



October 26, 2018

Re: Invitation to Small Church Vitality Project

Dear Small Church Leader,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a new initiative that Rachel Yates and I are developing: the Small Church Vitality Project. Currently 25 congregations in our presbytery have a membership of 125 or fewer -- that's over 1/2 of our congregations. We want to focus on the important, but sometimes challenging ministries of our small churches by providing both practical and spiritual encouragement, tailored to small churches. Below, we describe the outline of the project sessions and the commitments needed by congregations to participate.

You will note that we're organizing a church "vitality" project, not a church "viability" project. One challenge that congregations of all sizes face is understanding the difference between viability and vitality. In the realm of biology, the term "viable" is used to indicate when something has a chance of surviving. It has what it needs to exist in its current state. The resources exist to accomplish something. In the context of churches, the term viable similarly reflects the ability of a congregation to continue to exist. It has enough resources (people and funds) to continue as it is, and nearly always, conversations about a church's viability focus on numbers: how many people to do the work, how much money to cover expenses, how many costs involved (how much building maintenance is needed). In smaller congregations, the answer to all these questions is almost always "not enough"; and the greatest challenge becomes being so focused on the numbers and a mindset of scarcity that we feel it's all we can do to hold on and maintain.

In contrast, "vitality" refers not merely to the ability to exist but to feel alive. Vitality is defined as the state of feeling strong and active and energetic. Vital congregations not only have life *in* them, they also give life *to* others. In the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet is taken to a valley filled with dry bones, where God asks, "Can these bones live?" Then Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy to the bones. The bones come together and gain sinew and flesh; they exist, they have structure; but as the prophet recognizes, there is no life in them, for the breath of God is absent. So God commands him to prophesy to the breath -- breath that is integrally tied to the breath and Spirit of God which gives life. This scene is a metaphor for the house of Israel, who have said, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost." To them God proclaims, "O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live." In contrast to viability, exploring a congregation's vitality focuses not on the numbers -- what you need to stay alive, but rather on the Spirit of God alive within you -- what gives you life as a congregation and calls out a message of life and hope to others.

So how will we do this?

The Small Church Vitality Program includes six sessions. To participate, a team from your congregation comprised of session members and pastor (if you have a pastor) must attend each

session. (Preferably at least two people should participate, but more are welcome.) The project sessions build off one another, and there is a greater likelihood of positive impact on participants and, in turn, your congregation through consistent participation. To help focus the material to the specific needs and cultures of the participating congregations, we are asking each church to participate in a Holy Cow assessment<sup>1</sup> (if you have not already done so), the cost of which will be covered by the Presbytery. Each session will engage some aspect(s) of your Holy Cow results with the goal of not only addressing where you are now as a congregation but also helping you discern and develop the tools and drive needed to move into a vital future.

### An Overview of the Sessions

Because we want to make the most of the time we have together and recognizing that time is precious in lives and ministries that can often feel overloaded, there will be preparatory readings and reflections prior to each session as well as follow-up materials and exercises so you can apply what you've learned.

#### Session 1: Congregational Health: Viable *and* Vital -- January 26 and February 15-16

This session involves two parts. The first is attending the Healthy Congregations workshop led by the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center on January 26. (Please note that all session times are designed to not conflict with a typical 9-5 weekday work schedule or Sundays. We want elders to participate! For that reason, we're also cognizant of night time driving issues for some and will work to ease accessibility to meeting locations.) The second part follows the timeframe pattern we'll use for the remaining sessions, a Friday evening and Saturday, February 15-16.

Session 1 explores the dynamics of and the need for congregations to be both viable *and* vital, addressing concerns about morale and energy, financial struggles, dealing with change, addressing conflict, and sharing in work of the church.

#### Session 2: Lifelong Discipleship- March 22-23

This session takes seriously both participants' individual spiritual vitality as well as that of the congregation, asking "What does it mean to be followers of Jesus Christ?" In today's world people have many choices for clubs to join and ways to serve. The church is not called to be one social or service club among many but those whose lives witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Session 2 engages the need for congregations to be communities of Christian formation across all ages and explores some tools and resources for doing so.

#### Session 3: Evangelism- Sharing the Good News- Post Easter- dates tbd in consult with participants

Just as Jesus bids each of us to be disciples "Come and follow me," so too does he make us apostles -- those sent out to tell the good news. But "evangelism" often evokes fear about offending others and being rejected or leaves a bad taste in our mouths when we recall in-your-face evangelists. Session three invites participants to reflect on the impact of the Good News in their lives and explore how they and their congregations can authentically share why they've chosen to be followers of Christ and invite others into Christian community or the fellowship of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Holy Cow! Consulting provides an assessment tool that gauges a congregation's satisfaction and energy in a variety of areas. Through trained interpreters, congregations learn what motivates or drives congregants and the areas where a different approach or focus may be needed. The results are provided to the Session, so that you can decide how to move forward to sustained congregational health. By the end of 2018, nearly half of the Presbytery's congregations will have participated in Holy Cow, plus those who join in the Small Church Vitality Program.

#### Session 4: Empowering Leaders -- June 7-8

When the presbytery did its own Holy Cow assessment, one of the things congregations wanted most was help in developing leaders. Session 4 explores how congregants gain “readiness for ministry” and how you as leaders can help to nurture their gifts as well as empower them.

#### Session 5: Mission and Vision- Getting to your Why -- Summer date tbd in consult with participants

As earlier sessions will have explored lifelong discipleship and sharing the Good News, session 5 asks you to bring these things together in light of the particular context of your congregation and location in your greater community to begin to form your mission and vision. Through the Holy Cow assessment, we'll know what your congregation has listed as its priorities -- what it wants to achieve. This session will help you begin to take steps to live into this vision, to avoid toxic charity, and to build mutual relationships in mission near and far.

#### Session 6: Inspired Worship -- Sept 6-7

People have different reasons for going to worship, and if we reflect honestly on our own answers for why we go, most of us will notice that we go hoping to *get* something, as if we are at the center of worship instead of God. While this should give us some food for thought, there is the reality of feeling a deep hunger for connection with Divine. We want to be inspired; we want to feel breathed into by the Spirit of God, like the bones in the valley. We want to be fed by Christ in Word and at the table. And yet, we may not often leave worship feeling this way. This final session explores the hunger we all have to experience God and provides space and opportunity not only to reflect on worship that has been meaningful to you but also to hear what is meaningful and powerful to others. Then we'll move from reflection to action, discovering resources and methods for designing worship that crosses generation gaps, fills us with a sense of God's presence, and more -- in short, vital worship!

Among the expectations we have for participants in this program are that your congregation will have: completed Holy Cow by January 15 and completed your 2018 Clerk's Minute Review. While there is some flexibility on timing, this data will help us to shape the workshop material and resources more appropriately to the contexts and needs of our participants. Vital input + vital planning = Small Church Vitality Project.

What We Offer: in addition to covering all the costs for this program and your Holy Cow assessment, congregations will gain:

- The priceless opportunity to build relationships and connect with other small congregations and learn from one another
- Complimentary registration for up to 3 people from your congregation to attend *all* Presbytery trainings, workshops, or events through 2020
- Up to \$500 for programs related to congregational vitality to supplement or add to your Pastor's continuing education budget or for use by an elder
- Assistance in developing or improving website and social media
- Resources for Christian Education and Worship

Because of the lead-time associated with the Holy Cow assessment, **we request confirmation of your desire to participate in the Small Church Vitality Project no later than November 19.** This should provide sufficient time to complete the assessment and receive an interpretation of the results no later than our February session.

If you have questions about whether this project is right for your congregation or questions about the Holy Cow assessment, please contact me at 414-292-2740 or [agibbs@pbymilwaukee.org](mailto:agibbs@pbymilwaukee.org). I will also be delighted to receive your telephone or email confirmation of the intention to participate in the program with other small church leaders from the Presbytery.

We are excited about this project and how it can benefit a significant and essential percentage of our congregations. We look forward to hearing from you soon!  
May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you,

Ann Gibbs  
Associate for Ministry Vitality