



## *REPORT: Vital Congregations Report*

*The world needs passionate Christ-like disciples who are stirring up faith, hope and justice in the community.*

Colleagues in Christ,

Today I am filled with hope and joy. As bishops of the church, we recognized that we had a significant challenge to grow more highly vital congregations, particularly in the United States. We committed to pray and lead toward more highly vital congregations in the US and set a goal to double the number of highly vital congregations. **WE HAVE EXCEEDED THE GOAL.** We have grown from 14.6% to 33.9% highly vital congregations in the US since the TowersWatson Study in 2009. With God's help and working together, we have begun to turnaround some of the trends that have concerned us for the last two quadrenniums.

The doubling of highly vital congregations means that there are more disciples working on justice and mercy ministries, we are making more new disciples, more disciples inviting new people, more disciples are engaging in learning small groups, and more disciples are giving generously to mission.

In this letter I want to

1. Update you on what God accomplished in and through The United Methodist Church during 2012 related to the vital congregations movement
2. Share the specific vitality measures by US conference
3. Share what we measure to determine vitality
4. Offer some next steps

In 2012 the United Methodist congregations in the United States grew in the number of new disciples (professions of faith), disciples in small groups, disciples engaged in mission, and disciples giving to mission. During this same year the number of highly vital congregations exceeded 33% of our congregations in the US. This is the first time growth like this has occurred in more than a decade.

While there is more to learn, here are some things we believe are occurring.

1. When leaders identify, communicate and focus on specific strategies, goals and actions, disciples work toward them.
2. More and more congregations are implementing the 16 drivers of vitality.
3. Most of our congregations and conferences set goals in 2011 and worked toward these goals.
4. The congregations that are regularly updating their progress on their goals through tools such as vital signs, grew professions of faith, small group participation, mission engagement, and mission giving more than those who were not reporting progress regularly. There is a correlation between regular accounting for these ministries and growth.
5. The writings, workshops and leading on vital congregations are increasing vitality.

There is also a view that congregations are over counting. There may be some of this, but money sent to the General Church and Conferences for mission increased and this may indicate that more often than not, the increases in the other areas are genuine as well. The growth has more to do with purpose, focus and focusing on implementing goals/16 drivers of vitality.

Team Vital, the Metrics Team, the Council of Bishops Congregational Vitality Team and the General Agency Vital Congregations Staff Work Team will continue to review and learn about our vitality.

We must also keep in mind that vitality and sustainability can be two different things. A small congregation in a low income community with a large building may be vital but have a difficult time sustaining its ministry.

As you review the chart below keep in mind the following — the higher the percentage in all but the professions of faith column indicates greater vitality. In the professions of faith column we measure how many worshipers per one profession of faith and therefore a lower percent is preferable in this column. The mission percentage is low because up until 2013 we only measure those who go on a mission trip.

<b>US Conference Vital Signs</b>	Highly Vital Congregations 2010	Highly Vital Congregations 2012	Number of worshipers to make 1 profession of faith	% of adult worshipers in small groups	% of worshipers involved in a mission experience	% of local church spending going to mission	% of congregations growing
US Total	14.8%	33.9%	23.8	56.9%	15.2%	15.4%	34.0%
North Central Total	12.1%	33.0%	24.3	46.3%	11.1%	15.2%	32.4%
Northeastern Total	10.6%	34.7%	21.8	47.1%	10.0%	14.0%	33.8%
South Central Total	19.4%	33.7%	21.4	68.6%	22.0%	16.3%	36.2%
Southeastern Total	15.9%	33.0%	26.5	60.2%	16.6%	15.9%	33.6%
Western Total	20.5%	40.1%	22.7	57.3%	10.6%	13.5%	36.7%

While our statistics indicate we are improving in the US, we still have more to do. Within the United States we will have strong vitality when 70% of our congregations are highly vital, 70% of our congregations are growing in worship attendance, and 70% of our worshipers are engaged in a small group and community justice and mercy ministries. Ultimately our vitality is witnessed through changed lives, transformed communities and renewed congregations. As we continue to pray and lead together, God will bless our ministry and

use the United Methodist Church to make disciples of Jesus Christ and transform the world.

### **Resourcing Vital Congregations**

There is very creative resourcing being done in conferences on vital congregations. Team Vital has been gathering leaders from seven conferences that are learning together, sharing ideas and resources and accounting to one another for their progress. United Methodist Communications has just begun an online vital congregations training. Recently a training was conducted in the Philippines and Zimbabwe. The vital congregations' movement is spreading from conference to conference and around the world.

### **Measures to Determine Vitality**

Vital congregations evidence their vitality through: A) Life-full stories about changed lives, new disciples and transforming ministry; B) Fruitfulness evidenced by new disciples being made, number of disciples in worship and in small groups for learning and faith formation, number of disciples engaged in mission, and generous giving by disciples, particularly to mission. C) Life changing ministries that build up the community of faith and transform lives and social conditions in the community and the world. Vital congregations have powerful stories, fruitfulness and life changing ministries.

Life-full stories, fruitfulness and life changing ministries are fostered in vital congregations through

- Inviting and inspiring worship
- Engaged disciples in mission and outreach
- Gifted, empowered and equipped lay leadership
- Effective, equipped and inspired clergy leadership
- Faith forming small group ministries
- Strong children and youth ministries

Fruitfulness is one part of vitality and to measure fruitfulness, vitality indicators were identified in four areas – growth, involvement, engagement and giving.

### **Growth**

Growing every year in worship attendance may not be achievable for a variety of contextual reasons. Therefore, yearly growth in worship attendance is not measured. Instead growth over a five year period of time is measured. Another important area of growth is professions of faith, the one stable method we measure making new disciples. Professions of faith are also measured over a five year period of time.

### **Involvement**

Involving disciples in core ministries of the congregation is an important measure of vitality. It demonstrates that the congregation is not content with making members, but involving disciples in opportunities where their faith can be shaped and matured. Measures taken into consideration are Sunday school, Bible study and other ongoing groups for growth and ministry. The number of young adults involved in growth groups is also measured. Vital congregations are working to reach and disciple young adults.

### **Engaged**

Highly vital congregations are engaged in communities and the world by making new disciples and engaging in justice and mercy ministry. The measures include professions of faith that are in addition to confirmands. This measure identifies if the congregation is

connecting with the non and nominally religious in their community. Vital congregations also send more of their disciples on mission trips. The denominational statistical reports do not capture disciples engaged in mission in the community through the congregation. Presently only mission trips are included in the statistical reports. Future statistical reports will include community mission by the congregation so that we can also measure this area.

### **Giving**

Giving to ministry and mission are measured because they are signs of generous disciples and congregations that are focused on healthy stewardship.

### **Highly Vital Congregation Measures**

Below are the specific measures used to identify highly vital congregations. To be considered as a highly vital congregation, a church must be in the top 25% of all congregations in two of the four major areas and cannot be in the bottom 25% in any one of the areas. Each specific measure is important as a highly vital congregation may not be as fruitful in every area but is fruitful in most of the areas.

#### **Growth**

- On average, US highly vital congregations increase worship attendance by 4% over five years. The average worship attendance change for all US churches is -7%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations increase the number of professions of faith by 82% over five years. The average change in the number of professions of faith for all US churches is -11%.

#### **Involvement**

- On average, US highly vital congregations have 106% of their worship attendance involved in a small group or some ongoing study opportunity. This number may seem inaccurate but it is this high because the average worship attendance does not include some people who go to small groups like children in Sunday school or youth in youth group. The average for all US churches is 71% of the worship attendance in small groups.
- On average, US highly vital congregations have 9% of their worship attendance who are young adults involved in study groups that include Bible study, Sunday school and other groups for learning. The average for all US churches is 5%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations have 56% of their total professing members in average worship attendance. The average for all US churches is 51%.

#### **Engaged**

- On average, US highly vital congregations have 20% of their worship attendance engaged in a volunteer in mission ministry. The average for the US is 8%.
- On average, US highly vital congregations have 6% of their worship attendance that join by profession of faith or are restored in a given year. This does not include confirmands. The average for US churches is 2%.

#### **Giving**

- US highly vital congregations give 100% of their apportionments for the most current year.
- On average, US highly vital congregations grow mission giving by 12% over five years. The average for all US churches is -15%.

- On average, US highly vital congregations grow non capital spending by 22% over five years. The average for all US churches is 2% over five years.

### **Next Steps**

You are encouraged to remain focused on growing the number of highly vital congregations, encourage more congregations to use the web based vital signs, set ambitious God sized visions and goals within each conference, and focus resources to help congregations implement the 16 drivers of vitality. The Congregational Vitality Team will explore how we will set future goals related to vital congregations.

Together we are and will continue to change lives, congregations and the world.

Keep the faith!

John

John Schol, Bishop  
The United Methodist Church  
Greater New Jersey Conference

*Building a future with hope*  
Give to the GNJ Sandy Relief Fund  
[www.gnjumc.org](http://www.gnjumc.org)