

7 Marks of Vital Congregations (even during a pandemic) Mark #1: Lifelong Discipleship Formation

Share in reading aloud the entire scripture texts and quotes below:

Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 11:18-21 “ . . . what does the LORD require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, and to serve the LORD . . . ”

Matthew 25 “Be prepared (25:1-13). . . put your resources to work (25:14-30) . . . live out your faith through actions (25:31-46) Ellen Sherby, *Mission Crossroads*, Fall 2020

The church’s job is to till the soil, prepare the heart, ready the mind, still the soul, and stay awake so we notice where God is on the move, and follow. -Kendra Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*

*Christian “discipleship” or “spiritual formation” is training for apostleship, training for mission. From this understanding we place **less** emphasis on . . . lineage, rites, doctrines, structures, and terminology . . . and **more** emphasis on . . . actions, service, outreach, kindness, and effectiveness.* -Brian McClaren – *A Generous Orthodoxy*.

Lifelong Discipleship Formation = “from cradle to grave, seeking to be formed for right living with God and with all people, . . . being awakened and engaged in issues facing today’s cultures. Versus: complacent Christian piety, simply teaching good morals, or offering the latest educational programs. PCUSA VCI Manual

Sample Reflection and Discussion questions:

- 1) Revitalizing often requires adjusting to new circumstances and using different words.
 - a. What did you think of when you heard the phrase “Lifelong Discipleship Formation”? How else could you define this mark?
(i.e., “faithful living,” “disciplines of faith”)
 - b. What parts of the scripture and quotes above speak to your experience of “faithful living” during the pandemic?
- 2) In what ways has your life journey or faith grown?
- 3) In what ways does or could our congregation enable people of all age levels to grow in their faith and put their faith into action?

7 Marks of Vital Congregations (even during a pandemic) Mark #2: Intentional Authentic Evangelism

Share in reading aloud the entire scripture texts and quotes below:

Psalm 96:2-9 *“Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. . . .”*

2 Corinthians 4:6-10 *“ . . . But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that his extraordinary power belong to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; . . .”*

“Intentional Authentic Evangelism vs. ‘Jesus freaks’; Christian hypocrisy; a committee responsibility. . . . but instead means relational sharing of the Christian faith as it is intrinsic to one’s self-identity and behavior.” -PCUSA VCI Manual

“Reminding someone that they are Beloved seems to be about the best thing one human can do for another.”- Lolly Bargerstock

“ . . . The Christian should proselytize not because they think they can change everybody; they should proselytize because the Gospel (the good news of God’s love) being shared is the ultimate act of love: . . . “Criss Jami, Healology.

Sample Reflection and Discussion questions:

- 1) Revitalizing often requires adjusting to new circumstances and using different words.
 - a. What did you think of when you heard the words “Intentional Authentic Evangelism”? How else could you define this mark?
(i.e., “Sharing the Gospel,” “Reveal God’s Love”)
 - b. What parts of the scripture and quotes above speak to your experience of “Intentional Authentic Evangelism" during the pandemic?
- 2) In what ways does or could our congregation enable people of all age levels to grow in revealing God’s love to others?
- 3) What people in your life know that you are a person of faith? Are there others that you wish you could share your faith journey with?

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Mark #3: Outward Incarnational Focus

Share in reading aloud the entire scripture texts and quotes below:

Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 11:18-21 “ . . . what does the LORD require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, and to serve the LORD . . . ”

Matthew 25 “Be prepared (25:1-13). . . put your resources to work (25:14-30) . . . live out your faith through actions (25:31-46)

“Outward Incarnational Focus” is outward exploration, awareness, and focus on neighbors and neighborhoods. Beyond relationship with those who are like us, the incarnate Christ dwells among the lowly and least, the stranger and the suffering, the marginalized and majority. This focus stands against inward institutional survival and closed communities of assimilation and exclusion.-PCUSA Office of VCI

The stranger is not simply one who needs us. We need the stranger if we are to know Christ and Serve God in truth and love. Hospitality means inviting the stranger into personal space (physical of awareness/concern). Our private space is then enlarged and gives us a chance to see our own lives through different eyes. –John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality, Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission.*

Every congregation is both called and sent; the call gathers us to hear, understand and accept our vocation, which is that we are sent into the world for the sake of the gospel. As against of God’s reign, churches engage the people and powers of their context.-Mark LauBranson, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership.*

Sample Reflection and Discussion questions:

- 1) Revitalizing requires adjusting to new circumstances.
What parts of the scripture and quotes above speak to your experience of “Outward Focus” during the pandemic?
- 2) What evidence do you see in our congregation of turning inward instead of outward in our different ministries? Has this changed during the pandemic? How? What prevents you from going where God may send you? What tempts you to focus inward?
- 3) In what ways does or could our congregation focus more on those people who are not participating in our fellowship? How do you feel about those who might tune in virtually to worship, but not come to our facility following the pandemic?

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Mark #4: Empower Servant Leadership

Share in reading aloud the entire scripture texts and quotes below:

John 13:2-17 *“ . . . so if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ”*

Ephesians 4:1-16 *“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”*

“Empowering servant leadership . . . is nurturing the use of the gifts of all people to serve . . . because all voices and people are necessary. . . . This focus stands against perspectives that support ideas like ‘it’s the Pastor’s job’; monopolized leadership; hiring the young energetic pastor; and burning out good volunteers.”-PCUSA Office of VCI

“The church of Jesus Christ is not short of leaders. The Church of Jesus Christ is short of people who are willing to be servants” –Rodger Nishioka, Rooted in Love.

“The one who is fully like us, who deeply understands our joys and pains or hopes and desires, and who is willing and able to walk with us, that is the one to whom we gladly give authority and whose “Subjects” we are willing to be. It is the compassionate authority that empowers, encourages, calls forth hidden gifts, and enables great things to happen. –Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey

Sample Reflection and Discussion questions:

- 1) Revitalizing requires adjusting to new circumstances.
What parts of the scripture and quotes above speak to you about “servant leadership” during a time of quarantine and distancing?
- 2) What evidence have you seen or heard in our congregation of expecting only the pastor, the youth minister, or special experienced volunteers to take the lead? Has this changed during the pandemic? How? What prevents you from serving where you may be needed? What tempts you to say “yes” when there are others who could be asked to help?
- 3) In what ways does or could our congregation empower more servant leaders? How do you or others might feel about sharing leadership in situations that has often been “your or their job”?

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Mark #5: Spirit-Inspired Worship

Share in reading aloud the entire scripture texts and quotes below:

Micah 5:6-8 *“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you; but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

First Corinthians 13:1-13 . . . *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; . . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”*

“Spirit-inspired worship . . . is standing on holy ground, encountering God, and experiencing wonder. It challenges, teaches, transforms, convicts, and sends people out different. It is not self-gratifying, stale ritual divorced of meaning, or consumer entertainment. -PCUSA Office of VCI

*“the changing contemporary culture demands mainline Protestant worship move from providing rational responses to experiential ones, from a few representatives leading the congregation to broader participation, from being word-based to being image-driven, from isolate individualism to worship that promotes community. -Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader**

*“It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” -Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk**

Sample Reflection and Discussion questions:

- 1) Revitalizing requires adjusting to new circumstances.
What parts of the scripture and quotes sticks with you?" How do you feel about the virtual or distancing worship requires during Covid-19?
- 2) Have you experience anything new in worship during Covid-19? Is there anything you hope your congregation could continue to do when it returns to in-person worship in you sanctuary?
- 3) How did Dillard’s words make you feel? Do you believe that a sleeping God or a waking God is present in most worship you experience?

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Mark #6: Caring Relationships

Share in reading aloud the entire scripture texts and quotes below:

First Corinthians 13:4- *“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”*

Romans 12:9-21 *“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; . . . Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

“Caring relationships . . . provide a place where all people find freedom to share stories, ask for help, find identity, purpose and belonging, and confront conflict, embrace diversity, and seek to be peacemakers and bridge builders. Caring relationships moves us beyond “another social club” facades, hypocrisy, and judging others. -PCUSA Office of VCI

“Millions of missionary dollars have gone to Africa from the hands of church people who would die a million deaths before they would permit a single African the privilege of worshiping in their congregation. . . .I must not ignore the wounded man on life’s Jericho Road, because (they are) a part of me and I am a part of them.” –Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Strength to Love.

“The truth is, despite the gospel’s claim the Jesus will be with us always, young people usually assume – correctly – that the church will not always be there for them. . . .”-Kendra Creasy Dean, Practicing Passion

Sample Reflection and Discussion questions:

- 1) Revitalizing requires adjusting to new circumstances.
What parts of the scripture and quotes leave you with more questions?" Are caring relationships more important to you within your congregation or beyond your congregation? How are those two types of caring relationships different?
- 2) Have any of your caring relationship changes since distancing began? How have they changed? How do you image our congregation helping to support our internal caring relationships during Covid-19?
- 3) If you substitute “homelessness” and “homeless person” for “dollars to Africa” and the “African” how does that change the reality of the situation?

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Mark #7: Ecclesial Health

Share in reading aloud the entire scripture texts and quotes below:

Matthew 15:1-9 *“So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”*

Colossians 2:8-19 *“Therefore do not let anyone dis-qualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.”*

“Ecclesial health . . . nurtures and supports the health of pastor(s), staff, and all called to lead. It means that all are aware of how decisions are made, and are valued voices in envisioning process and procedures. It means being a church that has clarity in mission, core values, and what it means to be the church which the budget reflects. It works against unhealthy dysfunction, toxic environments, and obsolete and irrelevant buildings. -PCUSA Office of VCI

“In an institutional context, I believe God cares whether the institution’s goals are noble and . . . whether their methods for reaching those goals make sense. God is please, I believe, when I can make connections between my activities and an outcome that makes a positive difference in the world.” Sarah B. Drummond, Holy Clarity.

“Mediocrity may be less demanding, but it is ultimately a spiritual and social disaster. When communities choose a maintenance mode for extended periods, they are facilitating their own deaths.” –Christine Pohl, Living Into Community

Sample Reflection and Discussion questions:

- 1) Revitalizing requires adjusting to new circumstances.
What parts of the scripture and quotes feel familiar or new?" How would you re-name this mark in language for today’s culture and citizens? (Institutional Integrity?)
- 2) During Covid-19 distancing for personal health, how has the congregation maintained its organizational integrity and communal health?
- 3) What are the dangers of “institutionalization?” What are the benefits?

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