

# Oregon Synod—Assessment and Visitation Process

## Trends from Assessment & Visitation Data

April 2018

### Assessment Responses

+Congregational Vitality Survey (CVS)	New Fall 2017= 37	2016 or older= 38	Total= 75
+Congregation Life Assessment	29		
+Visitation/Interviews	58 congregations--Estimating 568 interviews		
+Congregations and ministries not participating in this process	25%.		

### **Consistent strengths identified by congregations from CVS.**

- Very positive about their congregation and for the most part lay and clergy leadership
- Worship life is strong in that it is experienced as Nurturing Faith, is Joyful, and full of God's Presence.
- Congregation see themselves as Doing God's Work in congregation and the community.
- Visitors are welcomed and accepted, and to a slightly lesser degree, newcomers are incorporated.
- Strong Sense of Belonging and Commitment to the congregation is felt by almost all respondents.
- Most congregations believe they are vital communities, even though this can be challenged by responses to specific questions and issues.

### **General Trends for Congregations from Visitation Interviews:**

About the Congregation:

- Strong Relationships, help each other
- Welcoming and Friendly
- Engaged in the community, engage others beyond members, being a good neighbor
- Helping others through community service
- Financial pressures around sustainability
- Pressure caused by national political situation, incivility and hate actions (some congregations)  
What God wants for and from the congregation?
- Deepening spiritual life and relationship with God
- Courage to serve others; love and serve
- Relationships with neighbors
- Listen to one another

**After these trends, three patterns or groupings arise among congregations (from those participating in the process):**

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| A. 65% Congregations trying to maintain ministry and community life.                      |
| B. 20% <i>Congregations ranked themselves highest in Vitality (according to CVS)</i>      |
| C. 15% Congregations in crisis ...ongoing or have had to right size their structure/staff |

**Group A: Congregations trying to maintain ministry and community life**

- Being a good neighbor
- Aging Community with few or no young families and children
- Find divisive issues—past and present—hard to discuss; often prefer not talking about them
- Facility challenges with aging buildings; low investment in upkeep

- Primary ministry emphasis is providing or funding community social services; worship and music a distant second
- Focus on homelessness (vs. affordable housing)
- See perseverant and scrappy as identified primary strengths
- Desire to be more accepting; considering RIC  
What God wants for and from them?
- Growth in numbers, families, children
- Vitality and longevity

Group B. *Congregations which ranked themselves with highest Vitality scores.*

- *Strong relationships with non-members and community*
- *Wide Political-social spectrum; able to talk about anything; moving beyond “comfort zone” is the new normal*
- *Lack of hatred and hypocrisy, no judgment; RIC process is in the past*
- *Lived out spirituality vs being religious; blurring the line between sacred and secular community*
- *Empowered laity*
- *Focus on affordable housing (vs. just homelessness)*
- *Advocating for justice and peace; working on Immigration and Sanctuary; often environmentally, politically active.*
- *1 to 1s “regularly” often in worship and Listening seasons; community organizing is priority*
- *Time pressure is significant especially with families with children*
- *Multi-generational, often lots of babies and kids*

Group C. *Congregation in Crisis*

Many of the trends identified with Group 1 also apply here: aging community with few if any children, service/charity ministry as the primary ministry action and desire for growth with no clear idea of how to make that happen.

- Not enough people or resources to take next steps
- Limited or no pastoral leadership for the congregation
- Poor communication especially on divisive issues
- Some congregations—destructive behaviors related to congregation conflicts e.g. secret meetings

## **Analysis of Trends and Conclusions from the Assessment and Visitation data.**

(Sources CVS, CLA, Trend Report and Qualitative and Quantitative data)

1. Leadership—clergy and lay—is THE critical component to vitality, positive tone and potential sustainability (or the lack thereof). Leaders that are risk avoidant are often facing some level of resistance and refuse to act upon their future for the sake of “harmony”. This creates the environment where the community is not willing to try new things and is less hopeful about the future. When the congregation has a strong sense of belonging and commitment along with trust in leadership there is capacity to experiment, talk about hard issues and do things differently.

### 2. Sustainability Grouping

Every congregation is full of extraordinary people and gifts. Some demonstrate strengths in many areas but no place is perfect. Others face critical decisions about their future. The challenge is that by the time most congregations are willing to make the necessary changes they no longer have the capacity—people and financial resources—to implement the needed change.

- Group #B-(20% highest vitality scores). These congregations had strong combined scores in vitality and sustainability. They came in every size and configuration. Large congregations with multiple staff, pastoral sized (c. 50-100 members) and places receiving limited pastoral coverage.
- Group #A (65% focus on maintenance): Sit right on the lip of “vital and currently viable but not sustainable” and “currently viable but not sustainable or vital”. Leadership is critical at this stage because decisions have to be made that will surface resistance. The Denial-Blaming-Shaming-Bullying cycle is a trap for congregations who think that it will turn around without recognizing it is themselves that must change.
- Group #C (15% in crisis): Congregations scoring below 3.8 on the CVS are also the ones who identify themselves as in some kind of crisis. They are at the point where intentional intervention—internal or external--needs to be done in key areas:
  - +*Clear Sense of Mission/Purpose* with a focus on what is God’s Mission,
  - +*Building Healthy Relationship* that can talk about hard issues and challenges,
  - +*Right Sizing the Congregation* to explore appropriate structure, staffing, and facilities within resources available, and determine what kind of action/intervention (internal or external) is required. In Oregon over the next 3-5 years, the synod is likely to see as many as 40 faith communities in Group C.

3. Strong Healthy Relationships. Congregations that have been able to make the transition to more vital, sustainable communities, often have developed a culture--within and outside--of ever deepening relationships among participants. When this is present, managing difficult or polarizing conversations becomes much easier and even life giving. This does not mean that there is never conflict; it only means that it will be handled in an open, respectful way. There are several ways this can happen but consistently with successful congregation it starts with listening: Listening to God, Listening to Each Other, and Listening to Neighbors.

4. Equipped to share faith with others. Many congregations scored significantly lower when asked two questions: “*Congregation equips member to share their faith*” and “*I feel equipped to share my faith with others.*” When tied to “*Congregation helps people live out their faith,*” this becomes a synod wide priority. The data reveals this can be: (1) lack of understanding about how one shares faith, (2) communication issue from leaders, and/or (3) uncomfortable talking about faith and life. These questions are considered the most important in determining the vitality of a congregation.

5. Oregon is truly unique. Looking at the religious affiliation in the communities where our congregations are located, the realization is that many rural, “conservative” communities throughout the synod have the same or lower percentage of religious affiliation as Portland (the most unchurched metropolitan area in the United States). We have often assumed that conservative, rural communities would be more religious. The implications of this reality is the Oregon Synod faces even harder challenges with growing or maintaining current participation and financial support than much of the country. Declines will be steeper and more dramatic in the next five years with more and more congregations failing to be sustainable except as “house” church with 30 or less participants.