

# A WAY FORWARD

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## Common Language for Our Common Life

**Submitted by Nora Adelman, Jeff Moretzsohn and Nancy Deming on behalf of  
The Diocesan Consultation Team**

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# CHARACTERISTICS OF VITAL CONGREGATIONS

### Introduction

Each congregation in our diocese has unique God-given gifts for mission and ministry that we offer together as the body of Christ. Carrying out God's mission through the church's ministries is the joint responsibility of both clergy and lay persons. The diocese calls upon each of our congregations to consider how we are currently using or might better use our gifts to create communities of faith that are inviting, forming, sending and serving. Additionally, we encourage all congregations to work in partnership with one another to develop effective ministries in order to carry out their mission.

The "Characteristics of Vital Congregations" that follow are a way of initiating a dialogue with congregations about their participation in God's mission and ministries in the world, with the hope that, from these discussions, the entire diocese-laity, clergy and bishops-will commit itself to engage in the work of mutual up building 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 to carry out the mission and ministry of the church. There is no need to take them in order or all at once; congregations may want to start in areas where they feel strong.

### **INVITING:**

*We will bear witness to God's reconciling love across boundaries of race and class, generation and language.*

### **Welcome**

- The congregation reflects the demographics (age, income, and race/ethnicity) of its surrounding community.
- The congregation shows hospitality to visitors and has a process for incorporation of new members.
- The congregation has adequate outdoor lighting and signage; signage (indoors and outdoors) and bulletin boards are neat, clear, accurate, engaging and readable; and phone messages are welcoming, timely and contain hours of worship and location of the church building.

### **Communications**

- The congregation uses electronic and print communications vehicles including newsletters, Web site and electronic newsletters which are engaging, accurate and timely and include contact information for the church office and 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 cable and, where present, radio stations.
- The congregation conducts creative outreach activities such as direct mail, special events and collaborations with advocacy groups, non-profits and community groups.

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### **FORMING:**

*We will work, study, pray and give for our  
lifelong conversion in Christ.*

#### **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, and 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 mutual ministry reviews that focus on achievement of goals in the context of the congregation's participation in God's mission.

#### **Education/Formation for Discipleship**

- Education and formation opportunities for discipleship are offered to children, youth, young adults, adults and elders. (We understand discipleship as living our lives following the example of Jesus' life and teaching, in fulfillment of our baptismal covenant.)
- There is clear designation of clergy and lay leaders responsible for planning and implementing education and formation programs.
- The curriculum or educational programs or resources offer a global perspective and celebrate ethnic diversity and gender 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.

#### **Fellowship**

- The congregation has opportunities outside of coffee hour for fellowship (e.g. dinner groups, meals at the parish house, discussion groups).
- 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 parish life.

#### **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 ourselves, 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.
- Members of the congregation throughout the year 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.

#### **Worship**

- Worship is both vibrant and fresh in expression and rooted in tradition with the result that people are energized and inspired for daily life.
- 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 considers alternative worship times, venues and liturgies.

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### **SENDING:**

*We will send one another in the power of the Spirit into the ministries of our daily lives.*

- The congregation intentionally and systematically helps its members discern their gifts for ministry in the church and 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.

### **SERVING:**

*We will show forth the just reign of God in advocacy and action.*

#### **Outreach**

- At least 10 percent of the parish budget, excluding the diocesan assessment, 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 the support of the entire congregation.
- The congregation looks for opportunities to engage in collaborative ministry with other churches and faiths.

#### **Congregational Leadership**

- The leadership reflects the gifts and talents (including demographic considerations) 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 lay leaders are engaged in community 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, e.g. lectures, afterschool programs, day care, etc.
- The congregation has engaged a community issue during the past year.

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### **CHARACTERISTICS OF VIABILITY**

Viability characteristics are those elements of congregational and diocesan life that are considered basic and essential. They represent the fundamental obligations and responsibilities that each congregation undertakes as a constituent part of this diocese. While these responsibilities rest largely with the vestry, clergy should work cooperatively with the vestry to maintain the viability of the parish in these areas. Congregations that discover that they are experiencing difficulties in meeting one or more of these responsibilities should contact the office of the bishop for a referral for specific help.

- Essential leadership positions (wardens, vestry, treasurer, and clerk) are filled and have regular turnover per parish bylaws.
- Clergy and staff salaries and benefits are paid in a timely manner and meet at least minimum diocesan recommended compensation levels.
- The congregation is current with its financial obligations, including payment of the diocesan assessment.
- The parish leadership understands and articulates a plan of action (strategic plan) for mission and ministry as a church.
- There is an annual giving (stewardship pledge) program.
- A parish 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 audit.
- There are parish bylaws that are reviewed at least every three (3) years.
- All clergy and appropriate lay persons have received Safe Church and Anti-Racism training.

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**COVENANT  
OF  
MUTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE**

As the People of God gathered by grace and bound together through Christ in holy community in the Diocese of Pennsylvania

**WE GIVE THANKS:**

- For our calling to join one another in God's mission of *inviting, forming, sending and serving*;
- For the ministries to which we are commissioned in baptism and which we profess in our baptismal covenant; and
- For the blessing of our mutual life and work in one community as bishop, clergy and people, one diocese, in the fellowship of the Episcopal Church.

**WE AFFIRM:**

- That as one diocese, our common participation in the mission of God is grounded in the ministries of local congregations large and small, urban and suburban, in parishes or on campus, worshiping in a diversity of languages and styles;
- That our individual local congregations depend upon one another, and on the diocese as a whole, for their origins and continuing health and strength;
- That as local congregations we hold our resources and real property in trust for one another, the diocese and church as a whole, for the purpose of furthering God's mission; and
- That as local congregations we will best thrive in faithfulness to our calling:
  - when we hold ourselves accountable one to another and to the diocese as a whole for the use that we make of our gifts and resources, and
  - When we embrace opportunities to work in partnerships of prayer, learning and service one with another, and together as one diocese.

**WE THEREFORE PLEDGE THROUGH THIS COVENANT:**

- To adopt characteristics by which to assess our congregations' *vitality* and *viability*,
  - The characteristics of *vitality* indicating a congregation's lively response to God's mission of inviting, forming, sending and serving; and
  - the characteristics of *viability* indicating the stability and strength of a congregation's finances, property and administrative functions;
- To use these characteristics as a tool of study, reflection and discernment, within and among our congregations for purposes of accountability, strategic planning and the faithful allocation of our resources;
- To devote resources within and among congregations, and in the diocese as a whole, in support of opportunities for transformation and growth in vitality and viability, including the creation of new congregations; and
- To reallocate in the service of God's mission those resources of the diocese and local congregations which do not actively serve congregational vitality and viability.

Signed, on behalf of the Parish:

Rector \_\_\_\_\_

Sr. Warden \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Date Affirmed by the Vestry \_\_\_\_\_

Signed, on behalf of the Diocese:

Bishop \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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### RECOMMENDATIONS/NEXT STEPS

#### Of the Renewal of a Congregation

##### **Section I: The Process Initiated by the Congregation:**

- **Notification:** When a congregation does not meet the Basic Standards for a Viable Congregation, or anticipates not meeting them, the leaders of the congregation shall notify the Bishop in writing, indicating how long the inability may be expected to last. If it is expected to last longer than ninety days, then the congregation will be invited to present its circumstances to the next meeting of the office of Congregational Care and Development to discuss steps towards resolution and renewal as a vital and viable congregation.
- **Developing an Action Plan:** The congregation, the Canon for Congregational Care and Development, and the Bishop, shall appoint a team to develop an action plan. The team shall include the clergy person in charge and at least two lay leaders of the congregation, a member of Diocesan Council, and at least two leaders from the Diocese with wisdom and experience in congregational development. The team will adopt an action plan by majority vote.

##### **Section II: The Process Initiated by Diocesan Leaders**

- **Notification:** If a congregation has not met the Basic Standards for at least ninety days, and if the leaders of the congregation have not initiated the process of Section I by notifying the Bishop, other Diocesan leaders, including but not limited to the Dean of the Deanery, key Diocesan staff, or members of Diocesan Council from the Deanery may request review of the circumstances and the development of an action plan. The request shall be made in writing to the Bishop. If the Bishop receives credible information from any other source, the Bishop may initiate this process. Within thirty days of such request, or of the Bishop's initiation of this process, the clergy person in charge, the wardens, and the vestry of the congregation shall be notified and be invited into the process of developing and implementing an action plan towards resolving the inability to meet the Basic Standards of Viability. The Bishop shall report such requests to Diocesan Council at its next meeting.
- **Developing an Action Plan:** If the congregation accepts the invitation, then the action plan shall be developed and implemented as prescribed in Section I. If the congregation rejects the invitation to participate in the process, or if the congregation does not participate constructively in the process, then the Bishop and Diocesan Council may appoint a team to develop the action plan without representatives of the congregation.

##### **Section III: Reporting Progress**

- As the congregation and others implement the action plan, the clergy person in charge, or other leader appointed by the team, shall report to each Diocesan Council meeting, in writing or in person, as the Council may direct, updating the Council of progress, and changes in circumstances, or in the action plan. The team leader shall continue to report until the congregation continues to meet the Basic Standards for at least ninety days, or as otherwise directed by Council.
- Should the agreed action plan result in the recommendation to close or merge the parish, a new action plan shall be developed in collaboration with the parish leadership and diocesan leadership, providing appropriate steps and timing in order to adequately address the logistical and pastoral components of closing or merging a parish. Once agreed to, by the parish leadership and diocesan leadership, this action plan shall be presented to the next regular Diocesan Council and Finance Committee meetings for consent, and subsequent Diocesan Convention for approval.