

# An open letter to the Future Directions Table

From Linda Bobbitt, Researcher/Project Manager for the Congregational Vitality Project  
June 6, 2016

## Abstract

This paper is in response to a background paper written for the Future Directions Table by Dr. Kenneth Inskeep.<sup>i</sup> In that paper, Inskeep describes long term trends of decline in attendance and mission support in the ELCA and concludes that the current model is unsustainable.

I agree with Inskeep that the present system is unsustainable unless there are major changes, but it begs the following questions: “What does God want us to sustain”, and “Is what we are doing now aligned with what God wants to sustain?” I explore these questions using data from the Faith Communities Today survey, and find that the majority of ELCA leaders describe their congregation’s relationships with God, each other and the world as “okay” or worse. Only about 10% said they are doing “very well” in these areas. These disappointing evaluations are consistent with other mainline denominations suggesting that there is something bigger going on than simply our failure to be aligned with God’s call.

That leads to even bigger questions, “What is God doing now in our culture and our church in this new age?” and “How can we, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, allow ourselves to be molded by God in new ways?” In this paper, I use data, research, theological reflection, and congregational leadership literature to shed some new light on these questions. I review how God stretches us to imagine new possibilities through the adaptive change cycle. Next I suggest some emerging models contrasting them with some of the myths Lutheran’s tell themselves about what they must but can’t, or won’t do. Data with accompanying stories illustrate how our church is already living into God’s imagined future, it just looks different than we expect. Finally I describe how the ELCA’s congregations, synods and churchwide organization can invite the Holy Spirit to expand their imaginations so that they can more fully participate in God’s call.

## Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the Future direction of the ELCA. My name is Linda Bobbitt. I’m a researcher and project manager for the Congregational Vitality Project of the ELCA. I’m also an M.A. student at Luther Seminary studying Congregational Mission and Leadership. Before all of this, I was vice president for the Rocky Mountain synod (2005-2013) and served on the Living into the Future Together (LIFT) and Addressing Social Concerns task forces so I have diverse perspectives on this church.

The Congregational Vitality Project studies how to help synods help congregations strengthen and sustain their connections with God, each other and the world. My work is generating some interesting results that may inform the work of the Future Directions Table.

Before I prepared this report, I read the background paper Dr. Inskeep wrote for this task force.<sup>ii</sup> As a reminder, Inskeep’s background paper talked about the ultimate purpose of the church as supporting God’s mission. It reflected on the work of eight different ELCA task forces or efforts that have recommended ways this church might support and sustain that mission into the future. To demonstrate the impact of these groups to date, Inskeep shared a variety of trend data which illustrated declining numbers of people and dollars collected from congregations to support their ministries and share with synods and the Churchwide Organization. These data make clear that the ELCA is not sustainable in its

present state. Inskip pointed out that because of these trends, it is getting harder and harder to “participate most fully in the mission of God” (p. i). He concludes that “none of the strategies proposed by any of these groups have reversed the well-established trends in membership or giving” (p. i) and later states, “Absent a significant reversal in these membership and giving trends, the ELCA will be under considerable pressure to “right size” or to substantially rethink its institutional expressions and the scope of their mission” (p. 18).

Inskip is not alone in predicting that major changes are required of mainline denominations if they are to survive. An article released last February reflects on similar trend data for mainline congregations and quotes sociologist Mark Chaves from Duke University as saying, “It might already be beyond that point” (where a significant recovery is possible). “It’s really hard to see what would reverse it.” Other religious researchers share similar thoughts including Dr. Scott Thumma, Executive Director of Faith Communities Today (source of the FACT survey) who was quoted saying “For many churches, it’s no longer “a matter of tweaking a few things,” It’s a matter of reinventing yourself, almost revitalizing yourself from ground zero.”<sup>iii</sup> For many involved in church life, this is an old song.

As I reflected on Inskip’s paper and the undeniable trends, I realized that, while these facts tell the truth about the ELCA and other denominations, there is more to the story.

The conclusions of the background paper and the other cited research are based on the premise, summed up by Inskip, that “Focusing on sustainability is an effective means for assessing church goals and planning for the future” (p. 1).<sup>iv</sup> This statement is true. But for me it raises critical questions: “What does God want us to sustain?” and “Is what we are doing now aligned with what God wants to sustain?” This leads me to even bigger questions, “What is God doing now in our culture and our church in this new age?” and “How can we, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, allow ourselves to be molded by God in new ways?” This paper uses data, research and theological reflection to shed some new light on these questions.

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*“What does God wants to sustain?”*  
*“Is what we are doing now what God wants?”*  
*“What is God up to in our culture and our church?”*  
*“How can the ELCA be molded by God?”*

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## What does God want us to sustain?

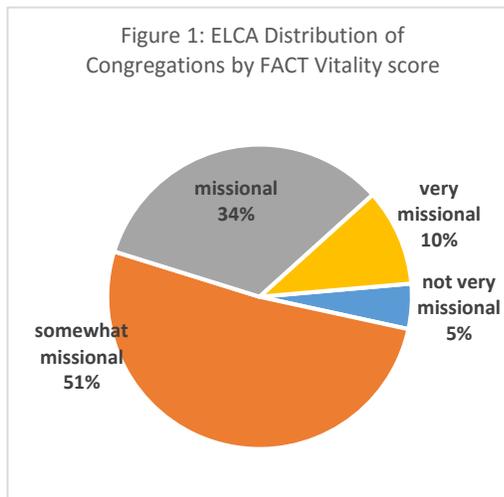
Many would say that God’s vocational call for all Christians can be summed up in the Great Commandment (Love God and neighbor) (Matt 22:37-40) and the Great Commission (Go baptize all nations, and teach them what Jesus taught) (Matt 28:18-20). Indeed, these commitments are present in baptismal vows, affirmation of baptism, and purpose statements in the constitutions of each of the expressions of the ELCA.

I use the word “vocational call” as it was used by DuBois in a Living Lutheran article when he described this foundational theological principle.<sup>v</sup> “Our vocational call to serve God in our everyday lives is embedded in our baptism, and in weekly worship we’re reminded again and again to live our faith in all we say and do” (p.14). But a vocational call isn’t just for individuals, it is also a call to the church to nurture communities of faith that bring people deeper into their relationship with God and their neighbors. This has been lived out differently through different ages of the church, but that basic vocational call remains the same.

## Is what we are doing now what God wants to sustain?

If we agree that God is calling us to live in loving relationship with God, our community of faith and our neighbors and that God's call to the church is to help make that happen, then the question becomes, how we are doing? One way to answer this question is with the 2015 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey which was completed by a statistically representative sample of ELCA church leaders (usually pastors). It asked many questions including some about the congregation's connections with God each other and the world. The results of this survey give us new insight into the capacity of the ELCA to address its vocational call.<sup>vi</sup>

I created a scale using items that reflected to how well the key informant felt the congregation connected with God, each other and the world. (E.g. sense of mission and God's presence, incorporating newcomers, impacting the community). All items rated the congregation on a scale from 1 (Not at all, Never or Strongly Disagree) to 5 (A lot, Strongly Agree or Very Well). A score of 3 meant neutral/unsure or sometimes or somewhat (e.g. Worship is filled with a



or sometimes or somewhat (e.g. Worship is filled with a sense of God's presence "somewhat"). Those items were averaged to create a vitality score between 1 and 5. Next, I grouped congregations by score to show how many congregations averaged below 3 "not very missional", between 3-3.9 "somewhat missional", between 4-4.4 "missional", and over 4.5 "very missional".<sup>vii</sup> The results are presented in the pie chart of Figure 1. Here I use the word "missional" to indicate how well the congregational leader feels their congregation is following its vocational call.

This quick view suggests that a majority of our congregations are only "somewhat" or "not very missional" in their connections with God, each other and the world. When I did the same comparisons for other mainline denominations

who surveyed representative samples, there were no statistically significant differences in the ratios among them.<sup>viii</sup> We are all in the same boat.

This brings me back to my original question: Is what we are doing now aligned with what God wants to sustain? These data show that right now, with some exceptions, our denomination is not responding strongly to God's call. Therefore, sustaining the status quo or reversing trends without addressing how most of our congregations engage with God, each other and the world will not necessarily translate to doing more mission. These data, combined with the trends presented by Inskip and others suggest that the "right sizing" alone won't be enough to bring us in line with our vocational call. We need a deeper change, a change of scene.

### A change of scene

I began writing this paper sitting in a dorm room at Luther Seminary participating in "intensives". From 9 until 5 each day, I sat riveted to my chair watching Dr. Craig Koester acting out the Bible chronologically from start to finish in his Genesis to Revelation class. In all those hours of class, he only broke character once. It was in the middle of Jeremiah 18:4-7 when God tells Jeremiah to go visit the potter. God points out the way the potter throws a pot which doesn't work out the way he wants, so he pushes it down and pulls it up

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again, re-framing it in the desired image. The message to Jeremiah is that God can and will remake his people.

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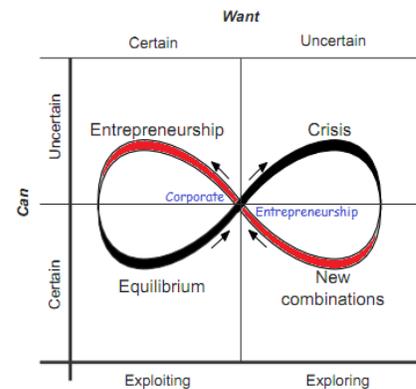
At this point Dr. Koester stopped and wondered out loud whether the church is in the midst of a “scene change”, as in when the stage goes dark and the entire setting changes before the lights come up. He acknowledged that, like the clay pot, the church is being reformed. While he finds this terrifying, he has faith that God is behind it, and so he trusts that is where the future lies. This prophetic moment struck me so I spent the rest of the class listening to what God is up to throughout the Bible and considering how that relates to our present day. I found several striking patterns.

### God’s adaptive change story

The Bible begins with a story of creation (Gen 1) and ends with another story of creation (Rev 20-21). In between, God is constantly working in and through people to create and recreate using the cycles of adaptive change. Many of you may be familiar with the term “adaptive change” from Ron Heifetz who described how this kind of change works in business and society at large.<sup>ix</sup>

In case you are unfamiliar with the cycle, let me briefly summarize how it works. Figure 2 illustrates a typical adaptive cycle.<sup>x</sup> Beginning from the upper left, new ideas become clear goals and effective practices identified in experiments are adopted. Organizations grow by perfecting these practices within the established model (lower left moving up and right). As practices are perfected they also become more rigid making it more and more difficult for the organization to change with its environment. This leads to the upper right where those practices no longer fit reality and goals cannot be achieved using previous practices, causing a crisis. In crisis mode, the organization realizes that improving previous practices no longer achieves desired outcomes and comes to terms with the fact that it must change to survive, however it does not know exactly what kind of change is required. This calls the organization to discern how it can adapt to the current situation, rather than trying to get back to “normal”. Once the organization accepts this truth, it is able to let go of past practices and structures and fall into what feels like chaos. However it is in this state that innovation becomes possible and new models emerge. As they come together the organization moves back toward the upper left into a mode of entrepreneurship and experimentation and the cycle continues.

Figure 2: Adaptive Change Cycle



The Bible is full of stories of adaptive change where people like Abraham, Jacob, Ruth, Esther, Mary, Peter and Paul were uprooted from their homes and lead by God into new places where they had to adapt to the new culture and situations while learning what it means to be children of God.

Consider the story of Israel and Juda as told in first and second Samuel and first and second Kings. After they came into the holy land the people began to build their society as free people like God promised. However, over time a new culture emerged. The tribes of Israel began to fight and people began to worship other gods. Kings put their desires for power and wealth over God’s desire for justice. Many prophets called them to repent and warned of dire consequences, and sometimes reforms were made, but they never lasted long. Eventually the kingdoms of Israel and Judah fell to the empires of Assyria and

Babylon. The story might have ended tragically with people being marched across the desert in yokes and chains, while black smoke billows up from the ashes of the Temple in the background. But it does not. Instead, God uses Jeremiah to encourage the exiled people to build houses, plant gardens, get married, have children and seek the welfare of their captor's city. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

This is a huge break from past prophets who urged the people to repent. Resisting corruption made sense when Israel and Judah were trying to perfect their practices under God's promise of a place where they were free of slavery - a sovereign nation. However that time was over. Judah had come to the crisis point of the cycle. It was time to let go of the old promises and embrace new ones. God used Jeremiah to call the people to adaptive change and it worked. During this time of mourning for the old, God sparked the imaginations of the people and creativity abounded. The people began to tell their stories, writing them down for the first time. It is from this time that we got much of the Old Testament. Eventually the people were allowed to return home (as God promised) and rebuild the temple. That is where the cycle began again.

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A similar scenario unfolds in the New Testament. Jesus' disciples saw their leader do great things, walk into Jerusalem, upset the authorities and get killed. Afterward they were in disarray but they reassembled, and guided by Jesus and the Holy Spirit, they got their bearings and started to spread the good news. Acts is the story of church growth, but the epistles are the story of the church struggling to answer the question, "What are we trying to sustain?" Paul and others write to Christian communities trying to figure out how to live as faithful disciples and often falling back on society's practices and values (both Jewish and pagan). Paul called Peter and the new church to let go of his identity as Jews in order to live into God's vision of a new community of faith (Galatians 2). The time of trial that ensued after the fall of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple inspired a creative response where Christians began writing down their story and establishing new systems for organizing the church (1 Tim 3) . It is from this period that we get the gospels and the beginnings of a faith that can be transmitted across generations. It was in this period that the Christian church was born and a new adaptive loop began in its entrepreneurial phase.

## What is God doing now in our culture and our church in this new age?

The data (presented here and in the original background paper) point to the fact that the ELCA (along with other mainline denominations in the United States) recently passed the crisis phase of the adaptive change cycle. Just like faithful people in the Old Testament, it is no longer a time for us to fix the old, rather we are being called to move forward into a new reality. Like the early Christians, we live in a chaotic time with no single understanding of how to be a faithful disciple in a changing world, and we have two things in common with the faithful people of the Old and New Testaments. First, the shrinking of old formal structures is opening up our imaginations to experiment with new ways of being faithful. Second, like generations before, we are not alone- indeed, we aren't even in the lead. We are accompanied by God through the Holy Spirit, and it is the Spirit that continues to guide us and bring us into the new world where the Spirit has been at work all the while. Our primary job is to trust in God's continued presence and allow God to transform us like God did with our ancestors before us.

## God's adaptive story continues

Many authors suggest that now may be the beginning of a third awakening in this country.<sup>xi</sup> Bosh takes it a step further suggesting that we are entering a new epoch he describes as a “postmodern paradigm”. He cites a resurgence in religions throughout the globe (especially south of the equator) and suggests that this is in part because “the narrow Enlightenment perception of rationality has, at long last, been found to be an inadequate cornerstone on which to build one’s life” (p.361).<sup>xii</sup> In his book *Transforming Mission*, Bosh describes the multiple epochs of the church since the time of the disciples noting the messiness involved in the transitions between epochs as some thinkers are ahead of their time while others cling to the old ways long after the rest of the church has moved on. In this new era there is a recognition that *missio Dei* (God’s mission) institutes the *missiones ecclesiae* (the church’s mission)” (p. 379).<sup>xiii</sup> Mission is now understood as something God does, not something the church does for or on behalf of God. “Here the church is not the sender but the one sent. Its mission (its “being sent”) is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent and in building up itself for the sake of its mission” (quoted from Barth 1956 p. 381).<sup>xiv</sup> “Missionary activity is not so much the work of the church as simply the Church at work” (p. 381).<sup>xv</sup> This sentiment was expressed by the LIFT taskforce.

The task force believes God is a missionary God who sends this church to participate in God's mission in new ways precisely in this challenging environment and in these changing times. To be a Lutheran means to be in mission. God has given the ELCA “the present moment as an opportunity, unparalleled in our history, to confess the center of our faith to the world.”(Exhibit 1H)<sup>xvi</sup>

Diana Butler-Bass describes a shift from a church that is established to one that is intentional.<sup>xvii</sup> Regarding the new age, Diana Butler-Bass says, “The current awakening is marked by its insistence on connection, networks, relationship, imagination, and story instead of dualism, individualism, autonomy, techniques and rules” (p. 237).<sup>xviii</sup> People of this world yearn for purpose and long for sincerity and authenticity. Too often they still see a church as embodying the opposite.

Yet the Spirit is already at work transforming the church. Many authors are documenting emerging new models of church noting “signposts”<sup>xix</sup> or “patterns”<sup>xx</sup> which include core dimensions of spiritual formation, radical hospitality, renewed authentic Christian community, witnessing and social action.<sup>xxi</sup> The ELCA is also caught up in the midst of this change. The evidence is all around us if you know where to look.

## Signs of the Spirit in action vs. ELCA Myths

As Bosch suggested, this is a messy time with some people experimenting with new definitions of church while others hold firmly to traditional assumptions about what it means to be the church. Just like faithful people going through adaptive change in past epochs, our modern church struggles to let go of old truths so that we can embrace the new realities. Below, I will name some of the old truths that continue to capture our imagination allowing us to marginalize new data and stories so that we can hang on to our old understandings. As you read the next section, please allow yourself to wonder if these data and stories actually represent the beginnings of a new thing, rather than simply being anomalies within the current system.

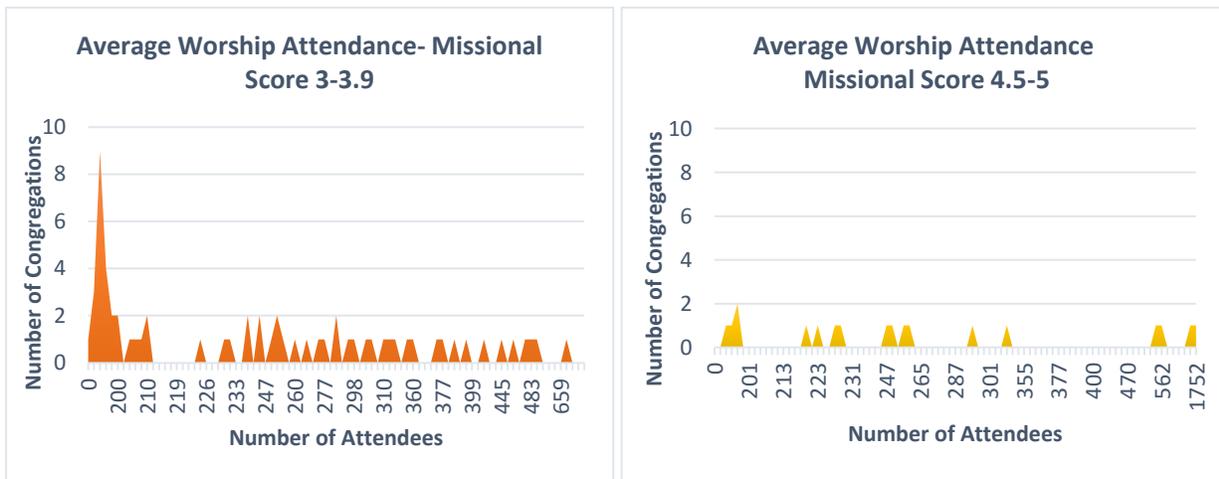
### **Bigger is better**

An important assumption of the modern age and the consumerist culture is that bigger is better and that congregations that are large and have lots of staff and programming are inherently more vital, sustainable, missional and healthy. Going back to the 2015 FACT survey, let’s look at the characteristics

of our “very missional” congregations (the top 10%). It shows that “Very missional” congregations aren’t necessarily larger than less missional congregations.

Figure 3 compares the average worship attendance of congregations who rated themselves between 3 and 3.9 “somewhat missional” with those who rated themselves over 4.5 “very missional”. It shows that 40% of “somewhat missional” churches worship between 50-100 or people each week with 15% worshipping in larger communities over 200. Meanwhile, the most “very missional” congregations’ size ranged more evenly with no more than 28% in any category suggesting that bigger isn’t necessarily better.

Figure 3: Average Worship Attendance in Congregations with Missional Scores of 3 compared to those with scores 4.5+



There is a church near St. Paul, Minnesota that exemplifies a “very missional” place with less than 50 worshipers most weeks. Years ago they tried to close by giving away their possessions to the neighborhood only to generate new life through their generosity and become the church that helps its neighbors make needed repairs. Now the Noah’s Arc structure they built for Sunday school is being used as a community tool shed where community members borrow what they need for home repairs. Church members celebrate their brokenness by making real clay pots and testifying to how God fills the cracks in their lives’ with gold. They love each other as Christ loves them. They love their neighbors as themselves. They know God is alive and still creating, and they proclaim it through prayers like this sending prayer which they said together last summer:

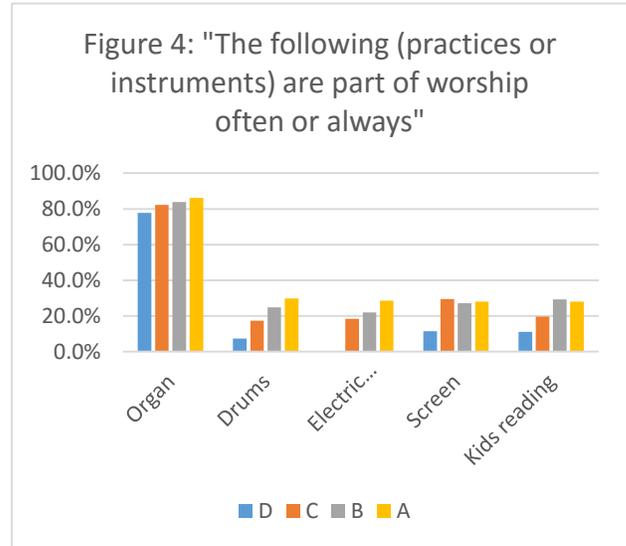
“Go forth, in Christ’s name, to transform existence, to bring consolation to the desperate, hope to the hungry and homeless, reconciliation to a community and world divide. And in Christ’s name, find a cause you can live for, a self you can live with, and a Redeemer for whom you can die.”<sup>xxii</sup>

### Vital churches have contemporary music in worship

Too often we hear struggling churches assert that if they just add contemporary worship the “the young families” will come and they will be renewed into the church they remember from their glory days.

The FACT survey asked congregations what kinds of practices they used in worship. The most missional congregations had worship services that were described as reverent, thought provoking and innovative. These congregations were no less likely to have traditional worship than less vital congregations. When contemporary worship was present, it was usually as a second service. Innovation happens within both contemporary and traditional worship settings.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of congregations that use organ, drums, electric guitar or bass, a screen and kids reading as part of worship “often” or “always”. “A” (yellow) signifies congregations that are most missional using the scale described above, “D” are those that are least missional. In the end, it is clear that congregational renewal takes more than technical changes and tweaks to programs. It requires adaptive change.



### Congregations hate change. Once they head downhill, there is no way to renew a dying church.

According to the FACT survey, nearly every congregation surveyed acknowledged a need to change. The key informant (usually pastor) from 80% of congregations that were “not very missional” and 27% of those who were “somewhat missional” said they knew they needed to change to increase vitality and viability, but that the congregation doesn’t seem to realize it and/or doesn’t want to make the necessary changes. Twenty percent of the “not very missional” congregations and 40% of those who were “somewhat missional” said that they were changing slowly, but not fast enough or in significant enough ways.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In another study, the Congregational Vitality Project followed up with over 40 congregations that participated in synod-run renewal projects.<sup>xxiv</sup> That study found of the 15 congregations in decline before the intervention, seven now felt they were moving in the right direction. The following activities made the biggest difference: discerning God’s purpose, healing broken relationships, building new healthy relationships, strengthening or developing new leadership skills in both rostered and lay leaders, shifting the congregation’s culture from “established” to “intentional”, and engaging their local community. One pastor in an improving congregation said, “I believe that God is working a re-formation and we get to be part of it--as disconcerting as it may feel at times. This is all part of listening to the Spirit as we move faithfully forward.” Notice the way she focused on God’s agency, rather than the congregation’s. Contrast this with the comments of a pastor from a church that continued to decline despite considerable outreach efforts. “Despite good participation by community members, its not contributing to bring people into the congregation.” This pastor focused the congregation’s survival rather than what God is doing to change the hearts and minds of people. Renewal appears to have more to do with a renewed imagination for God’s activity than the external forces often assume to be important predictors of change. Indeed congregations that turned around were no less likely to have conflict or natural disasters in their past. They were also no more likely to have a new pastor.

As of 2016, the ELCA is funding 134 congregations to participate in intentional renewal processes. These congregations sign commitments to faithfully engage each other and the Spirit to reconnect with God and each other as well as their communities over several years. Likewise, the ELCA is funding 11 synods to launch or continue to expand their own renewal initiatives. Congregations throughout the ELCA are currently taking advantage of opportunities to discern what God is doing in their context and allow God to mold them in new ways.

Stories of congregational change and renewal are plentiful. Many of them have been written up in books like those cited throughout this paper. To gain a better understanding of what these particular statistics look like on the ground, I called some of the “very missional” congregations to learn their story.

I found “Home Town” Lutheran Church which is near Houston Texas. About 50 people worshiped on Sunday and most of whom had grey hair. The former pastor completed the FACT survey before he retired last June. In the survey he said that a “country club mentality” was holding them back and that his role as an “ecclesiastical chemotherapist” helped them to change. The interim pastor, Steve, with whom I spoke, laughed at the phrase and agreed that part of what the last pastor did helped cleanse complacency and navel gazing from the community, which was not a fast or painfree process.

*Pastor as ecclesiastical  
chemotherapist*

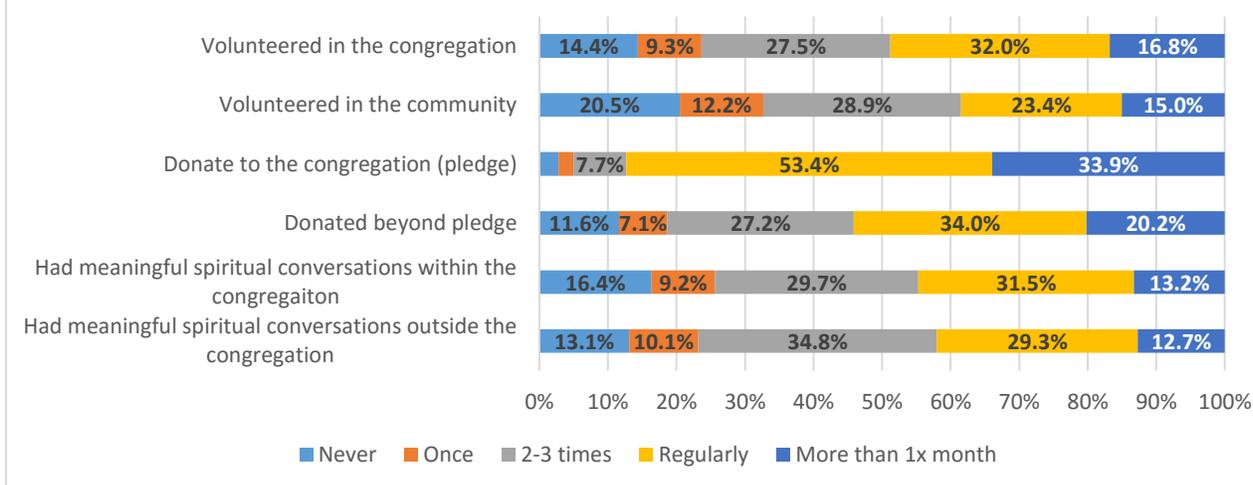
As an interim, he found proactive leaders and members willing to take risks, not for the sake of their own survival, but for the sake of the gospel. “They are ready to roll up their sleeves and get out into the community.” said Pr. Steve. He described the movement of the Holy Spirit that drove them out to meet their neighbors. There they found a local retirement home with many people who wanted to go to church but could not. “They didn’t even know they were there”, said Steve, so the church started bringing worship to that community and now serves about 25 people each Sunday. They also started reaching out to the young adults that are now moving into the neighborhood as it is changing over. This means focusing on worship that is traditional but has a lot of variety and is always done well. So far they have gotten a good response, with several young adults coming and staying. Now between 75 and 80 people gather for worship each Sunday. Their goal isn’t to become a mega church like many in their neighborhood. Rather they want to maintain critical mass into the future so that they can continue serving God in the neighborhood.

#### **Lutherans don’t.....**

There are many jokes about the things that Lutherans don’t do. Among those things is the idea that Lutherans don’t talk about their faith. The flip side of this are all kinds of negative caricatures about Lutherans – from being the “frozen chosen” to being hyper intellectual and therefore unspiritual. I’ve also heard pastoral, synodical and denominational leaders complain that Lutherans are disconnected from their own communities, caring more about sustaining their dying church than engaging their faith in the world.

Since 2013, congregations around the country have been asking each person who attends worship to complete the Congregational Vitality Survey. Part of the survey asks respondents to describe how they live out their vocational call in specific ways (e.g. donating, volunteering, taking about faith, etc.) Figure 5 comes from over 10,000 people in 335 congregations. These congregations had average vitality scores ranging from 2.8 (struggling) to 4.6 (thriving). This chart illustrates that 80- 90% of Lutherans volunteered, donated and had meaningful spiritual conversation both inside and outside the church at least once in the past year. A large number did so regularly.

Figure 5: In the past year, how often have you...



In his Living Lutheran article, DuBois talked with pastors about vocation. They said they yearned to put vocation in the center of their ministries but didn't know how.<sup>xxv</sup> For too long the Lutheran church has told itself that its people aren't good at talking about their faith or sharing it with the world. When DuBois met with lay people he was surprised to find that they don't limit their idea of ministry to what happens in church. Instead they "clearly affirmed their baptismal vocations" (p. 14).<sup>xxvi</sup> The fact that lay people are already responding to God's vocational call is supported by this data.

Indeed, God is already at work, sparking the vocational imaginations of people throughout the church. In several synods it looks like small groups of people who take their faith seriously enough to experiment with what it means to be a child of God in daily life and reflect on it together each week. It looks like congregations of homeless people or prisoners coming together around God's promises to the poor and outcast. It looks like retreats in the Northwestern woods with 30-40 LGBTQ people, once rejected by the old church but now accepted for who they are, forming a new kind of Christian community that digs deep into their faith together one weekend a month. It looks like a new ministry for people recovering from addictions teaching their founding/host congregation new ways to be deeply spiritual and authentic. It looks like a community organizing effort in Detroit that engaged mothers interested in a cooking co-op who invited their friends and then asked a faith component so they could explore how God was working in their community. This has grown into a new mission of the ELCA that adds worship to several other ministries including three micro- enterprises.

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*These places are all real and they all exist in the ELCA. God is doing new things!*

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These places are all real and they all exist in the ELCA, as do countless more. Most of them would not be lifted up as wildly "successful" in our old "bigger is better" understanding. Yet, God is doing new things like this throughout our country and the world.

## How can the ELCA allow ourselves to be molded by God in new ways?

While a new church is clearly emerging within the ELCA, it is still true that the majority of congregations are in decline and that the current trends remain unsustainable. So what is the way forward?

Believe it or not, the ELCA is actually in a really good position to hear and respond to the Spirit's call to participate in this age of the church. The pluralistic nature of our current culture makes it more open than ever to a new distinctly Lutheran voice focused on a theology of grace as an alternative to fundamentalism and imperialism. There are many aspects of our current theology and ecclesiology that resonate with today's culture. Daniel Anderson agrees. He compared the history, theology and ecclesiology of the ELCA with current practices and concluded that the ELCA has missional DNA, but that it has yet to live into its full potential.<sup>xxvii</sup> To address this time of crisis that is natural, inevitable and cyclical, we must not to look backward in an attempt to fix the problem, but rather forward, allowing God to mold each expression of the ELCA through the cycle of adaptive change.

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*We must not to look backward in an attempt to fix the problem, but rather forward allowing God to mold us in new ways.*

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### Congregations

While many congregations are already vitally connected with God, each other and their community, the FACT survey showed that most congregations are only somewhat or not very connected. Anderson laments that many ELCA churches have bought into a "modern consumer-oriented missiology that seeks to meet the felt needs of the people and that views them as "objects" rather than as active "subjects" of the church's mission" (Loc 2033).<sup>xxviii</sup> This perspective flies in the face of the new cultural era of anti-institutional attitudes and self-initiated networks.

Changing this missiology (our understanding of God's mission) will be hard work and it is likely that many of our congregations will not make the switch in time. For those that are willing, libraries could be filled with the books written to help congregations. After years of study by numerous researchers, considerable consensus has emerged about some of the key factors required for congregations to make this change. From the literature is clear that any effort to renew congregations begins with spiritual renewal and includes lay and rostered leaders collaborating in intentional efforts to engage with God in worship, within their own faith community and in their neighborhoods. A more detailed description is beyond the scope of this paper, however, specific suggestions for congregations may be found at [www.elca.org/Resources/Mission-Planning](http://www.elca.org/Resources/Mission-Planning) and [www.congregationalvitalityproject.com/resources](http://www.congregationalvitalityproject.com/resources).

What our own study found is that the declining congregations that were not able to turn around experienced a lack of trust in each other and a lack of connection to and trust in God. Intentional work in spirituality and relationships was a key component in every congregation that experienced renewal. While many individuals don't want "their church" to change, DuBois noted that lay people understood and embraced God's vocational call but needed additional support to do it better. He wondered, "What would it mean to shape our congregations around vocation?" (p.16).<sup>xxix</sup> I wonder what it would look like if congregations asked how they can support people living out their vocations in everyday life before asking how people can support the congregation. These questions might be a helpful place to start the conversation.

## Synods

The LIFT recommendations called for synods to become proactive catalysts for congregational mission and outreach, yet many synods express that they are overwhelmed by the day-to-day activities required of a synod including accompanying congregations through leadership transitions and times of conflict or crisis. That is why the LIFT recommendations called for synods to “prioritize the responsibilities in their constitutions to reflect a focus on equipping congregations and leaders” (p. 25).<sup>xxx</sup> Several synods have taken the initiative to do just that. Initial research shows that these strategies have a positive impact on congregations.<sup>xxxii</sup> In 2016, 11 synods were awarded funds from the Always Being Made New campaign to implement these strategies. Campaign funds also supported new Area Ministry Strategies (collaborations including multiple congregations), fast growth congregations and creative new ministries. Several other synods implemented strategies without funding from the churchwide organization. Evaluation plans are forming so that we can learn more about which kinds of congregations benefit most from which kinds of assistance.

What will it take to engage all the synods in this kind of pro-active experimentation? Like congregational renewal, synod leaders must be intentional in discerning God’s vocational call, building trust, and creating partnerships between lay and rostered leaders within synodical leadership, congregations and in the larger community.

## Churchwide Organization

The LIFT recommendation said, “A primary role for the churchwide organization is to support and build the capacity of synods, which are best positioned to work directly with congregations in planning and carrying out God’s mission” (p. 26).<sup>xxxii</sup> This is happening in several ways including the deployment of Directors for Evangelical Mission as staff to synods, by funding and research of synod and congregational initiatives described above and by funding experimental practices for renewing and new ministries (where only 14% of over 300 newly forming ministries follow the traditional Lutheran model).<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Unfortunately, the modernistic prioritization of efficiency, sustainability, accountability, and clear messaging sometimes results in treating congregations, pastors and synods as objects rather than interdependent partners in mission as described in the constitution. The churchwide organization and the entire ELCA must die to its idealistic image of who it wants to be and the structures it now has in place to support that image (theology of glory) and accept who it actually is with the full understanding that its time may have come and gone and that it is now time for a new creation (theology of the cross). Our governing documents embrace the ideas of creativity, interdependent expressions of the church and the priesthood of all believers, but our daily operations often do not.

For its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary the ELCA came up with the slogan “Always being made new” based on 2 Corinthians 5:17 “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new”. Indeed this is the intent and desire of many leaders across the church. But change is tricky, not only because it is difficult, but because the old model still exists in many places and is held by people who can’t or won’t change. Those children of God cannot be abandoned. Therefore, the church needs to find more ways to respect and care for those who will not make the change while simultaneously learning from the experimentation of those who are changing.

According to Van Gelder, this kind of systemic change cannot rely on a single process or group, rather we must “engage diverse perceptions of reality by drawing on a variety of methods that can inform the

discernment and decision-making process”.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Van Gelder described a framework for leading Christian communities through a communal discernment process that includes wide participation. Each participant approaches the matter from their own perspective and brings their own gifts. The discernment process includes theological reflection, but also uses data and theory relevant to each context in a way that allows each participant to take strategic actions with all of it culminating into an emerging identity that is Spirit lead, rather than human made. While the Future Directions effort underway is commendable because it involves wide participation, it is also limited because it doesn’t engage people in action as a result of our mutual discernment, and it doesn’t provide a mechanism to learn from those actions. Rather the end result will be another recommendation to church leaders.

Experimentation and communal discernment will be the most beneficial if their outcome is allowed to shape the larger ecology of the ELCA. For this reason, I suggest that the primary task of the churchwide organization is to adopt an adaptive culture so it can be changed by the many experiments happening throughout the ecology of the ELCA. The churchwide organization must do this while remaining accountable to God and the wider church which includes people from both models in every part of the denomination. In such a culture:

- Change takes place in the space between fear and hope. Adaptive cultures balance between the two, using the urgency created by fear and the promise of hope to move forward. These cultures keep people focused on God’s mission and intentionally and lovingly resist the natural pull toward the past. Leaders in the ELCA must artfully balance these two messages.
- A “holding environment” is created based on trust. In this environment, experimentation is encouraged and failure is not punished. Rather, intentional time is created to reflect on experiences so that learning and new innovation can take place.<sup>xxxv</sup>
- People at all levels of the Churchwide Organization are engaged, not as advisors, but as actors. People in authority don’t just listen to the people on the front lines and make decisions based on what they say. Rather, front line people have the freedom to act in the spirit of experimentation.
- Identity and vision bubble up from the grass roots. The organization doesn’t suggest, direct, decide or proclaim its new identity. Rather identity is revealed by the Holy Spirit and realized over time.
- Time and space are created for innovation. Right now the Churchwide Organization employs many of the best and brightest this church has to offer. Too often, those people are placed in positions where too many sensitive tasks are squeezed into too little time making them less effective than they could be. What if the system were restructured so that each person could have some time to pursue their own passions and ideas for improving the system? Many great ideas are already out there, but frustrated workers are unable to implement them because of the continuous crush of status quo work.<sup>xxxvi</sup>
- Collaboration is a primary means of work. Collaboration includes people from different levels, units and departments working together with other stakeholders. Often these stakeholders come from outside the organization. All participants in collaboration are given equal voice and power so that all can contribute equally. Collaborative groups work together to create a new thing that none of them could have created on their own. They are different than advisory

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*Create an adaptive culture  
carving out time for innovation*

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groups or task forces in that they don't work in order to advise someone else who can take action. Rather they bring all the resources of their organization (or department) to the table and have the authority to use them for the sake of the common good.

- Projects are designed to have early wins along the way and success is celebrated. This keeps momentum going and builds trust among partners.

The Future Directions Table and other lay and rostered leaders will be tremendously helpful if they can imagine ways to create such a culture in the churchwide organization itself. It will also be helpful to provide language that will assist churchwide staff in re-educating donors and other stakeholders so that expectations align more closely with a new culture. There are plenty of assets already in place from which this culture could be built. The philosophy of accompaniment lived out in the Global Missions unit the many assets of our ecumenical partners, Lutheran schools, colleges and seminaries, and the men's and women's and youth organizations affiliated with the ELCA all have gifts and wisdom that could be leveraged to help the ELCA "substantially rethink its institutional expressions and the scope of their mission" as Dr. Inskeep suggested.

## Conclusion

For too long the ELCA and mainline churches have obsessed over declining trends and waxed nostalgic over the church of the 1950s, trusting that returning there would renew the church to its former glory. In effect, we made an idol out of our idea of "successful" church and focused our energy toward pleasing that god, rather than looking forward to the new, amazing things God is doing all around us right now. When Martin Luther explained the first commandment he said, "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God."<sup>xxxvii</sup> If we are serious about responding to God's vocational call and spreading the Gospel in this post-modern age, the time has come for a new kind of intentional witness and action throughout the church. Rather than imagining the church as a place we go to – an institution to sustain, we can see the church as the Body of Christ – an incarnational presence whose nature is to go in the world heralding the good news of God's love and grace as it serves the neighbor.

Trusting in the Spirit of promise rather than the statistics of demise, we must reassert our love and faith in God over our faith in the ways of the world. That means we must let go of our worldly understandings of "success" and acknowledge that the day of this form of church may be over. It is only when we are willing to die to our own ideas of what church is that we will allow ourselves to be remolded by the Spirit. Just as God has reformed the church over thousands of years, we can trust that God will continue to re-form the church into the future.

Looking forward into the unknown can be terrifying, but also exciting and promising because the Spirit is alive and well, running amock. Remember what Paul wrote to the Philippians (4:5-7), "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, **will** guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Please join me in proclaiming this prayer from Ephesians 3:20-21:

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever." Amen!

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Kenneth Inskeep, "Priorities in Context: Sustainability and Membership Growth: A Background Paper for the Future Directions Tables" (ELCA, Chicago IL, December 2015).

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>iii</sup> David Briggs, "The 1 Percent in Mainline Protestantism? Congregations Attracting Young Adults," *Ahead of the Trend*.

<sup>iv</sup> Inskeep, "Priorities in Context: Sustainability and Membership Growth: A Background Paper for the Future Directions Tables."

<sup>v</sup> Dwight DuBois, "Vocation: From Worship to the World," *Living Lutheran*, no. May 2016 (2016).

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- <sup>vi</sup> I presented initial results at Hartford Seminary in November 2015 as part of a one day conference on the past, present and future directions of congregational and religious research. Visit <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/research.htm> to see the presentation slides.
- <sup>vii</sup> Linda Bobbitt, "Measuring Vitality Using Fact Items: Creation of the Fact Vitality Scale," Congregational Vitality Project, <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/Research/Creating%20FACT%20Vitality%20Scale.pdf>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Other denominations included United Church of Christ, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Seventh Day Adventists, and United Unitarian Association.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ronald A Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, vol. 465 (Harvard University Press, 1994); Ronald Abadian Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Harvard Business Press, 2009).
- <sup>x</sup> Renzo Hoogendoorn, "The Importance of Change Management (Group 2) Part 2," [http://www.adaptivecycle.nl/index.php?title=The\\_Importance\\_of\\_Change\\_Management\\_\(Group\\_2\)\\_Part\\_2](http://www.adaptivecycle.nl/index.php?title=The_Importance_of_Change_Management_(Group_2)_Part_2).
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- <sup>xii</sup> David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, vol. 16 (Orbis books, 1991).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> LIFT Task Force, "Report of the Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA Task Force," in *Report to the 2011 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA* (2011).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Diana Butler-Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon Virginia: Alban Institute, 2004).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Bass and Richmond, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*.
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- <sup>xxi</sup> Butler-Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*; Christian A Schwarz and Christoph Schalk, "Natural Church Development," *Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources* (1996). Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of Us Congregations* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).
- <sup>xxii</sup> From Peace Lutheran Church, Lauderdale MN
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Bobbitt, "Measuring Vitality Using Fact Items: Creation of the Fact Vitality Scale."
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Linda Bobbitt, "Factors Contributing to Congregational Vitality by Life Stage," in *Religious Research Association Annual Conference* (Newport CA2015).
- <sup>xxv</sup> DuBois, "Vocation: From Worship to the World."
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Daniel R. Anderson, ed. *Missional DNA of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity, edited by Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B> Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxix</sup> DuBois, "Vocation: From Worship to the World."
- <sup>xxx</sup> LIFT Task Force, "Report of the Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA Task Force."
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Linda Bobbitt, "Impact of Middle Judicatory Interventions on Congregations," in *Religious Research Association Annual Conference* (Newport CA2015). Also summarized here: <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/Research/Learnedsofar2015.pdf>
- <sup>xxxii</sup> LIFT Task Force, "Report of the Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA Task Force."
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> According to Ruben Duran, Director of New Missions in the Domestic Mission Unit of the ELCA
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Baker Books, 2007).

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<sup>xxxv</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Yochai Benkler, *The Penguin and the Leviathan: How Cooperation Triumphs over Self-Interest* (Crown Business, 2011).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, *The Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2002). p.386