**Handout #1-1 – Marks of a Vital Church**

As your House Group begins its conversations, it is important to have a reference point of what a vital and dynamic congregation might look like. Many church leaders have described characteristics of vibrant and thriving congregations, and most agree that the following marks or characteristics are essential. **These marks don’t necessarily translate into specific programs or prescriptions for success.** What works in Buffalo, NY is different than what works in Altoona, IA. The ministry needs of rural communities are different from those in urban areas. The style of worship in a Generation X majority church is different from a congregation that is surrounded by a retirement community. These ‘marks’ of a vital church transcend place and size and demographics. They are concepts to think about in relation to your congregation with all of its particular and peculiar uniqueness.

The first mark is **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. They have a pretty clear idea of what that means for their particular ministries. And they have some idea of where they are going on a collective journey. Quite often, congregational leaders are not able to articulate this reason for being. People may say something like, “We just want to grow.” Or people may relate things about being on the same corner for “all these years” without any clear sense of the connection of location and ministry. In other congregations, when asked about mission, people talk about specific programs that have been offered through the years without clear definition of how those programs fit into their future. There is certainly nothing wrong with growth or with building on the past to shape the future as long as the congregation has a very clear sense of “who it is” and “what it wants to be when it ‘grows up.’”

The answers to the questions of “who are we” and “what do we want to be when we grow up” are important compasses for any organization. Clear identity, mission and vision shapes the direction and decision making of all vibrant congregations. Without this clarity there may be people working really hard to grow while others in that same congregation feel that growth would destroy the intimacy that is important to them. Without this clarity, there may be people whose decisions are more connected to their desire to stay in a familiar building than to entertain a possibility of ministry elsewhere. Without this clarity, groups in the church may work, unintentionally, at cross purposes, getting nowhere but frustrated. Or worse, without this clarity, people are immobilized to take a common step into the future God has for them.

It is human nature for people to want to be liked. In congregational life, we sometimes believe that we can be all things to all people. In truth, no congregation, regardless of size, can fill that bill. Vital congregations know who they are, where they are going, and why. They know how to assess their strengths and they play to those strengths. They know how they intend to proclaim the gospel in their location and they organize all activities – worship, evangelism, fellowship, education, and outreach – in alignment with that singular purpose.

**Group discusses these questions:**

**1) What two or three things are our congregation really good at?**

**2) What distinguishes us from other social clubs or service organizations in our area?**

**3) Rank the items mentioned in Questions 1 and 2. In light of the Gospel, which of these things we named are the most important? Which seems the least important in light of the Gospel?**

*Note: It is quite okay for people to have differing opinions or for the conclusion to be that the congregation doesn’t have clarity about its values or mission. This is just more information for the next sessions.*

**Handout #1-2 – Membership Church or Discipleship Church?**

Church bulletins or newsletters often advertise invitations like this for joining in participation with the congregation: “If you want to become a member of this congregation, either by transfer of membership or by baptism, we invite you to become a part of the Inquirers’ Class which follows the worship service…” or “We invite you to come forward during this hymn of discipleship.” The concept of “membership” in a church body or in a single congregation has grown in the last centuries with the growing institutionalization of the church. For North American church folk the concept of joining a local congregation grew alongside a membership model that flourished in the 20th century with the rise of civic clubs, boy scouts and girl scouts, sports clubs, and the like. Membership is synonymous with belonging to a group where certain benefits and privileges are granted to that group or certain services are provided to the membership clientele.

Many would argue that this **Membership Model** has, indeed, taken over much of what was “mainline” Protestantism in the U.S. We talk mostly about belonging, not to the body of Christ or even to a particular way of professing Christ via denominational witness, but about belonging to First Church at the corner of Main and Central. Societal values have taught us that we can shop around to find the church that provides just the right goods and services for our particular needs. Our members sometimes stake out pews and claim them as our own. Some treat the pastor as the “hired Christian,” expecting service from that pastor on a 24/7 basis. Some treat stewardship and tithing as payment for service or as dues. And many congregations have dress and decorum codes for proper attire and behavior while at church. Churches have “business hours” and many are run by the same rules of order and decision-making standardized by government and civic clubs.

While this caricature of a church may not fit the profile of your congregation, the question is worth asking: “Does our church function on a Membership Model or a Discipleship Model?”

Most would agree that the church (or churches) was not founded to serve primarily the interests of people who were already “Christian.” In Matthew 28, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and then through them the eleven disciples, that their job is to make more disciples. In the text named “The Great Commission,” Jesus gives the directive to go into all the nations to teach people how to follow 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 called Christ. The directive has very little to do with 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 right at our doorstep!).

Making disciples in Matthew’s gospel (just as it is in the other gospels) means actively engaging the world in a way that brings passion for Jesus’ way, truth, and light to communities and cultures and people who need it. When Jesus tells his disciples to go into Galilee, he is not so much directing them to specific ministries in specific locales, he is saying “Go into the world; find out what’s needed in the world beyond what you’ve known. Listen to the people in all of their ‘foreignness’ and then figure out how to understand the life-giving identity they can have as fellow disciples.”

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The **Discipleship Model** focuses on outward mission rather than internal care-taking. Leaders may stake a course, but the call is to all participants to use their gifts creatively in a way that allows new opportunities for ministry to emerge. The Discipleship Model asks that people get to know the identity, nuanced needs, and ‘culture’ of a neighborhood or community and then mobilize resources to bring the gospel alive in ways that fit. The Discipleship Model asks people to risk the safety and ease of what they’ve known in order to leave a legacy of offering freedom and healing and relief for people in need.

The model acknowledges the great fear in taking this risk. It doesn’t promise that there won’t be misguided steps along the way. It doesn’t promise that peril and threat will stay at arm’s length or even that all will make it on this journey. What the Discipleship Model does promise is that Jesus will accompany the congregation on its great commission – even going ahead to stake out the territory. “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.” (Matthew 28:19-20, ***The Message***, Eugene Peterson)

**Handout #1-3 – Contextual Relevance**

Closely linked to this first mark of vitality is a second characteristic. Vitality in congregational life is characterized by **CONTEXTUAL RELEVANCE**. The desires and direction of the people in vibrant congregations are 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. In a culture where neighborhoods are every-changing in terms of demographics of the people who live there, in a culture where ideas and perceptions about the role of the church in our society are changing, in a culture where all kinds of traditions and values shape our realities, church life – in all its manifestations – has to adapt. Mission and vision must be shaped by context. One size ministry does not fit all neighborhoods, communities, or cities.

The kind of ministry the church engages must meet the needs of the community it serves. The decision-making bodies of the church must adapt easily and flexibly to the kinds of innovative ideas necessary to do new ministry. The way the church speaks (from signage, to worship, to identity statements, to the language spoken by the pastor and leaders) must speak to the hearers in the larger community in ways that are compelling, draw people in, and serve real need.

In one rural county seat congregation a woman recognized that her community had an increasing number of immigrant farm workers and their families moving about the town. She watched as Mexican restaurants and Hispanic-owned businesses came into what had been abandoned downtown storefronts. Her children came home from school telling her how difficult it was for the new kids to learn because they didn’t speak English. She began to share an idea for mission with her congregation’s leaders. “What if we open our building to host a church for the new folks in our community,” she asked. “What if we start a tutoring program for children after school? What if we do English as a Second Language classes for their parents on Sunday afternoons? What if we get to know our new neighbors and find out how we can make life together better for everyone in this community?”

The congregation had been in decline for several years. No one could deny that the community was changing radically. They got excited by the new ideas for mission that the woman proposed. While it wasn’t easy, while it required new pastoral leadership, the changing of the church governance structures, and numerous late-night board discussions, the congregation began to reach out to and eventually partner with the growing Mexican American community. What was once only one congregation became two worshiping congregations (one in Spanish, one in English) three years after the woman first shared her ideas. But the most impressive thing that happened is that the two worshiping congregations worked together in ministry to engage in economic and community redevelopment in their area.

Vital congregations understand their surroundings. They understand that new possibilities for ministry emerge – that what once was vital ministry might no longer fit. They adapt to those new opportunities in ways that are flexible. They are hospitable to people and ideas that are different from what has been normative. They claim a mission that they can be really good at; a mission that is contextually relevant. Then, they move into the opportunity God has given them.

**Group discusses these questions:**

**1) Describe the community and context in which your church sits.**

**2) Is your church’s ministry and program compatible with the needs and character of the community in which it is located?**

**Handout #1-4 – Passion, Energy and Purpose**

A third mark of vital congregations has to do with level of enthusiasm expressed by leaders and members of a congregation for the ministry. Vibrant and dynamic congregations move with PASSION AND ENERGY into the mission they claim. In the various expressions of church life – worship, stewardship, outreach, evangelism, etc. – these congregations walk with a spring and a purpose. The people in these congregations have a fire or a spirit about them that allows the good news of Jesus Christ to live through them. Passionate congregations have passionate members whose faith makes a difference in their daily lives.

One pastor tells the story of a congregation inspired by the life of one of its founders. The founding member had helped to build the church and had given thousands of dollars to other church-related institutions. He served in denominational life as a committed and devoted lay leader. He was also a business man. The man took a diesel engine manufacturer from a company of 60 employees in the 1930s to a global leader in diesel engines. At his funeral, there were plenty of stories about his convictions and passion to be a Christian in all places. And then the story came about his decision to close his manufacturing plants in South Africa in the midst of apartheid and in protest of that unjust system. The company’s diesel manufacturing represented 20% of the South African diesel engine market at the time. The pastor concluded his remarks, “Passion means letting Christ-like actions pervade your very being. It means doing in business what you would do in church even when it’s hard. It means treating strangers like they are Christ incarnate. It means living with fire for what you believe in.”

Congregations and the people in them have passion in vibrant congregations. They have an ability and desire to share their faith journey with people joined in common mission. And they are willing to share their story with words and actions that indicate that God is alive and well in their midst. These churches are looking to MAKE new disciples of Jesus Christ and not just welcome existing disciples. These churches help people LIVE a lifestyle of Christian witness. Vital congregations have a passion that energizes a “movement” of people toward a common mission.

**Group discusses these statements/questions:**

**1) On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high), how would you rate or congregation’s level of enthusiasm for its ministries?**

**2) A witty church leader once pointed out that Christians are to be “fishers of people, not keepers of the aquarium.” Would you say our congregation focuses more on “fishing for people,” or on “keeping the aquarium”?**

**Handout #1-5 – Resources for a Common Mission**

The fourth mark of a vital congregation is really a whole category of characteristics. Vital congregations **HAVE THE RESOURCES AND ARE ABLE TO MOBILIZE THOSE RESOURCES FOR A COMMON MISSION**.

Resources vary from congregation to congregation. They can be:

Available Financial and Capital Resources. Certainly, vital congregations have available financial resources to fund the ministries of the congregation. They have sufficient income streams to fund the mission the congregation is passionate about. They do not regularly run deficit budgets or overdraw from their endowments for operational spending. As well, vibrant congregations have building (or capital) assets that allow them space to live out their mission. This includes many vibrant congregations who do not own property, but rent space for their ministries. Whether a church chooses to own or rent, the space these vibrant churches occupy does not sap the missional funding needs of the congregation. In fact, in many of these congregations, construction or remodeling is occurring in ways that reflect the missional focus of the congregation.

**Question: Does your building serve or inhibit the ministries of your congregation?**

Inspiring or Empowering Lay and Clergy Leadership. Leadership is crucial to the vibrancy of any organization. Leaders in vital congregations are prepared, know what is expected of them, and are able to work in a team effort to accomplish goals. Vibrant congregations often have visionary pastoral leaders who are both hands-on and know when to delegate. These leaders have a keen ability to articulate the vision, create strategies to carry out the vision, and mobilize and train people to share in the implementation. They also have the ability to move groups of people to clear decisions in timely and appropriate ways. Lay leaders in vibrant congregations are chosen for their gifts and skills as a match to particular leadership positions. They know and agree to a set of expectations regarding functions and are trained with the preparation and knowledge they need to carry out the role. One pastor of a 20-year-old, 3,000-member congregation stressed the importance of this preparation. “For the first 19 years of my ministry here,” she said, “I interviewed and provided extensive training for every leader in the congregation because I wanted to make sure that they were capable and trained to help us live out our mission. Some people have great desire, but desire is not enough. They have to have skills and they have to have the right kind of training to be empowered to lead in ministry.” Vibrant congregations put a great deal of time and effort into calling, nurturing, and training their leaders.

**Question: Does your congregation have a leadership recruitment and training plan that matches the skills and gifts of leaders with the requirements of their particular leadership positions?**

Relational and Spiritual Health Among the People of the Congregation. Where there is a high level of conflict among congregants, 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. It is not that vital congregations don’t have conflict or that leaders are not free to share differing opinions about goals and direction. Vital congregations, rather, tend to be characterized by an ability to move to decisions quickly and resolve differing opinions without losing the commitment of the participants. Threats of split, use of game-playing, manipulative leadership, secretive politics and the like are not the means by which decisions about mission and ministry are made in the best of circumstances. Yet, these dynamics are present in most systems, so the relative vitality of congregations is dependent upon the degree to which leaders are able to move through these dynamics – to cooperate with or climb on board with decisions that support the direction of the mission. Instead of holding fast to “Robert’s Rules of Order,” vital congregations practice a kind of spiritual discernment, asking not what the majority wants, but asking instead, “What does God intend for us in this time and place?”

**Spend a few moments reflecting silently about the level of conflict and trust you experience in your congregation.**