional Clustering, Death and Resurrection. This is a high-energy time in the life of the church where we have 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.

Notes:

- Pastor(s) and session should pray with presbytery leaders and inform them 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 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.
- 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.

- 6. Final Assessment and "Show Your Marks" Report — (final 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.

- a. Session Vitality Assessment — (one month, Year 2)** — The 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.

Notes:

- The PC(USA) will provide final assessment tools and resources for ongoing vitality.

- The final “Show Your Marks” Report 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.
- 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?

b. Congregation Final Assessment — (final month, Year 2) — This will be an intentional time of reflecting, engaging in important conversations and assessments of the Vital Congregations Initiative. 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 that the Lord is doing in our midst!

Notes:

- Pastor(s) and session determine how to go about Vital Congregations debriefing with the whole church.
- From this debriefing should come tangible ways forward, 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.
- Pastors and churches should be sure to invite presbytery leaders to see, and to hear, and to be a part of debriefing, assessment and concluding rituals/celebration of the Vital Congregations Initiative.

Ideas:

- 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.

c. “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 PC(USA) staff.

Notes:

- 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.

C. Year 2 Resources:

1. 13 Sessions for Pastor Cohort Gatherings by Dr. William P. Brown
2. Full Vital Congregations Toolkit (Presbytery)
3. Rethinking Seven Marks of Vital Congregations: A Church-wide study
4. Plotting the Course – Action Plan Help
5. Week of Prayers
6. Final Debriefing and Assessment – Congregation

7. Final Debriefing and Assessment – Church Leadership
8. Final Debriefing and Assessment – Presbytery
9. “Show Your Marks” Campaign Report

D. Year 2 Vital Congregations Facilitator Role:

In consultation with presbytery leadership, 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 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.

III. 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 re-commitment 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:**

- Praying with, and for, you
- Creating continuing Vital Congregations resources (See Future Resources below)
- Offering presbytery leader gatherings (during Urban Presbyter Network or PC(USA) Evangelism Conferences)
- Training opportunities for current and future church leaders
- Connecting to resources and persons who can help in revitalizing actions
- Continuing to highlight vital congregations through the sharing of “Show Your Marks” Reports

• **Future Resources: After the two-year Vital Congregations Initiative, there will be:**

- Resources for ongoing congregational revitalization
- Resources for 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
- A Vital Congregations Conference to gather all pastors who’ve been through the Vital Congregations Initiative to share stories and debrief together
- Resources to help existing congregations that are looking to create new worshipping communities