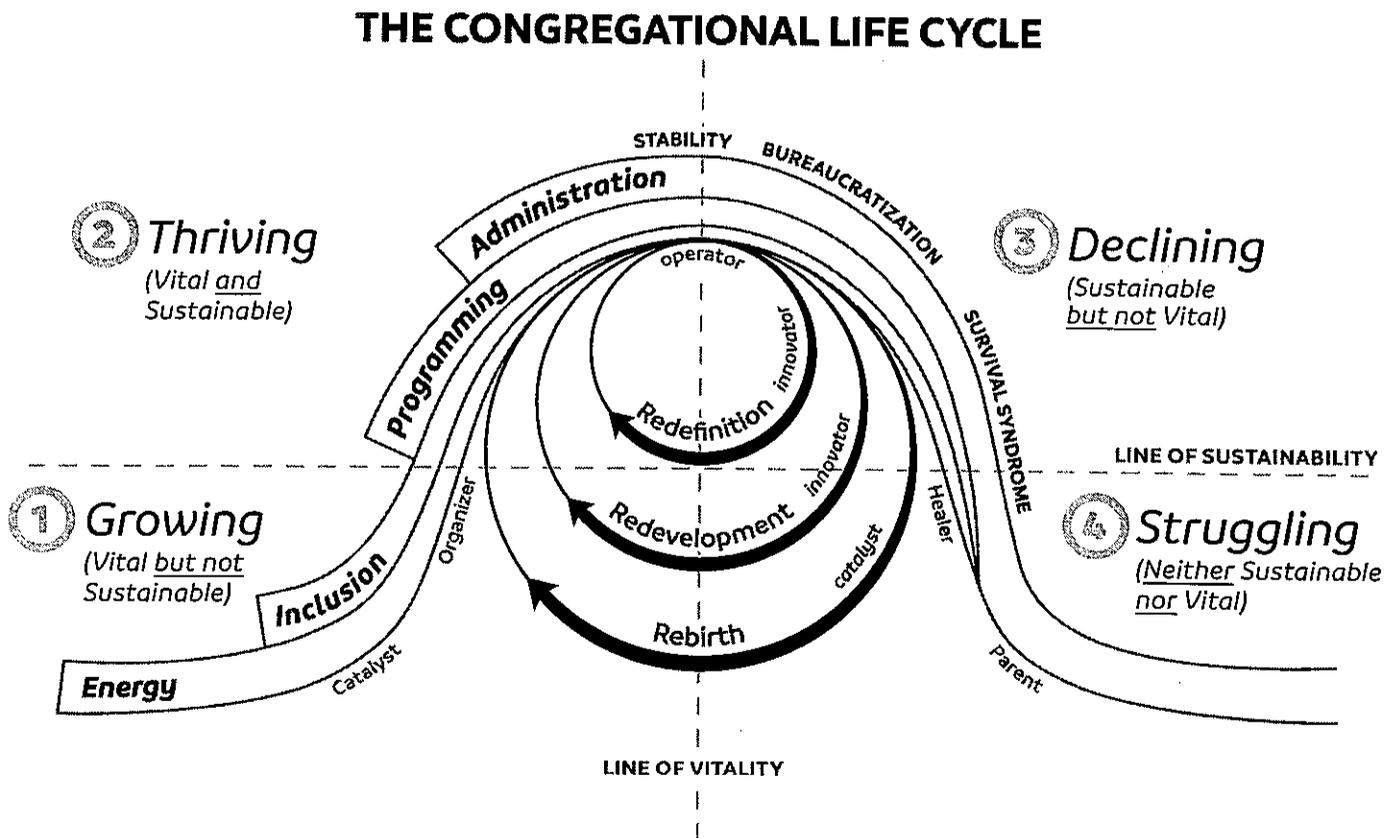


The Life Cycle of a Worshiping Community

The concept of a congregational life cycle has been around for a long time, and typically illustrated with a diagram such as the one below, that looks like a bell-shaped curve, showing the stages that a congregation can proceed through, from left to right. Note that as we move from left to right, we see that the congregation is growing and then eventually plateauing (the top of the curve), but only for a short while, and then steadily declining.

But, a gradual progression toward decline and even closure is not inevitable. What's missing in many life cycle models is an illustration that shows how worshiping communities can, and often do, break out of this cycle. The model we've developed (see diagram below, drawn by our colleague Angie Andriot) shows a "circling back" toward the thriving stage as the result of intentional work to redefine the worshiping community's vision, redevelop the worshiping community if needed, and birth a new community if it has declined too far to be redeveloped. Note that the farther a worshiping community moves over the top of the curve and to the right, more effort is required to move back to the thriving stage.



*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
See, the home of God is among mortals. ... See, I am making all things new.*

*Isaiah 43:19
1 Corinthians 3:16
Revelation 21:3-5*

Vital Congregations Vision

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.

Values:

- Courage, conviction and commitment to faithful discipleship
- Prayerful discernment
- Reliance upon Scripture
- Persistence — emboldened/enacted faith
- Honest assessment
- Resilience
- Intentional pursuits of reconciliation
- Hopefulness in change

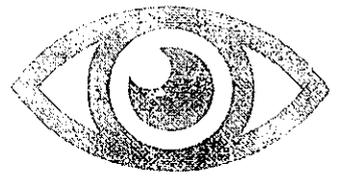
What we believe:

- A necessary re-turn to God and re-forming of God's people.
- A crucial time of awakening throughout our neighborhoods, nation and world
- The Holy Spirit's power is changing, re-forming, revitalizing the church
- It is necessary to rediscover faithful discipleship in 21st century context
- God is calling the Church to transform and transcend cultures and contexts
- Move from inward institutions to neighborhood relationships and mission

What this initiative is:

The hope is that this is the beginning of intentional, authentic relationships between the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Mission Agency and mid council leaders and pastors to:

- Come together as the people of God
- Pray: re-turn to faithfulness in God
- Inspire openness to the Holy Spirit's transformation/change
- Honestly assess, discern and act
- Resource, equip and support leaders and pastors
- Practice missional evangelism and faithful discipleship



- Equip vital congregations and develop a praxis of sustainability and ongoing assessment
- Capture congregational stories and develop new measurements of vitality

What this initiative is NOT:

- A universal program instructing churches and assuring vitality and sustainable life
- Another plan that promises an immediate fix
- A guarantee of revitalization for every congregation
- An attempt for the PC(USA) to tell churches what to do
- An institutional survival guide for membership numbers and buildings
- An encouragement to tweak, yet remain the same
- A return to glory days gone by, nor a guidebook on calling the young pastor

The initiative is a two-year covenant relationship between presbyteries and the PC(USA) to prayerfully walk with pastors and existing congregations in intentional efforts of revitalization. Year 1 builds authentic relationships of faith. Churches will embark on an honest assessment, capturing their unique stories, confessing their realities and discerning the Spirit's call to action.

From Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality, churches will determine a course between Three Acts:

1) Re-forming churches — *re-envision and change how we are church together through the Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality*, **2) Missional Clustering churches** — *revitalization by clustering congregations into new communities of worship and ministry*, **3) Death and Resurrection churches** — *revitalizing by grace and gratitude in the death and legacy of a congregation, in witness to the resurrection*. Year 2 is about joining Christ in the new thing taking place, allowing the wonder of God to transform, and faithfully living into change. Through Seven Marks and Three Acts, we pray that God will revitalize the church in missional action and faithful discipleship in Jesus Christ throughout our neighborhoods, our nation and the world.

- **Year 1: Relational:** Authentic Relationships and the Honest Assessment and Discernment of Congregations
- **Year 2: Incarnational:** Revitalizing Church in Three Acts: Re-forming, Missional Clustering, Death and Resurrection

Seven Marks of Congregational Vitality



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

“The righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith.”
— Phil. 3:9b

- From the cradle to the grave seeking to be formed for right living with God and with all people.
- Faith — seeking understanding, cultivating wisdom and actively following Christ; not an extra-curricular or merely head-knowledge.
- Discipleship awakened and engaged in issues facing today’s culture: injustice, inequality, divisive segregation, oppression, suffering, abuse of creation.
- Discipleship formed and strengthened in the community of Christ permeates daily practices and daily living.



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

We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God.” — 2 Cor. 4:7.

- Intentionally sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, not just acts of kindness
- Authentically sharing Christ because it is intrinsic to self-identity; an overflow of Christ in our life
- Relational, not programmatic or systematic.



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

“The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” — Matt. 7:14.

- Outward exploration, awareness, and focus on neighbors and neighborhood.
- Beyond relationship with those who are like us, the incarnate Christ dwells among the lowly and least, the stranger and the suffering, the marginalized and majority.
- Missional focus on where Christ is already living and present and calling us to dwell.



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

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers.” — Matt. 9:37–38.

- Identify, nurture and support the use of spiritual gifts of all people to serve; not monopolized cliques of power.
- All voices and people are necessary, and it is noticeable when people are absent/missing.
- Nurture and encourage those specifically called and gifted for pastoral ministry.



5

Spirit-Inspired Worship vs. *Self-gratifying worship, stale ritual divorced of meaning, or consumer entertainment worship*

"These people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote." — Isaiah 29:1

- Worship is about God. We get to come on holy ground, encounter God and experience wonder.
- Worship is active participation in the living relationship of the triune God, thus all should feel welcome just as they are to come.
- Worship challenges, teaches, transforms, encounters, convicts and sends people out different.

6

Caring Relationships vs. *any other social club; façades, hypocrisy, and judgment of "church" and "religion"*

"By this everyone will know that you are disciples, if you have love for one another." — John 13:3.

- Sharing in God's true agape moves us beyond half-hearted programmatic participation, lukewarm faith and pretending.
- Instead of a closed, judgmental community, people find freedom to share stories, encounter the Savior and ask for help.
- Welcome and hospitality are not left to a committee, but, imperfectly, we strive for all people to find identity, purpose and belonging in the household of God.
- Confront conflict, seek reconciliation in all divisions, find ways to embrace all diversity and seek to be peacemakers and bridge-builders together.

7

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

"The body does not consist of one member but of many. God has so arranged the body that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" 1 Cor. 12: 14, 24b-25.

- Understanding of: Why are we we a church community? How are we a church community in practice? Prayer permeates all life together.
- Clarity in mission, core values to ministry, and passion and joy in being the church. Our budget reflects these values, vision and ministries.
- Fiscally responsible — Stewardship and tithing are taught, along with transparency in spending and continual assessment/discernment of a sustainable budget.
- All are stakeholders, aware of how decisions are made in the process and procedures. All are valued voices in the envisioning, open to changes and continually assessing "why" and "how" we are church together.
- Nurturing and supporting the health of pastor(s), staff and all who are called to lead; fighting against burnout.

Presbytery Guidelines: The Journey Together

Overview:

Where to Begin: Basic Information and Presbyteries Letters of Interest

Foundational Planning and Preparation

Year 1: Relational — Building Intentional Relationships and Honest Assessment of Congregation

- A. Year 1 Objectives
- B. Year 1 Description
- C. Year 1 Resources
- D. Year 1 Facilitator Role

Year 2: Incarnational — Revitalizing Churches in Three Acts:

Re-forming, Clustering, Death and Resurrection

- A. Year 2 Objectives
- B. Year 2 Description
- C. Year 2 Resources
- D. Year 2 Facilitator Role

Looking Ahead

Where to Begin

Pray! This process of Vital Congregations begins with prayer and relationship together. Build a relationship with the Office of Vital Congregations. Read and share the Vital Congregations Manual and the Immediate Toolkit Resources with presbytery leadership and pastors. Finally, the process of submitting a “Letter of Interest” for your presbytery can be found in this manual. All dates and deadlines can be found by visiting the Vital Congregations web page: pcusa.org/vitalcongregations. Click on “Basic Information Packet.”

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.

Year 1: Building Intentional Relationships and Honest Assessment of Congregation

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;

2) Pastors with their session and congregations.

Presbytery and Pastors

- 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 “Getting Started in Vital Congregations” Handbook
 - PC(USA) Resource: 12 sessions will focus on the assessment of particular congregations and Seven Marks. (See Resource Information)
- B. Presbytery Meetings** — Presbytery leaders should plan time for debriefing, dialogue and checking in during regularly 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.
- 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.
- 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 in which to pray for on their own each day.
- 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 historical mapping, exploring our mission and ministry and identifying our congregations. Congregational assessment should be cross-referenced with a congregation’s own assessment from the “Show Your Marks” campaign.
- 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.

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 Churchwide Study
- 6) "Show Your Marks" Campaign Report
- 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

The objective of Year 2 is Exploration: 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.*

Presbytery and Pastors

A. Pastor Cohorts

- 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 the Neighborhood Exegesis of their particular context. The PC(USA) will offer data analysis of contextual neighborhoods. (*MissionInsite*)

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 the Three Acts:

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 Acts 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.

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.

D. Presbytery Debriefing Assessment and Envisioning — Presbytery leaders 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.

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 revitalization 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.

Year 2: Resources

- 1) 12 Sessions for Pastor Cohort Gatherings
- 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 Seven Marks in new ways.
- 2) **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 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 revitalization 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.

Vital Congregations Calendar: January Track

Year 1: Relational — *Authentic Relationships and the Honest Assessment and Discernment of Congregations*

January	Casting Vision — presbyteries with pastors and church leaders; pastors with churches
January-February	Prayer and planning meetings; introductions of pastor cohorts; opening celebration
March-April	<i>(seven-week churchwide study during Lent)</i> Exploring the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations
May-July	Break for summer
August	Prayer, planning and training for fall
September-November	<i>(three months)</i> Checking Our Marks — three-session church and presbytery assessments
November-December	"Show Your Marks" — reporting/capturing congregational stories

Year 2: Incarnational — *Revitalizing Church in Three Acts: Re-forming, Missional Clustering, Death and Resurrection*

January	Prayer and planning for Vital Congregations
February-March	<i>(two months)</i> Plotting the Course think-tanks; seven-week study of rethinking Seven Marks of Vitality
April	<i>(one week)</i> Pray
April-October	<i>(six months)</i> Changing Our Marks — Three Acts of revitalizing churches
November-December	<i>(two months)</i> Final Vital Congregations assessment and report: "Show Your Marks"

Recommendations:

1. Presbytery commitment.
2. VC Catalyst.
3. Budget.

