

The United Methodist Church
Council of Bishops
Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world

Congregational Vitality Report

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. –Jesus, Acts 1:8

“Why should I give my beer money to the church?” asked a worshiper in one of our highly vital congregations. Good question, difficult to answer.

As we strive to become more highly vital and reach further into the mission field, we also have to face more difficult questions within our congregations, our conferences and our denomination. As we work with new generations of believers, new questions are emerging requiring ministry and language shifts. These new questions and their answers are often more difficult than what we’ve experienced in the past. They require a shift in language and sometimes a new context.

We hear transformative stories from congregations and yet transformative shifts are becoming increasingly difficult for these same congregations. Reaching new generations of believers with a relevant and transformative witness is challenging and hard work.

Vitality, the spiritual capacity and ability for congregations to fully engage with the community, is as urgent today as ever before. Vitality is the measure of a congregation’s spiritual capacity to shift its ministry to be witnesses and offer resurrection power within the context of the community.

Vitality is the willingness to have a collection plate full of beer money.

The following report updates the state of the vital congregation movement that is occurring in existing congregations and new church starts. The report provides:

- New church start data for regions of the world.
- The latest vitality markers for each conference in the U.S.
- The challenges, learnings and recommendations from conferences throughout the world.

The materials for this report were gathered from statistical data submitted by conferences to GCFA, the Path 1 report, and reports submitted by 55 conferences from around the world.

New Church Starts

Across the connection, we are witnessing increased church planting and fruitfulness. There have been innovative, creative and transforming new church starts around the world including:

- Shades of Grace Church in the Holston Conference is a store front that reaches a new generation of believers that many congregations are challenged to reach.
- The Omata new church start in East Congo has bridged tribe and clan relationships which has been very difficult to do in other congregations.

- Providence Church in Juliet, TN was started through a partnership of congregations, the district and the conference. In five years it has grown to more than 1000 worshipers and inspired the plan for 20 new congregations by 2020.
- The Suncrest Church in West Virginia added a church planter to their staff to start a worshipping congregation with students of West Virginia University. This semester they have more than 150 students worshipping at the new service.

Church Starts by Region

	CC*	NCJ	NEJ	SCJ	SEJ	WJ
2012		27	18	26	36	9
2013	688	34	30	22	43	16

** Central Conference results include new faith communities.*

Challenges for New Church Starts

Conferences from around the world share common challenges when starting new congregations. The Central Conferences and Jurisdictional Conferences are experiencing similar challenges. Common challenges include:

- Leaders whose style and ability are suited for starting new churches. Leadership was the number one reason conferences identified for a new church start failure.
- Growth of new churches beyond the barrier of 100 worshipers. A pervasive pastoral approach which provides care and programs for the members is getting in the way of making new disciples and growing congregations.
- Clergy that understand the necessity of and how to develop the leadership of the laity in new churches.
- Development of new models for starting new congregations to replace strategies that have lost effectiveness like “parachute drops.”
- Unsupportive existing congregations that feel starting new churches undermine them.

Recommendations to Strengthen Our Ministry for Starting New Churches

- Offer no cost or significantly reduced cost quality coaching for new church start pastors and congregations.
- Develop and provide resources and tools for recruiting, calling, identifying and equipping potential successful new church start pastors.
- Identify and disseminate the characteristics of new church start pastors and the tools to assist conferences to evaluate the potential effectiveness of new church start pastors.
- Message the importance of new church starts and the fruitfulness existing congregations can experience side by side with them.
- Develop the concept and resources for bi-vocational new church start pastors.
- Add to the curriculum of every United Methodist seminary course work that includes how to start new faith communities and new congregations and how to reach new and younger generations of believers.
- Provide training and coaching that assists new church start pastors to develop lay leadership and congregations. The role we seek are mission leaders who make, form, equip, and send disciples into the mission field to make new disciples and engage in mercy and justice ministry.
- Strategize and work across conference lines to start new congregations and appoint new church start pastors.

Additional recommendations are found at the end of the report.

Vital Congregations

Congregational vitality, the spiritual capacity to witness and offer life, surged in 2012. The percentage of highly vital congregations in the US increased to 34%, up from 15% in 2010. In 2012, we grew in professions of faith, small group participation, mission participation and mission giving.

In 2013 congregational vitality experienced a dip. The percentage of highly vital congregations slipped to 27%. The only areas of growth were realized in small group participation and mission giving.

While we experienced a drop in vitality in 2013, we are still outpacing 2010. However, the fact remains that more than 70% of our congregations struggle to witness and offer the life giving power of Jesus Christ in their community.

There are not clear answers to the 2013 challenges except that increasing vitality is hard work. As we seek to turn around trends, we are experiencing unevenness. 2012 was the strongest year for United Methodists in the US in more than a decade. While we cannot be sure there is a correlation, 2012 was also the year after the conferences and congregations set goals. It is clear that growing vitality will require honoring our commitment to sustained and focused leadership for 10 years.

How we count mission participation changed in 2013 from counting the number of people who went on a mission trip to the number of people engaged in community and world mission. This change allowed for people who did not go on a mission *trip* but engaged *locally* to be counted in mission. In counting this aspect, we experienced significant variation from conference to conference. One conference had 275% of its worshipers engaged in mission while most conferences ranged in the 25% to 35% range. A significant number of conferences had between 60% and 75%. Different conferences were counting different things. Some were counting worshipers, some were counting people multiple times, and some were counting non worshipers. This year we did not include mission participation in the vitality metrics because of the variations. We found that for those in the 30% to 40% range, this did not affect their vitality. For those 60% and greater it did overall. We will work to create better understanding of this new metric.

2013 US Metrics

- Six conferences increased in highly vital congregations and 47 decreased. We experienced a decrease in the percent of highly vital congregations in 2013 from 34% to 27%.
- Forty-seven conferences increased in the percentage of worshipers in small groups and seven conferences decreased. We experienced an increase in 2013 in adult small group participation.
- Ten conferences increased in the percentage of congregations growing in worship attendance and 42 conferences decreased. Of the 10 conferences that increased, seven also grew in small group participants. We experienced a decrease in worship attendance in 2013.
- The number of worshipers to make a profession of faith went from 24% to 22%. While this is encouraging, overall we declined in the number of professions of faith in 2013. In essence we have congregations that are becoming more fruitful but there are a significant number of other congregations that are not reporting any new disciples/professions of faith.
- Overall, we grew in worshipers attending small groups (5% increase) and mission giving (1% increase) and declined in worship attendance (-2%) and professions of faith (-5%).

Vitality indicators begin on next page.

US Conference Vital Signs	Highly Vital Congrega- tions 2010	Highly Vital Congrega- tions 2012	Highly Vital Congrega- tions 2013	# of worshippers to make 1 profession of faith or restored	% of adult worshippers in small groups 2012	% of adult worshippers in small groups 2013	% of local church spending on mission	% of congrega- tions growing 2012	% of congrega- tions growing 2013
US TOTAL	15%	34%	27%	22	57%	59%	15%	34%	31%
NC TOTALS	12%	33%	25%	24	46%	49%	15%	32%	28%
DAKOTAS	9%	25%	18%	28	37%	34%	22%	39%	32%
DETROIT	9%	28%	30%	20	44%	46%	12%	32%	27%
EAST OHIO	10%	34%	22%	26	51%	52%	15%	28%	31%
IL GRT RIVERS	11%	28%	22%	26	43%	47%	15%	33%	24%
INDIANA	15%	40%	33%	27	47%	50%	12%	33%	28%
IOWA	13%	40%	18%	23	43%	43%	17%	34%	28%
MINNESOTA	12%	32%	22%	21	45%	45%	14%	28%	23%
N ILLINOIS	15%	29%	28%	18	44%	48%	15%	26%	23%
W MICHIGAN	12%	32%	27%	25	46%	50%	15%	33%	26%
WEST OHIO	14%	34%	30%	25	51%	57%	15%	36%	31%
WISCONSIN	8%	24%	24%	18	45%	47%	13%	30%	26%
NE TOTALS	11%	35%	26%	20	47%	48%	14%	34%	32%
BALT-WASH	22%	37%	39%	16	54%	56%	16%	35%	35%
EASTERN PENN	7%	36%	26%	18	50%	53%	10%	32%	31%
GREATER NJ	16%	31%	34%	18	53%	58%	14%	36%	39%
NEW ENGLAND	9%	29%	25%	19	40%	43%	13%	32%	27%
NEW YORK	7%	42%	25%	17	43%	44%	12%	38%	31%
PENIN-DEL	16%	39%	26%	22	43%	45%	15%	37%	33%
SUSQUEHANNA	8%	35%	28%	23	48%	49%	14%	39%	30%
UPPER NY	7%	31%	20%	23	40%	39%	13%	30%	32%
WEST VIRGINIA	10%	44%	22%	32	49%	47%	21%	32%	32%
WESTERN PENN	8%	24%	24%	24	44%	45%	14%	31%	32%
SC TOTALS	16%	34%	31%	20	69%	72%	16%	36%	31%
ARKANSAS	12%	35%	28%	24	58%	62%	15%	32%	27%
CENTRAL TEXAS	22%	32%	30%	19	87%	93%	15%	42%	41%
KANSAS EAST	14%	29%	24%	20	68%	59%	11%	31%	25%
KANSAS WEST	11%	24%	27%	22	58%	59%	11%	36%	28%
LOUISIANA	24%	38%	31%	21	66%	66%	23%	33%	34%
MISSOURI	16%	33%	32%	21	55%	57%	13%	42%	30%
NEBRASKA	11%	23%	34%	17	48%	52%	14%	41%	32%
NEW MEXICO	15%	31%	31%	24	65%	61%	13%	29%	33%
NORTH TEXAS	32%	42%	35%	16	77%	81%	16%	43%	34%

NW TEXAS	10%	27%	32%	22	85%	92%	16%	35%	22%
OKLAHOMA	24%	31%	27%	24	71%	74%	18%	34%	32%
OK INDIAN	27%	45%	38%	22	40%	45%	14%	33%	21%
RIO GRANDE	10%	36%	24%	27	40%	41%	13%	26%	23%
SW TEXAS	33%	42%	40%	20	69%	75%	16%	37%	34%
TEXAS	27%	38%	34%	19	81%	89%	16%	34%	34%
SE TOTAL	15%	33%	26%	25	60%	62%	15%	34%	32%
AL-W. FLORIDA	15%	40%	20%	25	61%	70%	13%	36%	34%
FLORIDA	13%	26%	32%	20	51%	52%	13%	32%	38%
HOLSTON	22%	31%	25%	31	63%	64%	16%	36%	31%
KENTUCKY	16%	31%	27%	29	53%	56%	14%	30%	29%
MEMPHIS	9%	36%	30%	28	58%	66%	17%	32%	32%
MISSISSIPPI	9%	29%	27%	35	53%	58%	16%	31%	35%
N ALABAMA	22%	47%	23%	31	73%	68%	13%	31%	30%
N CAROLINA	16%	26%	18%	26	57%	58%	20%	35%	35%
N GEORGIA	14%	34%	32%	20	62%	64%	15%	37%	36%
RED BIRD	19%	48%	38%	19	40%	35%	11%	44%	29%
S CAROLINA	15%	30%	31%	28	64%	66%	15%	39%	30%
S GEORGIA	14%	26%	25%	27	68%	67%	13%	31%	30%
TENNESSEE	16%	37%	30%	25	64%	66%	19%	33%	32%
VIRGINIA	16%	38%	24%	22	61%	62%	19%	33%	35%
WN CAROLINA	22%	33%	25%	25	61%	64%	13%	34%	28%
WESTERN TOTAL	20%	40%	32%	20	57%	60%	13%	37%	30%
ALASKA	18%	36%	27%	28	45%	47%	17%	36%	37%
CAL-NEVADA	21%	40%	27%	20	54%	58%	10%	32%	31%
CAL-PAC	24%	39%	37%	20	51%	52%	12%	41%	32%
DESERT SW	23%	46%	37%	20	51%	52%	17%	34%	28%
OREGON-IDAHO	11%	32%	22%	23	65%	73%	15%	36%	29%
PACIFIC NW	20%	39%	35%	25	55%	57%	17%	33%	27%
ROCKY MOUNT	23%	44%	40%	17	76%	76%	13%	42%	33%
YELLOWSTONE	21%	43%	21%	25	55%	56%	15%	37%	28%

What Are We Learning About Vitality

- Conferences that have specific strategies and programs (training and planning) for increasing vitality indicate that overall, churches who participate do better. For example in Minnesota 78% of the congregations that participate in their program showed an increase in worship attendance in 2013. Most likely the results are due to focus and strategic training. In other words what we pay attention to and equip people for produces fruit.
- Conferences have a variety of initiatives to increase vitality including Natural Church Development, The Healthy Church Initiative, Team Vital, conference developed academies and other initiatives. These strategies focus on spirituality, congregational assessment,

congregational development strategies and leadership development. Churches that participate tend to do better.

- Congregations that are vital have a renewed emphasis on small groups and community engagement. These are two key factors of vitality – involvement of disciples in growing their faith and engagement in community mission.
- New ethnic congregations in the US are being started are vital and are helping other congregations connect with new immigrant populations.
- More conferences are starting clergy peer learning and support groups to enhance clergy skills and focus on vitality. Clergy report that they appreciate the opportunity to connect with colleagues and work together.
- Congregations that are growing in vitality are engaging the immediate community.
- Congregations have lost the skill and fervor for evangelism.
- Larger congregations are more engaged in equipping the laity for leadership and engagement in the community. Equipping and coaching laity is a key strategic influencer of vitality.

Conferences Use of Metrics

There are two different movements related to the use of metrics within the US.

1. Conferences that are no longer using metrics or goal setting with congregations because they have not found that it makes a difference, have encountered strong resistance and/or have developed targets that are non-metric related.
2. Conferences that are using metrics, developing resources, and creating support mechanisms for goals and expectations. These conferences are using vital signs, sharing five year trends with congregations at charge conferences, engaging leaders in understanding their congregation's trends, and developing clear and measurable goals with congregations.

It is too early to measure and understand which strategies are working best to increase vitality. We will learn from these different approaches over time.

Recommendations for Growing Vitality

- Identify the characteristics of clergy leaders who grow vital congregations. From the TowersWatson study, we know what pastors of highly vital congregations do:
 - They set ambitious goals and help the congregation achieve them.
 - They mentor and coach lay leadership.
 - They stay for longer periods of time in an appointment.
 - They inspire people through their preaching.
 - They use their influence to motivate and engage people in making changes in the congregation.

We need to know what characteristics these leaders have so that we recruit and call for these characteristics. For instance some signs indicate these leaders persevere, are learners to improve skills, demonstrate creativity and innovation, and have passion. Is this what we should be looking for or are their other characteristics that vital leaders possess?

- Increase the messaging of vitality and share what is working across the denomination.
- Continue to shift emphasis and sustained focus toward fruitfulness that is spiritually centered and led.
- Identify strategies that move groups of churches forward. Much of the emphasis and work is church by church and has little impact on overall vitality. Identify and/or develop the models for moving groups of congregations to increase vitality.

We are called to be witnesses in a time of dramatic shifts within the culture that is challenging how we make disciples and grow vital congregations for the transformation of the world. Working and learning together will help us discover and understand how we best call and equip spiritual leaders and develop existing and new congregations.

Additional recommendations for starting new churches

- Develop common language across the connection for starting new churches.
- Develop organic models through existing congregations and equip existing congregations to start new congregations.
- Develop congregations that offer ministry specifically directed to young people.
- Explore more bi-vocational clergy to start new congregations.
- Create a healthy balance between spiritual-centeredness and the mechanics of starting new churches.
- Count the number of worshipers in new congregations in addition to counting the number of new churches started in Path 1 reports.
- Create highly trained and educated clergy that will connect in the community.
- Create a greater balance in denominational training that focuses not only on theoretical but also the practical.
- Create predetermined benchmarks for new church starts.
- Equip superintendents, as part of their missional strategist role, to assess new church start sites.
- Equip superintendents to supervise new church start pastors.
- Explore using lay women and men to start new congregations.
- Explore the Fresh Expression model used by British Methodists in which some polity is suspended in order to spur innovation.
- Utilize research on context before starting new churches.
- Ensure there is adequate housing for new church start pastors.