

4/10/18

**Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan
Parish Vitality Task Force**

**Mutuality, Vitality and Viability
Characteristics of Congregations
Growing in Mission**

Worship God + Follow Jesus + Grow Together + Serve the World

Our Mission

Rooted in the Episcopal tradition, the Diocese of Western Michigan is called to

- Worship God
- Follow Jesus Christ
- Grow together in the Holy Spirit, and
- Serve the world.

Our Vision

The Vision of the Diocese of Western Michigan is to live our values and be healthy, mission-focused, diverse parishes with innovative, collaborative engagement at all levels.

Our Values

Our values are expressed through:

- Transformation of Lives
- Service to Others, Loving God and Neighbor through Christ
- Active Participation
- Acceptance, Respect
- Sharing God's Gifts and Jesus' Example
- Engaging Worship

Preface

Our committee was tasked with developing a set of characteristics of various dimensions of congregational vitality and viability to be used as a starting point for a shared understanding throughout the Diocese. **We offer this document as a preliminary basis for discussion and further input as we move toward shared understanding of what it means to be a vital, viable congregation in our diocese.** In drafting this report we researched the work of other dioceses, and we are especially grateful to the dioceses of Eastern Michigan and Massachusetts for sharing their documents and experiences in defining dimensions of missional vibrancy within parishes.

In articulating what it means to be a parish in The Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan, this document suggests practical criteria for determining congregational vitality and viability. It also recommends a context for fostering mutual accountability between parishes and the diocese in order to reach agreement about the expectations we have of one another. As such, this

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document is designed to start discussions throughout the diocese that will guide us to that shared understanding.

We assume positive intent of all parishes: specifically we believe that every congregation aspires to be vital, viable and thriving. This report provides a tool to be used for both internal self-assessment and external review with assistance from the Canon Missioners and consulting teams. It is our expectation that the leadership of the diocese, including the Bishop, Standing Committee and Diocesan Council, will provide ample support to congregations as they review their current status and move toward further vitality and viability.

As we reviewed materials related to congregational vitality and viability, we found that this might also be an opportune time to review our Mission and Vision statements. We recommend that the broader discussions about mutuality, viability, and vitality also include conversations about how robustly our Mission and Vision statements focus us on what is most important about our Christian mission; that is, creating disciples and restoring people to right relationship with God, and how these statements might shape how we are to more fully engage as members of the Jesus Movement in Western Michigan.

Faithfully,

The Parish Vitality Task Force

Barbara Kelly, Diocesan Council, chaired the group, comprised of

The Rev. Valerie Ambrose

Mr. Bill Fleener, Jr.

Ms. Judy Fleener

Dr. Rosemary Hagan

Dr. Barbara Kelly

Introduction

Prior to the adoption of the Resolution on Diocesan Structure by the 143th Diocesan Convention, 2017, the Bishop and Diocesan Council made recommendations to the Standing Committee regarding our mutual ministry, and, in particular, the development and growth of congregations. Additionally, a Small Church Task Force was born out of a resolution of the 140th Diocesan Convention, in 2014, which charged that task force with, in part, addressing “questions of parish viability.” Other important efforts have emerged, including the process of Asset

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Mapping, now in full gear, and the continuing vital work of the Diocesan Congregational Development Institute. The Small Church Task Force Report to the 141st Diocesan Convention in 2015 also proposed, “using Canon 31 (on restoring congregational health) as an instrument in support of healthy congregations.” Emerging from all this important work is an emphasis on the mutual interdependence of individual congregations and the diocese as a whole.

It is out of this context that we offer this preliminary report of our Parish Vitality Task Force, addressing the need for a shared understanding of what it means to be a vital, viable, thriving parish in the Diocese of Western Michigan.

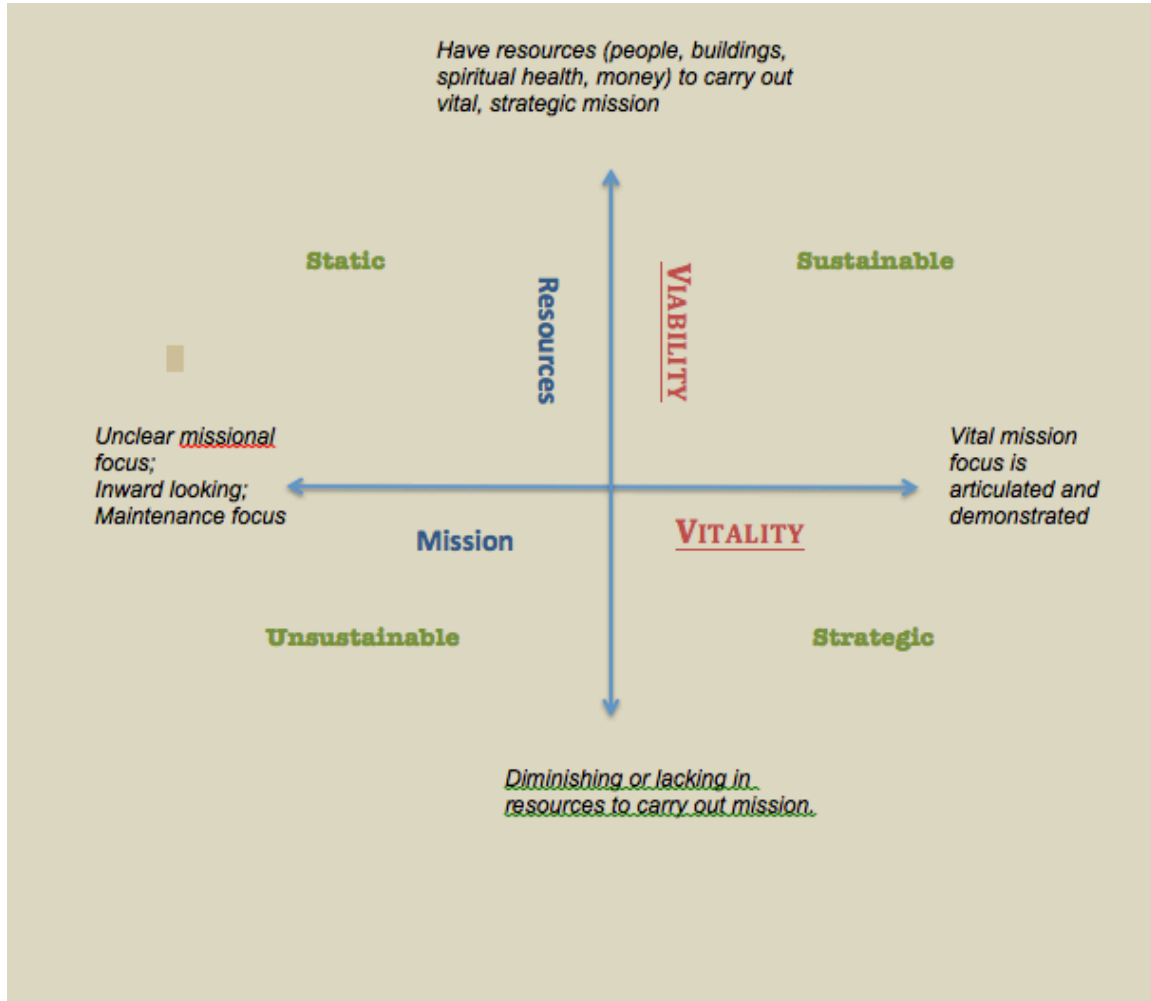
Throughout this document we employ the following concepts:

- **Vitality:** A congregation's lively response to and living out of God's mission, and of the mission and vision of the diocese.
- **Viability:** The stability, strength, and sustainability of a congregation's finances, property and the clerical and administrative functions which enable it to carry out God's mission, as well as the mission and vision of the diocese.

Some dioceses further delineate these two dimensions (which we may want to adopt or adapt) as follows:

- **Sustainable:** Parish has a clear missional focus and sufficient resources. The congregation is vital and viable.
- **Strategic:** Parish has a clear missional focus with insufficient resources. The congregation is vital with compromised viability.
- **Static:** Parish has an unclear or missing missional focus with sufficient resources. The congregation is viable with compromised vitality.
- **Unsustainable:** Parish has an unclear or missing missional focus with insufficient resources. Both vitality and viability are compromised.

As parishes receive this report as well as an assessment tool (to follow), we realize that each situation calls for unique and varied responses both internally, as a Vestry, Rector, and people, as well as from the Diocese. Along with their mission and their resources, each of our parishes has a meaningful history and many stories to tell. Our prayer and hope is that a process of self-assessment and mutual ministry review may yield new ideas about the kind of support and strategies that will lead to renewed, transformed, and dynamic parish life. May we be open and vigilant to perceive the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit in this endeavor.



Vital Congregations

Vital congregations have a clear, lively, and strategic missional focus, reflecting the core of our diocesan mission: worshiping God, following Jesus, serving the world, and growing in faith and ministry.

The characteristics of Vital Congregations that follow are a way of initiating a dialogue about our participation in God's mission and ministries in the world, with the hope that, from these discussions, the entire diocese --- laity, bishop, priests and deacons --- will commit itself to engage in the work of mutual building up, regeneration, and transformation.

No congregation possesses all of these characteristics. As a starting point, each congregation is invited to make a self-assessment using these characteristics; to identify areas where they are strong and have resources to offer, and areas where needs are unaddressed or help is needed for growth.

EDWM Mission: Worshiping God

Worship

- Worship is both vibrant and fresh in expression and rooted in tradition resulting in people who are energized and inspired for Christian service and ministry in their daily lives.
- The planning and leadership of worship invites participation and engages the creativity of the entire congregation: all age groups, newcomers and established members.
- Worship expresses the cultural diversity of the congregation and its neighboring communities.
- The congregation appropriately and strategically considers alternative worship times, venues and liturgies.

Fellowship

- The congregation has fellowship opportunities in addition to Sunday morning, after-worship fellowship times (for example: dinner groups, meals in the parish hall, discussion groups, etc.).
- The congregation uses fellowship opportunities to deepen the discipleship of its members.
- The congregation gathers to celebrate, support and care for each other in the midst of congregational life.

EDWM Mission: Following Jesus

Mission Discernment and Accountability

- The congregation has a mission and/or vision statement, which is clear, concise, broadly known and periodically reviewed by the vestry and congregation.
- The ministry and mission of the congregation reflect this vision.
- The congregation has achievable and measurable goals, strategies and objectives which members know and support.
- The vestry and clergy engage in annual reviews of their common ministry to and with one another, such reviews focusing on goal achievement in relation to the congregation's participation in God's mission.

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- The congregation engages in systematic and regular mutual ministry review.

Education/Formation for Discipleship

- Education and formation opportunities for discipleship are offered to children, youth, young adults, adults and senior adults.
- The Baptismal Covenant is used as a framework for designing and implementing education and formation opportunities.
- There is clear designation of clergy and lay leaders responsible for planning and implementing education and formation programs.
- The curriculum, educational programs and/ or resources offer a global perspective and celebrate diversity and equality.
- Lay and clergy leaders are actively encouraged to enhance their own skills for ministry through participation in diocesan, provincial and national learning and training opportunities.

EDWM Mission: Serving Each Other and the World

Welcome

- The congregation reflects the demographics of its surrounding community.
- The congregation shows hospitality to visitors and has a process for new member incorporation.
- The congregation has adequate outdoor lighting and signage.
- Signage (indoors and outdoors) and bulletin boards are neat, clear, accurate, engaging and readable.
- Phone messages are welcoming, timely and contain times of worship and other events, as well as the location of the church.

Communications

- To the greatest extent possible with human and material resources available, the congregation uses electronic and print communications vehicles including newsletters, website and electronic newsletters which are engaging, accurate, and timely and which convey contact information for the congregation's office, clergy, and lay leaders, as well as directions, service times and mission statement.
- The congregation has a media relations program that builds good relations with local media, including press releases, op/ed commentary articles, letters to the editor and appearances on local television and radio stations.
- The congregation conducts creative outreach activities such as, but not limited to: direct mail, advertising; newspaper, radio, and television advertising; and special events and collaborations with advocacy, non-profit, and community groups.

Outreach

- At least 10 percent of the parish budget, excluding the diocesan apportionment, is spent on outreach.
- The congregation has at least one signature effort of service, witness or advocacy that includes a broad cross-section of congregational members and has broad congregational support.

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- The congregation looks for opportunities to engage in collaborative ministry with other congregations and faiths.

Congregational Leadership

- The leadership reflects the gifts and talents of the congregation.
- The leaders embody the theology of servant ministry: they delegate responsibilities and duties, encourage and empower others and communicate openly.
- The congregation's budget and financial information are available and transparent to the congregation, and members have an opportunity to engage in the budget process.

Community Connections

- The congregation has a visible presence in the community, and clergy and laity are engaged in community, ecumenical, and interfaith activities and leadership.
- People in the community who are not members of the congregation know about the congregation and are regularly informed of the congregation's activities and offerings.
- People in the community come to the church for a variety of reasons in addition to worship (for example: lectures, afterschool programs, day care, art shows, AA meetings, etc.).
- The congregation has engaged a community issue during the past year.

EDWM Mission: Growing Together in Faith and Ministry

Stewardship

- Members of the congregation understand stewardship as their response to God's love and God's call to tend and care for the whole of creation, including our selves, our possessions and "this fragile earth, our island home."
- Members of the congregation practice simplicity of life and generosity in giving as spiritual disciplines rooted in gratitude to God.
- Throughout the year members of the congregation are asked to support the ministry of the church with their time, talents and treasure, especially through the practices of proportionate giving (or tithing) and witnessing to God's work in their lives.

Discernment

- The congregation intentionally and systematically helps its members discern their gifts for ministry in the congregation as well as in their families, workplaces, communities, and beyond.
- Once gifts for ministry are discerned, the congregation helps its members understand where they are called to exercise those gifts and encourages them to pursue that call.
- The congregation's current mission initiatives stretch its members by calling them to work alongside and on behalf of people who are different from them in language, culture, ethnicity or economic status.

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Viable Congregations

Viability indicates a parish's stability, sustainability, and strength in terms of finances, property and administrative functions that enable it to carry out God's mission. These characteristics point to the ability for a parish to survive. These characteristics are those elements of congregational and diocesan life that are considered basic and essential to ongoing existence. They also represent the fundamental obligations and responsibilities that each congregation undertakes as a constituent part of this diocese.

The characteristics of Viable Congregations that follow are a way of initiating a dialogue about our participation in God's mission and ministries in the world, with the hope that, from these discussions, the entire diocese --- laity, bishop, priests and deacons --- will commit itself to engage in the work of mutual building up, regeneration, and transformation.

Viability characteristics include the following. Problems or issues with viability are indicated by their absence, which may indicate a failure to thrive, stasis, or unsustainability:

- Essential leadership positions (wardens, vestry, treasurer, clerk) are filled and have regular turnover per congregation bylaws.
- Clergy and staff salaries and pensions are paid in a timely manner and meet at least minimum diocesan recommended compensation levels.
- The congregation is current with all financial obligations, including payment of the full Diocesan apportionment.
- There is an annual giving (stewardship pledge) program.
- A congregational financial budget is prepared annually.
- Church properties (buildings and grounds) are free of major defects or these are being addressed.
- The congregation files an annual parochial report and a yearly financial review or audit per diocesan canons.
- The congregation has By-laws by which it closely governs its affairs and that are reviewed at least every three (3) years.
- All clergy and appropriate laypersons have received training in *Safeguarding God's People* and *Safeguarding God's Children* as required by diocesan guidelines.
- The parish follows the Canons of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan and of The Episcopal Church.
- The parish follows The Episcopal Church's *Manual of Business Methods in Church Affairs*.
- The parish is represented at Diocesan Convention
- All clergy are required to take anti-racism training, and it is strongly recommended for all congregational lay leaders (wardens, vestry members, child and adult educators, music personnel, and youth program coordinators).

Additional dimensions used by another diocese:

Strategic Parish

Using the key dimensions of mission and resources, a strategic parish has a clear missional focus but may have insufficient resources or compromised viability. While its resources may be waning, its mission is strategic in terms of making a discernible difference in individual lives and in the larger world around it; being in alignment with the vision and priorities of the Diocese; and being strategically located.

Static Parish

Using the key variables of mission and resources, these parishes appear to have an unclear or missing missional focus, but do, however, have sufficient resources (money, people, buildings, etc.). The congregation is therefore viable, but a clear, vital, lively response to God's mission is unclear or missing. They may exhibit a more inward-looking, self-maintenance focus. The living out of diocesan core values of following Jesus, serving each other and the world, and growing together in faith and ministry are compromised or missing. Efforts toward missional renewal, regeneration, and transformation would be required to align with diocesan mission and vision values.

Unsustainable Parish

Using the key variables of mission and resources, these parishes exhibit both an unclear or missing missional focus and insufficient resources (money, people, buildings, clergy, administration, etc.). Both vitality and viability are compromised.

The parish does not appear to have a strategic ministry or mission, is not mission-focused, is unable to come into alignment with Diocesan strategic priorities, is inward-looking and appears to be making little difference in its surrounding community. In addition to an unclear mission focus, it also may exhibit some of these characteristics -

- Depleting its capital assets to pay for its current expenses.
- Unable to maintain its property and have sufficient capital reserves for its longer-term property needs.
- Cannot cover current operating expenses without cutting back on important ministry.
- Is unduly reliant on sources of funding outside the freewill offering.

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