

Congregational  
Vitality Project



Synod Strategy  
First year update

June 2017

Congregational Vitality  
Project  
12000 N. Washington St.  
# 385  
Thornton CO 80241  
(303) 523-3144

6/2/2016

# Executive Summary

---

This report is a one year update on the 12 synod strategies that were funded by Campaign dollars. All synod strategies are designed to teach congregations the practices associated with adaptive change and vitality. While specifics vary, all synod strategies include an in-depth training for congregational teams of lay and rostered leaders. Some also include events or other resources. This report does not detail the specifics of each synod's strategy. Rather it provides a glimpse into the initial impact of these strategies from the perspective of the some of the early participants and strategy coordinators.

After one year, all but one synod had started training congregations. So far over 150 congregations have participated in at least one in-depth training event. The one synod that experienced a setback has since re-grouped, kicked off its first event, and plans to start the first in-depth training next fall.

While it is too early to evaluate the entire program, evaluations of some of the first congregations to complete their training indicate that most congregations experience significant shifts in missional attitudes and some have adopted new behaviors that are improving the overall vitality of the larger congregations. The degree of impact appears to be related to the initial state of the congregations and the degree to which they engaged the trainings. This report provides descriptions of the kinds of congregations involved and their learning objectives. Next it describes the lessons learned by participating congregations, often with their own words. Finally, it describes significant lessons learned by synods as well as areas for potential new learning.

---

## Background

---

In 2016, \$235,000 of campaign funds supported 12 synods' multi-year strategies for stirring up vitality within participating congregations. The twelve synods involved are: Alaska, Northwest Washington, Southwest Washington, Oregon, Southwest California, Western North Dakota, Western Iowa, Northwest Wisconsin, South-Central Wisconsin, Indiana-Kentucky, Upstate New York and North Carolina. These strategies are separate from Area Ministry Strategies or Fast Growth Congregation grants which also used campaign funds and were administered through the renewal grant program.

All synod strategies are designed to teach congregations the practices associated with adaptive change and vitality. While each strategy is different, every strategy includes an in-depth training for congregational teams of lay and rostered leaders. In all but one synod (North Carolina), leaders from 5-10 of congregations participated in trainings together forming cohorts. Cohorts typically meet between 2-4 times over 1-2 years with homework assigned to each congregation in between meetings. One exception is SW California's cohorts which meet 8 times in 18 months. Western Iowa suffered significant setbacks when their project coordinator and trainer died unexpectedly before the strategy



could be kicked off. After identifying and training new leaders, they launched an introductory event this spring and plan to start their first multi-year training in fall 2017.

In addition to an in-depth training, some synods used one-time training events to introduce congregational leaders to vitality principles and encourage them to join a cohort. South Central Wisconsin plans to host four one-time events, each with a different theme. At the time of this report the first event, focused on worship, was complete. Future events will train congregations in the areas of stewardship, cross-generational practices, and congregational leadership. North Carolina, took training to another level by implementing a 9-week intensive leadership training program for any lay or rostered leader. The first 9-week course focused on spirituality and prayer. Three additional courses are planned in the areas of leading congregations, faith in finances and sharing faith.

Beyond training events and cohort gatherings, several synods assign coaches to work with congregations between meetings. In several synods, the early months of this grant were used to identify and train coaches.

Because all of these efforts are experiments designed to help the ELCA learn how synods can best support congregational vitality, an evaluation plan was developed specifically for each synod and for the project overall. Appendix A is a rubric that outlines expected outcomes of synod events. A similar rubric was used to evaluate leadership training. Appendix B is a rubric outlining expectations of congregations that complete cohort training over multiple sessions. Each of these rubrics is organized with the outcomes on the left and the observed changes to the right under the colored boxes. Descriptions of the changes we expect to observe for each outcome are described in the boxes. The means of collecting data for these observations is described in the “measurement” column.

Out of the 150+ congregations engaged in these strategies so far, very few have completed their training. A previous study reviewed the initial 2013-2015 pilot in the Oregon synod. Lessons learned there were used to develop the current Oregon synod strategy which is now being implemented with three new cohorts across the state. These findings were also shared with the other 11 synods in hopes that their lessons could be used.

#### Oregon's pilot outcome study

In addition to this report, seven congregations from the Oregon pilot were studied in depth in late 2016. That report published here: <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/Blogs/OregonRpt.html>

This report reflects on feedback from synod strategy coordinators along with reflections from nine congregations other than to those from Oregon. These congregations come from synods that developed and initiated their strategy prior to this funding. The intent of this report is threefold. First it is to place the work of these synods in front of people to share how campaign dollars are being used. Second, it is intended provide early examples of how these strategies are impacting the lives of congregations. Finally, by exploring strengths and challenges within these strategies, we hope to learn from these experiences and make adjustments in future cohorts. This report is not intended to be a definitive



evaluation or judgment on the value of these kinds of interventions. With most congregations, still in the midst of the strategy, that kind of conclusion is premature.

## Objectives for congregations

Initial pilot projects (including the Oregon report cited above) have demonstrated that not all congregations are alike. Congregations need different strategies and can expect different outcomes depending on where they begin the journey. Below is a chart from Roxburgh and Romanuk describing the kinds of cultures present in congregations at different times in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Congregations move through this cycle beginning on the lower left when they are founded (new actions). They move up from left to right (performance organization) as they hit their stride in the blue zone. However, eventually the world changes and the things that worked well no longer achieve the same results. Eventually congregations move into the red zone, where they act as regulative agencies attempting to control their situation by holding on to what used to work until they can't any longer. Then comes the crisis where they finally come to terms with the new reality.

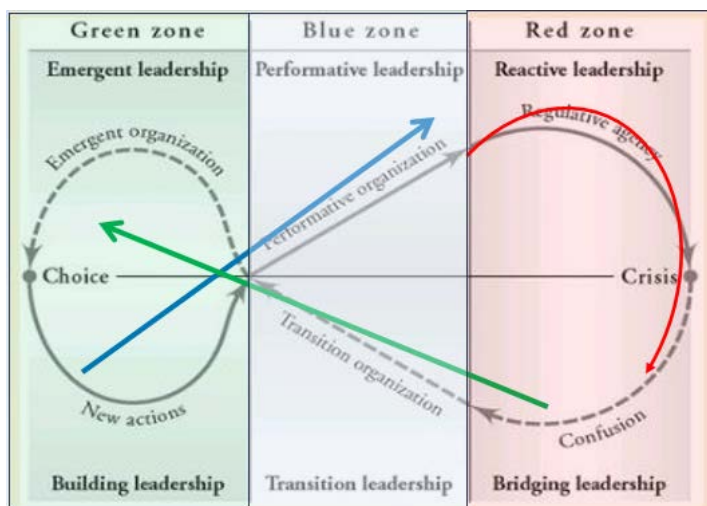


Figure 1: Three Zone Model of Missional Leadership

Some congregations choose to end their ministry at the time of crisis. Others decide to continue ministry which leads them to the bottom right (confusion) as they walk into the wilderness open to a new call from God and perhaps a new identity. This marks a period of adaptive change that moves them back across from the bottom right to the upper left (transition organization) until they reach the top (emergent organization) and the cycle continues. The authors describe the different leadership strategies and skills required for each stage.

Synod strategies work with congregations based on where they are in the change cycle. The congregations participating in current synod strategies are typically in the blue zone or the red zone. While adaptive change is essential for congregations in the red zone, even congregations in the blue zone are being influenced by substantial societal changes. These changes are forcing them to consider adaptive questions of identity and purpose earlier than they might have in times past. Some blue zone congregations already have a missional sense of purpose and are ready for the next thing. Other blue zone

<sup>1</sup> Roxburgh, Alan, and Fred Romanuk. *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*. Vol. 17, San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.



congregations feel like they are getting stuck or stale, especially as they approach the red zone. They need to change the kinds of things they do and renew their sense of call.

Red zone congregations have often lost touch with their sense of call and are typically focused on scarcity. Their imagination may be stuck reflecting on glory days of the past rather than looking toward a future that is contextually relevant. Their primary task is to deepen their trust in God and expand their imagination through an adaptive change process. This movement is illustrated in the diagram as moving from the red arrow to the green arrow. It should be noted that the movement goes through a stage of confusion where congregations are not sure what they are called to, but they are willing to trust God to lead them where they need to be. As they learn to trust God and experiment, new opportunities present themselves, imaginations are stretched and new ways of being church are born. Eventually these congregations may develop a new identity based on a new sense of what God is calling them to in their current context. This new identity may be quite different from the church they were before.

## Synod strategies

---

All synod strategies included some version of spiritual practice/discernment, listening within the congregation, listening to the congregation's neighbors with the hope of developing mutual relationships, experimenting (often around developing relationships with neighbors), and reflecting. While all strategies included these basic adaptive skills, their theoretical approach and actual practices varied. Some taught community organizing approaches emphasizing one-to-one conversations and focused collaborations with community stakeholders. Some taught mission planning using spiritual practices and listening to discern a missional purpose and develop a plan to achieve it. Other synods expected adaptive change practices to help congregation's sense of mission evolve. One synod used appreciative inquiry practices to identify gifts within congregations and their communities and then build on them.

To provide these trainings, some synods used synod staff (including the Director for Evangelical Mission), others used volunteers from inside the synod, while still others hired project coordinators, consultants, and/or coaches to work directly with congregations. Not all synods had the infrastructure available to begin recruiting or training congregations immediately. Some synods spent some the first-year recruiting and training trainers and coaches who could in turn train groups of congregations. The first year was also spent recruiting congregations to participate and customizing initial plans based on feedback from recruiting efforts and the actual needs of the congregations that agreed to participate.





## Summary of activity

---

This table indicates primary activities undertaken by each synod so far, along with the number of participants (either individuals or congregations depending on the activity). It also indicates the year the activity started. Sometimes activities occurred over a program year (i.e. 2015-2016). When synods had online material describing their strategy, those links were provided.

<b>Synod</b>	<b>Activities and participants</b>
<b>Alaska</b> <a href="#"><i>Rooted in Christ</i></a>	2016 built up trainers and developed program. October 2016 event – 43 people from 15 cong. Cohort: 4 congregations in 2017
<b>Northwest Washington</b> <a href="#"><i>Living Local</i></a>	Cohorts: 6 cong. in 2015, 2016 Reviewed outcomes, redesigned process based on lessons learned and implemented new plan in 2017 with 8 congregations.
<b>Southwest Washington</b> <i>Renewing, Rerooting and Reaching out</i>	Cohort: 12 cong. in 2017 (Funding began after most synods - August 2016)
<b>Oregon</b> <a href="#"><i>Transformation Leadership Initiative</i></a>	Cohorts: 7 cong. in 2013-15 (pilot), Reviewed outcomes, redesigned process and implemented new plan in Fall 2017 with 16 congregations across three cohort groups.
<b>Southwest California</b> <a href="#"><i>Living the Resurrection</i></a>	2016 revised plan based on feedback, built up trainers, recruited and held event at synod assembly. Cohort: 8 cong. in 2016
<b>Western North Dakota</b> <a href="#"><i>Congregational Renewal Cohort</i></a>	Cohorts: 7 cong. in 2015, 5 in 2016, 4 expected in 2017
<b>Western Iowa</b> <i>Helping Congregations Rediscover a Passion for Christ</i>	2016 developed trainers and process 2017 Spring event with 60 people November 2017 the first cohort will begin. Now recruiting up to 10 congregations.
<b>Northwest Wisconsin</b> <i>Healthy Leaders supporting healthy communities</i>	Cohorts: 10 cong. in 2016
<b>Indiana-Kentucky</b> <i>Connect</i>	Cohorts: (2 cohorts per year) 12 cong. in 2015-16, 9 in 16-17
<b>South–Central Wisconsin</b> <i>Connect</i>	Built up trainers and program based on IN-KY. 2016 event with 58 people Cohorts: 8 cong. in 2016, expect 7 in 2017
<b>Upstate New York</b> <i>Faith Formation Project</i>	2016 built up trainers and developed program. Cohorts: 5 cong. in 2016, 14 cong. in 2017
<b>North Carolina</b> <a href="#"><i>Congregational Renewal</i></a>	Developed collection of <a href="#"><i>best practices</i></a> from within the synod. Held leadership training but not in a cohort model. Congregations participate in two-year renewal process similar to other synods' cohorts. 22 cong. are participating at this time.
<b>Total congregations to date</b>	<b>165 congregations are participating in long-term (cohort) training or are about to start. More to come.</b>



# Impact

## Events

Alaska, South Central Wisconsin, Western Iowa, and North Carolina synods held one day events separate from cohort trainings. Afterward, congregations were asked to describe what they learned and how they planned to use that information in their congregation. The specificity of their response was rated using the rubric in Appendix B. In South Central Wisconsin, congregations were asked how they actually used the information a few months later. Below is a summary of the outcomes from congregations with events.

Synod/ Event	Number of Participants	Understanding of learning objectives	Plan for sharing information in their congregation	Plan to use information in their cong.	3 mo. follow-up
<b>Alaska – October Event</b>	43 participants from 15 congregations <i>(45% of all congregations in Alaska synod)</i> 12 respondents	75% clear 25% vague	83% clear 17% vague	75% clear 25% vague	n/a
<b>South Central Wisconsin MDMT event</b>	58 participants 18 respondents	83% clear 17% vague	Not asked	67% clear 33% vague	Of 6 resp. 5 did use it, 1 had not yet.
<b>Western Iowa Assembly workshop</b>	60 participants at synod assembly workshop in June 2017	Evaluation in process			
<b>North Carolina Bold like Jesus</b>	200 participants 72 responses	81% clear 19% vague		70% Clear 26% Vague 2 had no plan	n/a

### Leadership Training

<b>North Carolina Leadership training</b>	94 participants in 9-week course on spirituality and prayer practices 23 responses	61% gave clear descriptions of what they learned	39% showed expanded missional imaginations	43% named clear ideas for how to use the info.	30% named clear next steps
<p>This workshop was taught in one location and webcast to others. Technical problems interfered with many participant's experience. These could be resolved by small changes and better pre-testing. Several lay persons named new ideas and practices they learned. Local small group conversation enhanced the experience. Some pastors shared that they now know how to better accompany lay people in prayer and teaching spirituality.</p>					



## Cohort trainings

After congregations finish their multi-session, multi-year training, they are asked to complete a reflection. A summary of key findings from the reflections of 9 congregations are included below. Information comes from the following synods: 3 congregations from North Carolina, 3 from NW Washington plus annual report and summary of coach's reflections, 3 from Western North Dakota plus annual report, Alaska synod's annual report.

Reflections asked leaders about current practices, what they've learned, how they've changed and what challenges they face. All congregations described things they were learning and the challenges they were dealing with. None of the congregations had only successes or failures. The following quotes and stories are designed to help the reader understand the perspective of the two groups of congregations that synods typically work with: red zone and blue zone.<sup>2</sup> The stories show different kinds of learning and culture change under way in different kinds of congregations. Notice the kinds of shifts in missional imagination that people describe. Consider what this means about where these congregations are coming from and where they are now heading. Ask yourself what God is doing in, with and through these congregations.

### View from the Red Zone

Red zone congregations often struggle with a sense of scarcity, isolation from neighbors, weak leadership (especially, but not exclusively lay leaders) and limited capacity for adaptive change. They often have limited imaginations for ministry, weak connections with an active/present God, and a fear of failure. Much of the work with these congregations is around teaching the importance of spiritual practices and discernment, building relationships within the church and shifting attitudes about the need to be engaged with the neighborhood. The following stories and reflections illustrate the ways in which attitudes are shifting.

As part of a listening exercise one man asked a youth "what do you need around church"? The youth replied, "to be needed". From that came the idea for a "trunk or treat event" as an experiment run by youth. They estimated that 75 kids came by in a couple of hours. They got emails from many of their parents and plan to reach out around Christmas and Easter. They felt the event was successful.

"One experience was that people said we were more fun than they thought we were." "We are thinking less about how to get people in the pews and more about how we can meet people where they are."

This story shows a couple of things. First it is a lesson to the adult that the youth didn't need to be served, rather they needed to serve along with the adults in the congregation. Second, it

---

<sup>2</sup> Synod coordinators describe distinct differences in expectations while working with red and blue zone congregations, however the means for identifying the type of congregation for this report was limited. *Since the time of these reflections, synods are using a new readiness assessment tool.* For this study, red zone congregations included any groups with an initial Congregational Vitality Survey score under 4 while blue zone congregations were those over 4. The one congregation that had not taken the vitality survey was included as a blue congregation because their average worship attendance was over 100.





illustrates how the congregation's attitude about the neighborhood is changing. They are beginning to shift from seeing neighbors only as potential members (who will come in and give money to support the church) toward seeing them as people with whom they may have other kinds of relationships. This does not mean evangelism isn't important, it only means it isn't about selling the church, rather it is about inviting people into relationship and allowing themselves to be invited into relationships outside their walls.

The following story is from a small red zone congregation with an average worship attendance of 40.

We didn't go and create something new, we saw something going on in the community and joined them there. Twenty people went. They took it very seriously, and spent an hour and a half talking about it afterward. Comments included: "I was able to see God in our experiment when we went to the school to help them prepare for the start of the school year. God was in the helping hands, and just by being present with others, not to convert them, but to be with them. Our experiment helped us to be more present in our community, something we have not done very well because many of us are commuters to this church." Another said, "Experimenting is just going out and not having to promote our church was important. We're out there where God wants us to be and God is blessing us there in those places too. I have to trust God to keep this experimenting, "going out", going, and trust that God can work when it isn't about God."

These quotes reveal some people's experience of an active God who wants them to be engaged and who is already in the community. It also reveals an increased trust in God. Other research demonstrates the importance of congregations understanding that God is active and present both in their congregation and in their community. These are very exciting lessons which are key to longer term renewal.

Here are other quotes from reflections of red zone congregations in multiple synods:

About God:

- God was shaking us up out of our stuckness; and hugging us into a future of experimentation and collaboration.

About listening, relationships and experimenting:

- We used to just do a lot of stuff, and now we see the importance of listening to others.
- We were surprised that when people were asked about where they see God, they responded in their relationships. We were expecting people to say things about the church.
- I don't think we even listen to the people beside us even in the pew. Maybe we can start learning how to be in relationship with each other, maybe this will help us to be more present with our neighbors. Perhaps this could be a congregational experiment. We have come to recognize that *spiritual practice* is an important part of this process.
- We learned that talking to people is much more valuable than sending emails. (after an email survey failed.)



- Our experiment helped us to learn that listening and getting to know others is an important way for understanding and living with our neighbors.
- The parents of the (*congregation run preschool*) said they wanted to be part of an event we were doing. In fact, the school parents wanted to introduce themselves to us and the church, and they wanted to make meals for this gathering. And we said great! This process helped us to see this response from the parents of the school board as a way we were receiving hospitality from strangers.
- Experimenting was tough, but now we're much more open to experimenting.
- We were asked to design an experiment in the summer and that was hard. In the end, our experiment failed but we still learned a lot. It took us getting used to trying new things that helped us realize we can even try new things without being afraid.

About reflecting:

- Reflecting is hard work. We're still learning how to do this among our congregation, how to lead it, how to work with others to incorporate it into our life together.

About the overall process:

- This process helps you to be who you are as church.
- We realize that many of our attempts to involve our congregants in this process were unsuccessful, but we have noticed a marked difference in how our congregation thinks about the community around us.
- What I got out of our (cohort) meetings was the support of what we could then experiment with here in this place. Hearing what was going on with others. Knowing that other churches were going on with others was very helpful. We don't want to lose touch with these people; we don't want to stop this work.
- In council now they ask "what are we doing for the community?". And this question wouldn't have been received previously because they only looked inside. We're beginning to see the door opened up.
- We used to think that going out as church was about doing, now we are starting to see that it is about being with others, and seeing God there.
- Comments from an interviewer gathering the reflection: this congregation is being "dragged into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by *this strategy*", learning to use Bible studies in new ways, awakening to the need to be friends within the community and "hopeful about what will come next". This is one of the places where awareness and attitudes have shifted but not yet behavior.

Advice these congregations would give to others considering the process:

- Be open to change. You will learn a great deal about your neighbors, neighborhoods and each other.
- It's an opportunity for the congregation to look outward not just inward.
- You will learn how to listen to each other.
- You can still learn something even if it falls apart and completely fails.



- Don't be afraid to go outside the walls of the church.

When the four red zone congregations were reviewed using the rubric in Appendix A, none of the red zone congregations were able to engage all the practices listed at the top (spiritual, listening, discerning, reflecting) in ways that changed their decisions. However, one of them embraced spiritual and listening practices and was beginning to engage experimenting and reflecting. Another embraced experimenting without spiritual practices. In their reflection, they said, "We have come to recognize that this is an important part of the process." One congregation learned the most from their reflections on their failures. Another could do very little because of internal conflict and fear. Yet even there, some improvements were made because the conflict was identified and intentionally addressed.

When shifts in missional imagination were considered on the 7-point scale<sup>3</sup>, one congregation was struggling with resistance to change which prevented growth. Another is beginning to see shifts in attitudes but not yet behaviors, and the final congregation experienced a shift in attitudes followed by the beginnings of new behaviors.

When synod coordinators talk about working with these congregations, they share how slow it is and how it can be frustrating at times because the congregations don't appear to be using what they are taught. However, some coordinators have also shared stories of how these same congregations returned a year or two after the training with signs of change and readiness for next steps. One coordinator described working with these congregations as "planting seeds".

### **View from the Blue Zone**

Most congregations presently participating in synod strategies appear to be in the blue zone. Blue zone congregations feel healthier and are less concerned about immediate sustainability. Some see these trainings as a way of strengthening their sense of mission and moving to the next thing. Others have become disconnected from a sense of mission and are beginning to move into the red zone.<sup>4</sup> They are looking for the Holy Spirit's energy but they are also sometimes a bit more reluctant to give up on things that used to work because they are not yet desperate.

The following quotes come from the reflections of blue zone congregations across multiple synods:

About God:

- We used to believe that our resources were too scarce to share. Now we understand that God's blessings are too abundant not to share.

---

<sup>3</sup> Page two of Appendix B

<sup>4</sup> It may be that they have entered the red zone despite their vitality survey score of 4.



- We used to think that a fancy building in a growing area was the ultimate gift. Now we realize that God has given us unique gifts of our own.
- We used to have no idea who we were or why we were here, now we are growing slowly toward a language of faith and an ability to express that we have a responsibility to spread the good news of Jesus to others.
- We used to think it didn't matter what we did or if we did anything outside our doors, now we know we are called to be part of the community and God calls us to go outside our doors to serve.
- We used to be nervous about saying or doing too much because someone might get offended. Now we see that God has united us through service.

#### About leadership and congregational culture:

- We used to be afraid to talk about the future, but now we are more willing to see who we are and what will happen if we refuse to talk about it.
- I used to believe the pastor should develop the ministry, now I invite the congregation to develop and support choices and efforts of ministry that expand mission.
- We used to think nothing would change, now we know the only way things will change is if we help them change.
- We have changed focus from the original church that was formed in the 80's who kept everything internal and controlled, to a more flexible and adaptable group who are willing to be more open and reach out into the community for mission.
- I used to think programs solved problems, but now I understand that people involved in mission find new opportunities.
- There used to be heaviness, a somberness in the church community. Now there is a lightness, a positive energy in the church community.
- There was growth in the team in prayer, scripture reading and reflection, and expressing faith. The team leader really grew in noticing the world around him, stopping to consider that God's love is for all, even those unaware. He grew tremendously personally in this process.

#### About listening, relationships and experimenting:

- We used to be unaware of members' perceptions and dreams, but, with the help of the survey, the mission study and intentional conversations, we now have some idea of where people are.
- People are realizing the gifts God has given this congregation. We started a garden ministry that came out of people realizing that they understood farming/gardening and that the congregation owns about 13 acres of land. It has been fun to watch people discover more and more of their gifts and come back with great ideas!
- We used to have a NOT welcoming feeling between younger and older generations, now we are building bridges between generations.



- We used to have very critical people making negative remarks about everything including pastors. Now we seem to be more at peace and positive.
- There used to be real hesitancy toward engaging the wider community. Now there seems to be an eagerness to get the word out and participate in the shared life of the wider community.
- The (*congregation's*) website has been dramatically improved in the past year, and is kept up-to-date. Newsletters (e-) mailed monthly (even in the summer).

About the overall process:

- *We have* “been reorganizing over the past four years and are now able to contribute lessons learned to the larger *cohort* community. Our engagement in the strategy allows us to move forward in being renewed and reorganized again and again through the agitation of these relationships.
- The budgeting process may be changing for the upcoming year to be more mission focused.
- Wow! We can hear God speaking to us! Through dreams, visions, prayers, bible study, we can hear God’s call for us now. We experienced God’s leading us toward something new and it is powerful.

When the five blue zone congregations were reviewed using the rubric in Appendix A, two of them had engaged at least three of the four practices in a major way. The other three had engaged some of them in a minor way and some not at all.

When shifts in missional imagination and behavior were considered, two of them struggled with resistance that is holding the wider congregation back, two demonstrated shifts in missional attitudes but not yet behaviors, and the final congregation experienced both shifts in attitudes and behaviors. Time will tell what impact these shifts have on other aspects of ministry.

### **Challenges experienced**

Even though every congregations could point to good experiences and hopeful initial outcomes, all of them also experienced challenges. This process requires a lot of work and emotional energy. Nearly every synod has had a few congregations drop out of the process before it began. For those that continued, the required change always elicited a reaction, and sometimes these responses slowed things down, caused congregations to drop-out midway, or caused the work to stop until something changed (e.g. new team members or pastor).

The following issues were raised when teams were asked what might hold them back from continuing this work:

- **FEAR:** Fear of talking to people outside the congregation. Fear of the influence people outside the congregation might have on them. Fear of bringing out conflicts that are hidden. Fear of change.
- Apathy on the part of the renewal committee. One renewal process went into a holding pattern when their committee said, “Let’s stop, things are going well.”





- Councils or congregations who expect the pastor and/or staff to do all the work.
- Pastors that have not completely bought in or who aren't willing to make substantial changes.
- Difficulty addressing resistance within the congregation – especially from informal leaders.
- Difficulty getting broad participation across the congregation.
- Lack of financial resources and/or people to implement some ideas.

Here are some quotes illustrating some of the obstacles encountered:

- “According to the vitality survey we have conflict, but no one wants to talk. I was told people were wondering who caused the conflict.”
- “This NEEDS to be staff and council support and attention. This process was so much harder because the council was either not supportive or indifferent to the process, and the staff did not have the time to spend addressing Renewal issues during the process.”

## Lessons learned by synods

---

In their annual reports and in conversations with me, synod strategy coordinators reflected on lessons they have learned so far. Below are common examples:

- This process is slow. It may take years to see substantial shifts, especially in red zone congregations. However, seeds planted early on do often bear fruit two or more years later. Patience is warranted.
- There is a lack of necessary leadership capacity in many lay and rostered leaders (e.g. decision making, deep listening, setting and achieving goals, collaboration, having difficult or emotional conversations, big picture thinking, etc.).
- Expanded missional imagination and increased missional behavior do not necessarily lead to increased sustainability in the form of more people or financial resources. Issues of sustainability may need to be addressed more intentionally and directly.
- Some congregations fail to take spiritual practices seriously or see it as critical piece of their work. Without sound, spiritual practices little progress is made.
- Congregations that fail to fully engage discernment, listening, experimenting and reflecting experience less transformation than those that do.
- Congregations must be intentional and work hard to get the lessons learned by the team into the regular practice of the larger congregation. Resistance is to be expected, intentionally planned for, and addressed repeatedly over time.
- The action, reflection model of teaching seems to work with most congregations.
- Congregations with low internal trust or dysfunctional patterns have difficulty succeeding and may be harmed by this process because the it requires intentional change which raises tension even in healthy settings.
- It is hard to keep the momentum going over the course of these strategies. It is hard for congregations to make this a top priority rather than one more thing.



# Opportunities for mutual learning

---

Synod strategy coordinators described areas where they are still learning:

1. How to best introduce this opportunity and generate interest with congregations.
2. Determine criteria that should be used to selection congregations. (Readiness)
3. How to work with leadership teams that do not have basic leadership skills.
4. Coaches – training, relationships with congregations, recruiting, supervision, etc.
5. Curricula pacing – how much can folks absorb when?
6. How to vary curricula based on developmental zone.
7. What are realistic expectations for congregations starting in different places?
8. How to help leadership teams engage their larger congregation in change process.
9. How to help congregations maintain energy, intentionality and engagement throughout the process.
10. How synods can build capacity so that coordination and training can move beyond synod staff.
11. How synods can help congregations keep up their energy throughout the process.
12. How do synods remain open to emerging models of church resulting from this project? How can those models be used to generate different definitions of success?
13. How synods can sustain or grow these opportunities over time, particularly if grant funding is reduced or eliminated after the campaign?
14. How synods can learn from one another.
15. How this information can be shared with new synods and new DEMs.

While the strategies described in this report have had clear positive impacts on congregations, they have yet to transform the participating congregations into vital centers of mission. It is understood that transformation takes years and that the positive changes described in this paper can lead to transformation. But it is also clear that some congregations and synods experienced set-backs that require reflection and re-tooling.

Congregations are not the only ones in the ELCA's ecosystem that need adaptive change. Synods and the churchwide organization must also engage the same practices of discernment, listening, experimenting and reflection to experience shifts in their missional imagination so that they can better join God and our congregations in the world. This paper hopes to be one step toward listening and reflecting on these experiments, however more relational work is needed. Now that every synod has had some experience working with congregations, the time may be right to bring them together to reflect on what God is doing and learn from one another before the next round of cohorts begins next fall.



# Appendix

## Appendix A: Event Project Evaluation Rubric

After each training, ask members to answer two questions: what have you learned, and what are your next steps (or some variation of those questions). Collect the responses and ask someone in the synod to read the answers and mark each response using the rating sheet in Attachment 1. Total the marks in teach box. The total responses in each row should equal the total number of participants.

Key Categories of Focus	Measurement	Evidence that the Difference is occurring in a MAJOR way	Evidence that the Difference is occurring, but in a MINOR way	Evidence that the Difference has yet to happen
<b>Leaders articulate what they learned</b>	Answer to 2 open ended questions (immediately after or at the end of training)	Leaders describe what they have learned in clear, specific terms. What they learned corresponds with what was taught.	Leaders have vague ideas of what they learned or describe things not taught in class.	Leaders are not able to describe what they learned.
<b>Leaders have clear ideas of how to implement</b>	Answer to 2 open ended questions (immediately after or at the end of training)	Leaders articulate clear next steps	Leaders articulate vague next steps	Leaders don't articulate next steps.

### Event Project Follow-up

Two months after each training, ask participants to answer the following question: Please describe how you have used \_\_\_\_\_ training. (give specific examples of what you have done). Collect the responses and ask someone in the synod to read the answers and mark each response using the rating sheet in Attachment 1. Total the marks in teach box. The total responses in each row should equal the total number of people who responded to the follow-up.

Date of follow-up: \_\_\_\_\_ Number responding: \_\_\_\_\_

Key Categories of Focus	Measurement	Evidence that the Difference is occurring in a MAJOR way	Evidence that the Difference is occurring, but in a MINOR way	Evidence that the Difference has yet to happen
<b>Leaders implement next steps</b>	Follow-up survey & reflection 3 months later?	Leaders can name specific steps they have taken	Leaders implemented started planning but have not yet implemented action plan	Leaders did not implement training.

## Appendix B: Measuring Progress Cohort Rubric

Key Categories of Focus	Measurement	Evidence that the Difference is occurring in a MAJOR way	Evidence that the Difference is occurring, but in a MINOR way	Evidence that the Difference has yet to happen
<b>Spiritual practices</b>	Reflection	Leaders describe that spiritual practices have become part of congregational life and are now informing their continued work.	Spiritual practices happen but it does not appear to be informing their work.	No regular spiritual practice yet
<b>Listening</b>	Reflection	Leaders describe listening activities they've done that are now informing their continued work.	Listening activities have happened but are not yet being used to inform work.	No listening activities have taken place yet.
<b>Experimenting</b>	Reflection	Leaders describe experiments they've done that are now informing their continued work.	Experiments have happened but are not yet used to inform work.	No experimentation have taken place yet.
<b>Reflecting</b>	Reflection	Leaders describe reflections they've done that are now informing their continued work.	Reflections have happened but are not yet used to inform work.	No reflections have taken place yet.
<b>Clear Purpose within God's mission &amp; path forward</b>	Reflection	Congregation can articulate their mission/purpose and has clear next steps.	Vague mission/purpose and/or vague next steps.	Congregation cannot articulate a sense of mission/purpose.
<b>Expanded Missional Imagination</b>	Use reflection score sheet with 1-7 scale (afterward)	Leaders describe shifts in missional imagination and behaviors. (score of 6-7)	Progress in attitudes and some behaviors but transformation incomplete. (score 4-5)	No shift in imagination, little or no God language. (score 1-3)
<b>Increased engagement in local context</b>	Reflection	Leaders describe concrete ways they now engage with their context in a subject to subject manner.	Some local connections but still subject/object, transactional or purely attractional.	No new activities.
<b>Deeper cong. connections with God, each other, world</b>	Congregational Vitality Survey at beginning of process and the end. Annually after <i>(Measures people in pews)</i>	Vitality scores all over 4 or improved from pre-test. Increases in specific practices or specific scores. (TBD)	Some improvements, but not significant from time 1 to time 2	Do change or decrease
<b>New Leadership</b>	Reflection	New lay leaders are named and specific roles they've played are identified	Lay leaders are named but haven't played leadership role yet	No new leaders identified
<b>Worship attendance</b>	Annual report: Average worship attendance	Worship attendance increases more than 5% and congregations have enough people to participate in ministry.	Congregations are holding steady in attendance.	Worship attendance decreases more than 5%
<b>Generous Giving</b>	Annual Report: % shared with synod, income/expenses of congregation	Congregations experience increased contributions from members. Congregations increase percentage given to synod.	Some improvements, but not significant from time 1 to time 2	Congregations' expenses are higher than income.



## Seven-point change in missional imagination and behavior

These characteristics describe a continuum of change that congregations may experience.

1. The congregation is moving in the wrong direction in both attitude and behavior.
2. The congregation is stuck in an old or unhealthy model. No appreciable movement in attitudes or behaviors. No willingness or ability to work to work on these things at this time. It may be the wrong time for this congregation to participate.
3. The congregation is struggling with resistance. Some positive steps have been taken, however the struggle has prevented significant, steady growth. Change is needed (resistance overcome) before they will be able to move forward.
4. There has been positive change in attitude, but it is not yet reflected in behaviors. They appear to be moving in the right direction without enough resistance to derail the process.
5. There has been positive movement in both attitudes and behaviors or practices, but the transformation is incomplete to date.
6. This congregation has been transformed from an older or unhealthy model to a new model.
7. This congregation began the process from a healthy model and continues in that model. They may have grown by sharing their story with others.

