



# Vital Congregations Vision

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 their doors.

Everywhere you turn, God, in Christ, by 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 re-investing 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.

*<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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.

*<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. <sup>11</sup> 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.' <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup> 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 reminiscent of a scarring past never truly reconciled. Words like "Christian" and "religion" are 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!

*<sup>3</sup> 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; <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> 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." <sup>6</sup> 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 imag-

ine 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 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 the 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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