

Five Characteristics of Vibrant and Thriving Congregations

#1: A Compelling Sense of Mission that is Driven by the Gospel

- People in a vibrant congregation are clear about their identity as followers of Jesus Christ.
- This identity is what motivates their particular ministries and gives them a sense of direction as a congregation. It tells them who they are (identity), what they are called to do (mission) and where they are going (vision).
- Without this clarity about “who we are” and “what do we want to do when we grow up”
 - Some people work really hard to grow while others are afraid that growth will destroy the things that are important to them in the congregation
 - Some people will make decisions based on their desire to stay in a familiar building rather than entertain the possibility of ministry elsewhere.
 - Groups in the church may work, unintentionally, at cross purposes, getting nowhere but frustrated.
 - Worse, people are immobilized to take a common step into a future God has for them.

In congregational life, we sometimes believe that we can be all things to all people.

The truth is that no congregation, regardless of size, can fill that bill.

So, vital congregations

- Know who they are
- Where they are going and why
- They know how to assess their strengths and then play to those strengths
- They know how they intend to proclaim the gospel in their location
- They organize all activities—worship, evangelism, fellowship, education, and outreach based on their clear sense of purpose.

#2 A Membership Church or a Discipleship Church

A Membership Church

- “Membership” in a congregation or denomination is a recent idea that flourished in the U.S. in the 20th century with the rise of civic clubs, boy and girl scouts, sports clubs, etc.
- Membership implies belonging to a group where certain benefits and privileges are granted or certain services are provided to the membership clientele.
- This causes us to think of ourselves as belonging, not to the body of Christ but about belonging to “First Church at the Corner of Main and Central.”
- It has caused people to shop around to find the church that provides just the right goods and services for their particular needs.

- The pastor can begin to be treated as the “hired Christian.”
- Stewardship and tithing can be seen as payment for service or as membership dues.

Discipleship Church

- The first churches existed to make more disciples not to serve its members.
- They follow “The Great Commission” Jesus’ directive to
 - go into all the nations to teach people to follow in his ways
 - to tell people the stories of God’s love and redemptive work in the world
 - to show people how to be disciples of the one named Christ
 - Has very little to do the comfort of a church that serves the needs of the disciples and everything to do with challenging the disciples to go and meet the needs of people in strange and foreign communities (which are increasingly found right at our doorstep!)
- Focuses of the church is on outward mission rather than internal caretaking.
- Asks people to know the identity, needs and “culture” of its neighborhood and then mobilize resources to bring the gospel alive in ways that context.
- Asks people to risk the safety and ease of what they’ve known
- It acknowledges the great fear in taking this risk and doesn’t promise that there won’t be missteps along the way.
- But it promises that Jesus will go with the congregation

The Great Commission

Matthew 28:19-20, *The Message* translation

“Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism...and instructing them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.”

#3: Contextual Relevance

The desires and direction of the people in vibrant congregation is linked to living out ministry in a way that is completely compatible with the demographics and unique opportunities of the area in which the church is located.

- Mission and vision are shaped by context. One size ministry does not fit all neighborhoods, communities, or cities.
- The church seeks to meet the needs of the community it serves.
- Session and other decision making bodies are flexible and innovative in order to do new ministry
- The way the church speaks (from signage, to worship, to identity statements, to language spoken by the pastor and leaders) speaks to the hearers in the larger community in way that are compelling, draw people in, and serve real need.

In other words:

Vital congregations

- Understand their surroundings.
- Understand that what was once a vital ministry might no longer fit
- Understand that new possibilities for ministry emerge and they adapt to these new opportunities in ways that are flexible.
- They are hospitable to people and ideas that are different from what has always been done.
- Claim a mission that they can be really good at and that is relevant to their context.
- They move forward into the opportunity God gives them.

#4: Passion and Energy

This mark of vital congregations has to do with the level of enthusiasm expressed by leaders and members of a congregation for its ministry.

- In various expressions of church life—Worship, Stewardship, Outreach, Evangelism--these congregations walk with a spring and a purpose.
- Passionate congregations are made up of passionate people whose faith makes a difference in their daily lives.
 - They have an ability and desire to share their faith journey with people joined in common mission.
 - They are willing to share their story with words and actions that show that God is alive and well in their midst.
 - They look to MAKE new disciples of Jesus Christ and not just welcome existing disciples.
 - They help people LIVE a lifestyle of Christian witness.

Vital congregations have a passion that energizes a “movement” of people toward a common mission.

#5: Have the Resources and are able to Mobilize those Resources for a Common Mission

Resources vary from congregation to congregation. They can include:

Available Financial and Capital Resources

- Sufficient income streams to fund the mission the congregation is passionate about.
 - They do not regularly run deficit budgets or depend on endowments for operational expenses.
- Their space (building) supports the needs of their ministry rather than sapping their resources.

Inspiring or Empowering Lay and Clergy Leadership

- Leaders are prepared, know what is expected of them, and are able to work in a team effort to accomplish goals
- Often have visionary pastoral leaders who are both hands-on and know when to delegate.
- The leaders of the congregation have skills and the right kind of training to be empowered to lead ministry. They
 - can articulate the vision, create strategies to carry out the vision, and mobilize and train people to share in the implementation
 - can move groups of people to clear decisions in timely and appropriate ways
 - are chosen for their gifts and skills as a match to particular leadership positions
 - know and agree on what their job is and are trained (are prepared and have the knowledge) to carry out the role

Relational and Spiritual Health Among the People of the Congregation

Where there is a high level of conflict among members, where there is a low level of trust, and where there are cumbersome decision-making processes, mobilization of resources toward a common mission is difficult. Vital congregations are not conflict-free, but they can

- Move to decisions quickly and resolve differing opinions without losing the commitment of the participants.
- Threats of split, game-playing, manipulative leadership, secretive politics do not dominate decision making processes
- Ask not what the majority wants, but instead ask “What does God intend for us in this time and place?”