

## **How New Castle Presbytery Churches Can Engage With Vital Congregations**

Most of our churches describe the same worries:

- Aging congregation
- Money is tight and getting tighter
- People are tired
- Buildings demand a lot of upkeep

So churches ask these questions:

- How can we get young people and families in here?
- How can we get more money?
- How can we get people back in the pews after Covid?

### **Maybe we need to be asking different questions.**

No one wants to add another weight to the already over-burdened church leaders.  
No one needs more things on their to-do lists.  
Many of us already feel “not good enough.”

How about helping one another get back to the love that first ignited in us a love for God?’

How about asking questions that can help us get to some of that joy that Jesus promised as part of what it means to abide in Christ’s love and embody that love in this world?

- Why are we here?
- Why does the Church exist?
- What is the purpose of your congregation?

We’re inviting churches to engage deeply in questions of how God is calling us to live into our purpose here and now.

We have taken the Vital Congregations Initiative offered by the PC(USA) and pulled out what we see as the plums:

- the many layers of exploring the Seven Marks,
- the connection of life-changing prayer to world-changing justice work,
- and our Presbyterian belief that the Holy Spirit works through us all.

It’s about exercising our faith. Building up its muscles.

Like exercise, what you put in determines much of what you get out of it.

Like exercise, there can be some immediate rewards, but the big payoff comes from consistent habits that slowly change how our bodies work.

Doing this work influences our health, our ability to thrive, and to be an effective presence in this world.

Here are the options for the Vital Congregations Initiative:

**Option #1: You don't have to change a thing.**

**Option #2: Wade into the waters of Vital Congregations Initiative.**

**Option #3: Deep dive all the way in with a companion and support for the journey.**

**Option #1 – Do what you do. But do it with eyes open.**

You can keep going the way you're going. If this is what your congregation wants to do, then I ask you to please do two things:

First, **map out the trajectory**. If this is what your congregation looks like now with the ages of its members, the giving levels, and the spending down of resources, how will things look in five years? Ten?

Second thing is to **pray**. Set down these figures, trajectories, your thoughts, dreams, and feelings – set them all down in the presence of God and be still. Breathe. Listen the way Elijah did on the mountaintop. Listen the way Jesus did at Gethsemane. Listen with your heart and mind and soul.

If you believe that it's God's will for you to keep doing what you're doing the way you're doing it, then do that.

**Option #2 - Wade in and explore. [FILL OUT FORM]**

**It involves things you already do.**

This is not a cure-all. It is simply another tool to add to our toolboxes, another approach to the same kind of faithful attention God calls us to all life long. It's not a call to get busy and do more things. **It's simply a call to prayer and exploration.**

Those of you who embarked on the Unglued Church Project a few years ago can use what you've already discovered and weave it into this work. This can help you get back on track after Covid, or it can come at the same things from a different angle.

**None of this is wasted effort.**

You probably already **pray**. At least, I hope you do. So, how might you challenge your congregation to deepen their prayer experiences? Commit to praying together and individually with more time and space for quiet listening, to turning off the screens and the noise and giving our attention to this rich moment of life into which God is breathing life and love?

As for **exploration**, you can explore the "**Seven Joyful Marks of Vital Congregations\***." It's a way of looking at ourselves and our communities with fresh eyes. You can share these at session meetings, committee meetings, knitting group, circles, and even design a worship series around them. There are also Bible studies to connect with each of the seven marks.

This is an **NCP crowd-sourcing endeavor**: as folks share some of their best practices; favorite books, podcasts, and curricula; formative experiences and influences, we will continue to add them to our website.

You gather and talk and worship together anyway. How about focusing some of that on shifting how we approach church life and live into our purpose?

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\* We have relabeled some of these and added the word "joyful" to the list as a reminder that this work is intended to help our churches claim the joy Jesus described as coming from abiding in and embodying God's love.

**Option #3: Deep Dive [FILL OUT FORM]**

**Get matched with a companion** to accompany you for the next couple of years to listen to you, ask thought- and prayer-provoking questions, and to help you explore your church, your context, and your future with love and honesty. We have seven facilitators getting trained and oriented to be matched with congregations who want to dive deep and get the most out of this initiative.

**This can also involve cohorts of leaders with similar hopes and frustrations**, to meet as often as the group deems best.

Our recommendation is **monthly meetings with the companion facilitator** and then cohort meetings as your cohort wants: monthly, quarterly, whatever works for you.

**If you want to start in October, perhaps to develop an Advent start with your church, let us know.**

**Otherwise, we will launch you in January.**

Again, if you worked previously with the Unglued Church Project, you will see some primary themes reinforced, and can bring that previous work to bear on this. But you can also jump into this without having done Unglued Church. As previously mentioned, none of this is wasted effort.

**This is for those who want to do more than survive.** Maybe you are called to do something new, or to allow something new to happen in your midst, or to reorient your lenses to see the world in a new way.

Remember, when God calls us, God also equips us.