

Congregational Vitality Project Background

This document describes the origin of the 15 vitality oriented items that were added to the parochial report.

[The quest for a better tool](#)

The 15 vitality items on the ELCA 2016 parochial report were developed as part of the Congregational Vitality Project.

This project began as the volunteer effort of Linda Bobbitt, who was vice president of the Rocky Mountain Synod from 2005-2013. After reviewing the literature and meeting with researchers at the Religious Research Association's annual meeting, Bobbitt concluded that none of the numerous ways of measuring a congregation's health or vitality met the ELCA's needs. The goal was to create an efficient, statistically robust instrument that describes congregational vitality beyond membership growth and financial sustainability.

[Defining the 'so what'](#)

The 'what'

Every approach to congregational vitality is based on an assumption about what really matters or the ultimate "so what." Most assume that if a congregation is growing numerically it is vital. Over emphasis on growth has taken root so that many congregational leaders equate growth with success. Yet, studies have shown that vital congregations aren't always growingⁱ and, in fact, congregations most likely have a "right size" beyond which growth may be counter-productiveⁱⁱ.

As an alternative to growth, some researchers have focused on identifying the "fruits" of a congregationⁱⁱⁱ. In this case, the "so what" is an expectation that a vital congregation will have deep relationships with God, each other and the world. This is the approach used by the Congregational Vitality Project.

The 'who' – individuals or congregations?

Once the "what" is known, the next question is who exhibits the "fruits" – the individuals or the congregation? Most agree that a vital congregation should have participants who are spiritually mature and who demonstrate a love for God and their neighbor. It is tempting to measure vitality by the percentage of congregants with these qualities, but ELCA Lutherans hesitate because we believe no one is ever perfect and that we don't become more holy by going to church. Additionally, members of a vital congregation should have a range of spiritual maturity levels, including those who are just discovering faith. What we should expect to see in a vital congregation is a collective commitment to God's presence and purpose, relationships that encourage faith seeking and using the gifts of all, a congregation that is an important part of its local community, and one that trusts in God's promised future. With this in mind, the Congregational Vitality Project chose congregations as the subject of the "what" rather than individuals.

Measuring vitality

To measure these concepts, several years of existing national survey data from ELCA congregations were used to see if multiple questions could be combined into a single survey that was a reliable and valid measure of vitality. Work demonstrating the soundness of this approach was presented at the Religious Research Association meeting in 2010.^{iv} Additional refinement and testing resulted in the Congregational Vitality Survey. A paper describing this work was presented at the 2011 Religious Research Association meeting and published in the Religious Research Review (a peer reviewed journal) in 2014.^v The 29-item survey proved to be highly reliable when tested as an every-member congregational survey in 73 congregations in seven ELCA synods. The survey asked respondents to rate the congregation (e.g. **this place** builds strong relationships among members) and their own experience within the congregation (**I feel** a sense of belonging). When participant scores from congregations were averaged, the resulting congregational scores were highly correlated with individual member's experiences. There were also significant correlations between the congregational scores and numeric growth and key informant's external ratings of the congregation. This means that congregations with higher scores tend to have more members who are connected with God, each other and the world. They are also more likely to be growing (but not always).

Using the Congregational Vitality Survey

The survey is primarily intended to assess vitality over time among congregations participating in different mission development strategies. The survey is not a program in and of itself and was not intended to take the place of programs designed to strengthen vitality (e.g. Natural Church Development, Holy Cow, etc.). In 2014, the Congregational Vitality Project became an official pilot program when the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit of the ELCA contracted with Bobbitt to coordinate the project and to continue the research. Four pilot synods were involved in using the survey in many of their congregations to get a baseline for congregations and inform synodical strategies. Synods found that taking the survey often ignited meaningful and productive conversations in congregations, and eventually some pilot synods requested a shorter survey that could be used with congregational leadership to introduce this approach to assessing vitality. A new study identifying 15 questions to serve as a reliable and valid measure of vitality was published in the Review of Religious Research.^{vi} Congregations found that using these questions to talk about connecting with God, each other and the world is considerably more productive than talking about why people are or aren't coming to church or giving more money.

Using the Congregational Vitality Survey on the annual report

The success of the survey in assessing vitality and its usefulness in producing substantive congregational discussions on vitality led to including items from the survey on the annual report form. We believe this development has the potential for:

1. Providing a way for congregations to routinely measure their vitality over time that goes beyond membership growth and financial sustainability.
2. Providing a way for congregations to engage leadership in an assessment of the congregation's vitality. This can be done by completing the questions on the annual report together as part of a congregation council meeting or with another leadership group and asking questions such as: How is the congregation doing on each of the items? Where does the congregation excel? Where could it do better?
3. Providing synods and the churchwide organization information about the strengths and challenges of congregations. This information could be used to connect congregations to share wisdom and

practices. Resources could be focused where there are needed most, and the survey could then study the impact of those resources to determine their effectiveness.

Over time the project will shift beyond measuring vitality toward measuring how to help congregations improve it in different contexts. This innovation is necessary because the U.S. culture has changed so dramatically that what worked in the past is no longer working. This project can help congregations understand how they can answer God's call in new ways to connect new people with God, each other and the world for the sake of God's redeeming mission.

ⁱ David Roozen, "Do Vital Congregations Necessarily Grow? What the Facts Say," (paper presented at the SSSR/RRA Annual Meeting, Phoenix, Az, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Peter Zaleski and Charles Zech, "The Optimal Size of a Religious Congregation: An Economic Theory of Clubs Analysis," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* Vol. 54, no. No. 4 (1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of US Congregations* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Diana Butler-Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2006).

^v "Healthy Churches. Nine Core Qualities," NCLS Research, www.ncls.org.us (accessed 12/1/09).

^{vi} Linda Bobbitt, "Measuring the Fruits of Congregations," in *Society for the Scientific Study of Religion/Religious Research Association Annual Conference* (Baltimore, Md., 2010).

^{vii} Linda Bobbitt, "Measuring Congregational Vitality: Phase 2 Development of an Outcome Measurement Tool," *Review of Religious Research* 56, no. 3 (2014).

^{viii} Linda Bobbitt, "Creating Shorter Scales to Measure Congregational Vitality," *ibid.* (2015).

www.elca.org/vitalityshortscales.