**Shape

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It’s a new day. The tools and approaches the church used in the past are no longer are working the way they used to. As part of this, naturally comes questions about identity, existence, purpose, and mission. If this sounds familiar or describes the situation your congregation finds itself in, then you may be being called to participate in the Vitality Initiative.

***The Vitality Initiative for Congregations***

The Nebraska Synod created the Vitality Initiative for Congregations (VIC) to support and challenge congregations and ministry sites demonstrating generosity, innovation, resilience, collaboration, and grit.

This is not a project to be created, or a follow-the-directions or how-to program to be completed. This is an intentional process to go deeper, grow disciples, and lean into the culture shifts and changes that God is inviting.

The Vitality Initiative invites congregations to explore three big area of discernment:

* Who are we? Discerning congregational identity.
* Who are our neighbors? Discerning context and the surrounding community(s) to which the congregation is a part.
* What is God inviting? Discerning the next most faithful step and lean into God’s invitation to come and see, follow, experiment, and serve.

In a cohort of 6-12 congregations together, the congregations (and shared ministries) participating in this initiative will discern answers and direction based on:

* Pondering and wrestling with many deep questions
* Assessing the congregation’s vitality
* Discerning vocation through spiritual, theological, biblical practices, contextual exploration and through becoming equipped and strengthened for embracing change.

***The Particulars***

The *Initiative* is an eighteen-month intense adventure of discovery, learning, listening and discernment with monthly cohort online learning sessions followed by assignments to be completed before the next session.

A trained and certified ELCA coach will walk with each congregation in this journey for the 18 months and will accompany them as desired for up to an additional six months as they live into their discoveries. Prayer and spiritual practices will be woven into all phases of this work as together we listen for and to the Holy Spirit

***What we mean by Vitality***

A thriving congregation may be a multi-point parish, a shared ministry, or a single site; and could be in any context from rural to suburban to big city, with a history that is 150 years old or just 10 years old.

Every congregation experiences vitality differently, because each is a unique body in a specific context – and this truth is the key to vitality. In congregations, as in individuals, God grants the gifts, the relationships, the moments and the tasks – the mission – of vocation.

***Outcomes***

Success will be measured in ways that move us beyond the number and product driven definition of success. The initiative encourages healthy risk-taking, experimentation and progressive learning experiences. This process is about culture change, and that sometimes proves harder to measure. That said, there is a goal for both qualitative and quantitative increases which will indicate a sense of growing vitality of congregations. Prior to the beginning of the cohort, a baseline vitality will be measured, and tools will be used to track change. This will include, but not be limited to, more traditional data such as membership, attendance, and finances. Throughout the process, each cohort will be encouraged and at some level expected to be learning posts for others.

***Expectations for, and Recruiting Your Congregation’s Leadership Team***

Upon a congregation receiving notification of its inclusion in the Vitality Initiative, it will then need to form a congregational leadership team. The congregation will be best served by a leadership team for this experience that is representative of the whole congregation and community. Team members bring diverse stories, networks, perspectives and experiences. When inviting members to serve on the leadership team consider gifts, passions, gender, ethnicity, experience in the congregation, occupation, networks, economic perspective, family demographics, generational representation and years in the community. The most effective leadership team also will have a mix of skillsets with individuals who are analytical, achievers or doers, creative minds, and visionary thinkers. The leadership team of six to ten members should include the pastoral leader and at least one member of the council. Leadership team members are expected to commit and actively participate for the duration of the initiative, and to be able to attend most cohort sessions live online (and willing to make up any missed sections by watching the zoom recordings afterwards).

***Cost to Participate***Each congregation is expected to pay **$950.00** to participate. It is expected that this fee will be paid to the Nebraska Synod by August 1, 2023. The cost to participate should not be seen as a barrier for participation, however. If this fee is a challenge for your congregation, please contact Deacon Timothy Siburg.

**Applications deadline is May 1, 2023.**

The application is to be completed by the congregation’s pastoral leader(s), council president, and at least two other leaders in the congregation. Deadline is May 1, 2023. The 2023 cohort will be announced by June 1.

Note that the first cohort session will be **Sunday September 17, 2023, at 1:30pm CDT/12:30pm MDT**. Prior to the first cohort session there will be a pastoral leaders and coaches meeting on **Sunday August 27, 2023, also at 1:30pm CDT/12:30pm MDT.** See the Timeline Overview for all tentative session dates so that they might be on your calendars as soon as possible.

For more information please email: EMAIL timothy@nebraskasynod.org

**Next Steps to Take**If your congregation has discerned that the Vitality Initiative may be the right next step for it, then:

1. Apply by completing and submitting the Vitality Initiative for Congregations Application by May 1, 2023. The 2023 cohort will be announced by June 1.
2. Upon receiving notice of inclusion in the Vitality Initiative, recruit and form your congregation’s leadership team as outlined above. Please submit their information as follows to [vitality@nebraskasynod.org](mailto:vitality@nebraskasynod.org).

**Congregational Leadership Team Roster**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Age | Gender | Generational Representation | Gifts They Bring to the Team | E-mail Address |
| 1. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10. |  |  |  |  |  |

1. If your congregation is accepted into the cohort, submit the $950.00 payment to the Nebraska Synod by August 1. If you have questions or concerns about this, please reach out to Deacon Timothy Siburg.

***The Vitality Initiative for Congregations Timeline Overview***

All cohort meetings will be 90 minutes long and occur online via Zoom on Sunday afternoons at 1:30pm CT/12:30pm MT, unless otherwise noted. Prior to the official start of the cohort in September, all pastoral leaders of congregations participating in this initiative and their coaches will have an introductory meeting on August 27, 2023.

The Vitality Initiative is divided into four-phases for learning and implementation. The phases are as follows:

**Phase 1**:

1. Discovering where your congregation is on the journey of vitality
2. Grounding Yourselves in God’s Mission
3. Listening to Discern your Congregation’s Vocation
4. Getting into Shape through a Process of Listening and Discernment of Vocation
5. Listening to Congregational Stories and Sharing Your Story

Congregations are challenged to discover and nurture their unique call. Congregations will be given tools to ask, “Who are we?” and “Why do we do what we do?” Leadership teams will begin a deep exploration of the concept of vocation through a Lutheran lens, grounded in Luther’s own theology and the biblical roots of the church. This theological emphasis will be paired with Christian discernment practices, including the development and sharing of congregational call stories and prayer as a personal and communal practice.

**Phase 2**:

1. Marking Your Movement in the Process
2. Finding out, “Who are Your Neighbors?”
3. Coordinating and Listening in Neighborhood interviews
4. Discerning Through What You Heard
5. Focusing Your Emerging Vocation through Faith Language
6. Telling the story of what God is doing in process of vocational discernment

Congregations will develop awareness of cultural and social trends. Congregations will be equipped to explore their community and trends that impact their context. Through exploration of external relationships with a congregation’s neighbors and of relationships to the larger church, congregations will discern “Who are our neighbors?” and imagine “Whom are we called to serve?” and “With whom are we called?”

**Phase 3**:

1. Narrowing Down to Your Congregation’s Unique Vocation
2. Telling the story of what God has given in process of vocational discernment
3. Experimenting in Your Neighborhood as tool for discernment, not just a project
4. Staying in Vocational Shape

Equipped with a deeper understanding of congregational identity and context, the third phase will invite the process of synthesis: given one’s congregation’s identity, gifts, passions, histories, and the realities of its culture, context, and neighbors, what are the ways that the congregation senses the Holy Spirit is calling us to be church together? What are the ways the congregation can serve with its neighbors?

**Phase 4:**   
Coaches may continue meeting with the leadership team for six additional months following the final cohort session, helping the congregation stay on track with their discerned next steps and/or experiment(s).

**Vitality Initiative for Congregations- Cohort 2- Session Dates** *(subject to change)*

*\*All sessions will run from 1:30-3pm CT/12:30-2pm MT, unless otherwise noted.*

**2023**

September 17

October 15

November 12

**2024**

January 21

February 18

March 10

April 21

May 19

June 23

August 25

September 15

October 20  
November 17

*Note: There will also be a special Leaders Gathering for all pastoral leaders during the Fall Theological Conference (Date TBD)*

**2025**

January 19 (or 26)

March 2, 2025