



*How Healthy Congregations Thrive:
A Prelude to the Benchmarks*

The first objective of the Diocese of Algoma's Strategic Plan, adopted in 2009, calls for the development of healthy congregations in communities throughout our deaneries.

Shaped by a Living Hope is the process by which we are embarking upon this quest. Responsive to the Mission, Vision and Governing Values we share as a diocese, *Shaped by a Living Hope* equips congregations for vibrant life and ministry today in the light of God's promised tomorrow.

A common concern of churches across North America is that of congregational viability. They wonder, "Where can we find the people and resources we need to flourish, even just carry on as a congregation?" There is an epidemic of anxiety spreading through many congregations due to:

- The apparent trend of an overall decline in numbers, human and financial;
- The marginalization of the church and changing demographics within our society;
- The scarcity of young people populating most of our pews.

As a result, a "survival instinct" kicks in amongst churches. In short order, maintaining our buildings and bank accounts has become the "mission" of congregations – an unhealthy factor that perpetuates and accelerates decline.

What vibrant and faithful congregations have discovered is that focusing on Vision and Vitality usually best determines Viability within the church.



VISION

The vibrant and faithful congregation is inspired and guided by the presence and promises of a loving and generous God.



The healthy congregation acts upon an adaptive, but deliberate and focused vision, a vision rooted in God's promises and mission. The healthy congregation deepens its identity and discovers its purpose – its particular share in God's mission – by identifying the place of intersection between:

- God's promises and action as revealed in Scripture and discerned in today's world,
- The gifts, assets and passions God has given to the congregation,
- The needs and opportunities of the context in which it lives.

In the healthy congregation, purpose is shared and articulated by the greater part of its active membership. The various groups and ministries of the congregation order their priorities, activities and resources according to its vision. In light of its vision, a healthy congregation sets bold and generous goals in order to reflect and embody the extravagant nature of Christ's love.

The governing motivation of the vibrant, faithful congregation is not to grow or serve the church, but rather to **be** the church. Acting upon a compelling sense of vision, such a congregation tends to experience meaningful growth because complaints or convenience, "success" or survival do not determine outcomes; rather, living the baptismal life by acting on God's promises, nurturing discipleship and sharing in God's mission determines outcomes.



to
be
the church

Acting upon an adaptive, but deliberate and focused vision both fosters and depends upon the nurture of congregational vitality.

A healthy congregation orients its life to robust engagement with activities, disciplines and habits that harmonize hearts and lives with its vision.

Such a congregation emphasizes priorities such as...

- fostering uplifting worship that opens people to the transformative presence and purposes of God
- reclaiming the deep traditions of Christianity through intentional, creative and reflective engagement with faith practices such as shared Scripture study and reflection, biblical hospitality, faith-sharing and testimony, reconciliation, the creation of artistic beauty, prayer and contemplation



VITALITY

The vibrant and faithful congregation places priority on those practices and activities that shape its life according to the promised and immanent Reign of God.



- allowing youth and children to be participants in God's mission, not just targets of mission
- demonstrating mutuality, respect and love in its resolution of disagreements and conflict, showing openness to "minority insights," and dealing firmly with agents of antagonism in the congregation
- cultivating a communal life that includes but moves beyond "social" activities to embrace care and support of one another, particularly its weakest members
- exercising and experiencing the radical friendship of Jesus by extending the care and support of its common life to the stranger and those in need
- employing a systematic and effective process of welcoming and extending personal follow-up to visitors and newcomers
- undertaking through worship, formation and service a deliberate and flexible process for introducing, socializing and initiating individuals into the church's shared life in Christ.



VIABILITY

The vibrant and faithful congregation allows vision and vitality to drive efforts toward sustainability and growth.

Consistently delivering on its missional objectives is the key factor in attracting resources and participation, and strengthening the congregation and its leadership overall. However, the healthy, vibrant congregation also supports this dynamic with practices that reinforce sustainability and growth such as:

- developing leaders with the skills and resources necessary to motivate, guide and oversee its assets and activities, and doing so with sufficient critical mass (numbers and energy) to allow for rotation and rest
- cultivating a culture that allows for faithful and imaginative change and innovation in all aspects of its life
- maintaining a highly visible and easily accessible facility that is appropriate and adaptable to its missional purpose and the demands of Christian formation
- generating financial resources, provided primarily through the free will offering of congregants and others supporters, sufficient to engage in intentional mission as well as pay the expenses of “staff ministers,” buildings and other assets in a way that these serve the church’s mission rather than “become” that mission
- repaying debt (if it exists) at a predictable and acceptable rate
- effectively communicating by a variety of means, including social media

It must be recognized that there exist factors beyond a congregation’s influence (demographics, societal trends, etc.) which impact upon viability. In a diocese such as ours, then, it is important to note that sometimes there are “healthy” circumstances when it is necessary for a congregation to team with other Anglican congregations or ecumenical partners. Likewise, it may be determined that it is strategically imperative or desirable to support congregations that normally would not be considered viable according to the standards typically commended in *Shaped by a Living Hope*. In the latter situation, however, it must be a goal to bring such congregations to a condition of viability.

The congregation that is inspired and guided by the promises of God (Vision) and devotes itself to the habits and disciplines that further its vision and equip people to live as citizens of God’s reign (Vitality) are most likely to reach a condition of sustainability and meaningful growth (Viability). The members of such a congregation experience personal transformation and exercise significant witness and service in the world. Thankfully, this dynamic between vision, vitality and viability is not ultimately up to us. As author Kendra Creasy Dean observes,

Because Christians believe that transformation belongs to God, Christian formation – the patterning of our lives and our communities after Christ’s own self-giving love – requires grace, not determination. 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. It is in the mission of God that God decisively changes us into disciples.¹

It is from this perspective, then, that we move on to our Diocesan benchmarks...



Congregational Development
The Diocese of Algoma
Anglican (Episcopal) Church of Canada
P.O. Box 1168
Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario
P6A 5N7 Canada
705-256-5061 x22
congdevelopment@dioceseofalgoma.com
www.dioceseofalgoma.com

¹ Kendra Creasy Dean, [Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church](#). (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 15.

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