



The Thrive Project: a season of exploration

Fall: A Season of Education

Purpose: to broaden and deepen congregational awareness and articulation of the biblical foundations of congregational revitalization.

Proposed Metric: By the conclusion of the Season of Education (define beginning and ending dates here), 100% of our staff and officers, 80% of our committee / team members, and 50% of all church regular participants will be able (1) to name and (2) to describe the seven marks of a healthy congregation.

Alternative Proposed Metric (established by Session): _____

Mark the following ideas your congregation will use for their explorations in education. Choose at least three, please.

_____ Choose a theme for your 7 Marks of a Healthy Congregation educational series

- Examples include, “The Magnificent Seven,” “7 Up for Jesus,” “Seven for Heaven,” “Seven Vital Signs of Health” (with an accompanying medical image), or a theme of your own imagination. Be creative...be provocative...be evocative...have fun together to create anticipation!

_____ *Sermon Series*: either a seven-week series (one per week) or an eight-week series (with an introductory sermon).

- Alternative sermon series: dig into each of the seven marks for two-three weeks: 14 – 21 weeks series.

_____ *“Extend the Sermon” notes*: include in-bulletin and on-line notes that create a six-day follow-up study for personal, couple, or family use.**

_____ *Congregation-wide study focus*:

___ Sunday morning studies: theme classes at child, youth, and adult levels*

___ Seven-week small group initiative: use existing groups and / or create time-limited groups

___ All-church retreat

___ Wednesday night program: use the existing program and / or experiment for seven weeks

_____ *Faith-sharing focus*: invite congregants to share their perspectives and/or experiences on one of the seven marks of a healthy congregation.

___ Devotional book: Write brief essays and publish the book online or as a written hand-out.

___ Video a response or personal sharing in the midst of the worship service each week: one theme per week.

_____ *“Lord, Deepen Our Hope” prayer concerts*: in which the church hosts a dedicated time of prayer for each of the seven themes. The Prayer Concert can be conducted amidst,

___ All small groups and committees throughout the seven, eight, 14, or 21) weeks

- ___ As a Sunday morning gathering
- ___ By organizing “prayer triads” or “prayer quads” of people willing to pray the theme for each week.
- ___ As part of each week’s worship service – it could be *both* a joy *and* a concern!

Winter: A Season of Examination

Purpose: to enter into a process of discernment that leads to one’s becoming aware of the connection places between (1) the congregation’s unique, spiritual giftedness, (2) the congregation’s deep, abiding passions for ministry, and (3) the community’s significant need(s).

Proposed Metric: By the conclusion of the Season of Examination (define beginning and ending dates here), the congregation will have discerned, and the leadership will be able to articulate verbally and in writing, (1) three, congregational spiritual gifts, (2) three, abiding passions that energize the congregation for ministry, and (3) three significant community needs which, if met, would bless the community.

Alternative Proposed Metric (established by Session): _____

Mark the following ideas your congregation will use for their explorations in examination. Choose at least three, please.

- _____ *Congregational Survey*: use the 4-5 page survey in worship created by GA’s Research Services.**
- _____ *Session Survey on Seven Marks*: this survey is intended to stimulate discussion, dialogue and discernment among elders regarding the current being and future journey of their congregation.*
- _____ *Neighborhood Analysis*: use the GA provided analysis tool to deepen and broaden your congregation’s awareness.*
- _____ *“Lord, Deepen Our Wonder” prayer concerts*: in which the church hosts dedicated times of prayer on each of the seven themes, using similar times and groups described above, but specifically targeted toward,
 - ___ *Repentance*: Lord, how have we failed to live with courageous and generous faith?
 - ___ *Discernment*: Lord, what would you have us to know, to do, or to become?
 - ___ *Wonder*: Lord, show us your Providence and provision beyond our ability!
- _____ *Journey Walk*: create a timeline in the fellowship hall using butcher paper. At a fellowship event (or series of events), ask congregants to share their stories related to the seven marks of a healthy congregation:
 - ___ The approximate time (by decade or year) when they experienced *personally* God’s love and grace through one of the seven marks. (This can be at the same or a different church.)
 - ___ The approximate time (by decade or year) when the church *as a faith community* experienced spiritual insight, deepening, or blessing through one of the seven marks. (This is, of necessity, an exercise that will be dominated by longer term members, and will help others to hear the congregational story of God’s love and grace through the decades.)
 - ___ What “themes” emerge from the narrative told in this journey wall? What core values emerge?

___ What “chapters” are written by this narrative? How do the different “church epochs” differ from one another?

Spring: A Season of Experimentation

Purpose: to engage ministry and mission as a congregation with sufficient “newness” (e.g. in new ways, to new people, with new voices, toward new goals, etc.) that we are required to trust in the Lord with all of our heart.

Proposed Metric: By the conclusion of the Season of Experimentation (define beginning and ending dates here), our congregation will have experimented with ___ form(s) of internal ministry within the congregation and ___ forms of external or missional ministry.* (*The number of external experiments should be at least double the number of internal experiments.)

Alternative Proposed Metric (established by Session): _____

Mark the following ideas your congregation will use for their explorations in celebration. Choose at least two, please.

___ *Re-forming*: choose one of the seven marks to focus on for skill growth, congregational experimentation, expanding one’s community connections, and risk-taking.**

___ *Missional clustering*: partnering with other congregations (either Presbyterian, ecumenical, or inter-faith) or community organizations toward engaging missional ministry.**

___ *Death and Resurrection*: helping congregations live into death with gratitude and memorial, while preparing for resurrection and new life in various forms (e.g. as a new worshipping community or thriving without a building).**

___ *“Lord, Deepen Our Service” prayer concerts*: in which the church hosts dedicated times of prayer on each of the seven themes, using similar times and groups described above, but specifically targeted toward one of the three revitalization options above.

Summer: A Season of Celebration

Purpose: to articulate and celebrate together what God has done and has been doing, as well as articulate and celebrate that toward which (those toward whom) God appears to be guiding the congregation for ministry and mission.

Proposed Metric: By the conclusion of the Season of Celebration (define beginning and ending dates here), 100% of our staff and officers, 80% of our committee / team members, and 50% of all church regular participants will have shared a story related to this season of congregational revitalization of how God has been engaging / teaching / calling / challenging them.

Alternative Proposed Metric (established by Session): _____

Mark the following ideas your congregation will use for their explorations in celebration. Choose at least two, please.

_____ *“Tell Your Story” campaign*: see above under faith-sharing focus. The difference here is a nuanced change in focus from “share your perspective or experience” to “share what new song God is teaching you to sing” regarding one of the seven marks.

___ Have a “speak out” during the worship service in which the sermon time is used to tell stories. These stories can be prepared and invited in advance or, for more adventurous worship leaders, experienced as “open mic” reporting.

___ Host a Town Hall with the theme of story-telling on the seven marks.

___ Devotional book: Write brief essays and publish the book online or as a written hand-out.

___ Video a response or personal sharing in the midst of the worship service each week: one theme per week.

_____ *“Share Your Marks” report*: Complete the required report from GA’s congregational vitality unit. This is required as it will provide feedback to GA staff for the pilot project – Please and Thank You!).

_____ *“Lord, Deepen Our Praise” prayer concerts*: in which the church hosts dedicated times of prayer on each of the seven themes, using similar times and groups described above, but specifically targeted toward,

___ Celebrating where we see God working in our community, even though we may not have anything to do with that work.

___ Celebrating where we see God working in our congregation both through us and in spite of us.

___ Celebrating where we sense God’s leading, guiding, and calling to each one as an individual and to the entire congregation as a faith community.

_____ *Avoid “peacocking”* – defined as so worried about how one looks positively or negatively, that one distorts honest self-evaluation and deepening personal awareness that suffocates congregational vitality. The twin evils of peacocking include,

- “Woe is me / us” with too great a focus on the negative, which drains one of energy, intelligence, imagination and love.
- “I’m not just okay but a real rock star” with so little ego strength that we pretend to be something we are not.

The opposite of “peacocking” is “to be who you are in Jesus.” The value of being who we are in Jesus includes,

- A healthy self-awareness that “I’m not okay and you’re not okay but we’re all alright in Christ Jesus.”
- A sense of energy and joy that comes when honesty kisses grace.
- A shift in focus from ourselves (the spirituality of narcissism) to a focus on what God is up to in, with, around, through and sometimes in spite of our faith community (the essence of Reformed faith)!

*Resources exist and can be transmitted electronically

**Resources are being produced “with all due Presbyterian haste” and will be available soon.



Thrive Project Vision

"True religion must come first, to direct our minds to the living God. Thus, steeped in the knowledge of God, they may aspire to contemplate, fear, and worship his majesty; to participate in God's blessings; to seek God's help at all times; to recognize, and by praise to celebrate, the greatness of God's works – as the only goal of all the activities of this life."

John Calvin

"A post Christian mission should leave behind all attempts to become a Christian culture again. Mission is not a project. Evangelism is not to grow the church. Conversions are not instruments to change the world but are a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. They are good things in and of themselves: evangelism and mission. Even if they do not bring back a Christian culture, they offer beauty to our world. Mission is about the glory of God before anything else. God is simply good, not just good for something. Evangelism and serving the poor are good, not just good for something."

Ray Jones

Courageous faith knows there is no assurance of comfort and ease to the life of discipleship in Jesus Christ. Our Savior's crucifixion taught us that. Yet those who boldly dare to passionately follow know that this is a living faith in a living God, a living Gospel that was always meant to be on the move! Christ's followers are always reforming and revitalizing because they understand that is what resurrection and redemption are all about.

Kathryn Threadgill

Revitalization – *"The act or an instance of bringing something back to life, public attention, or vigorous activity."* (Webster Dictionary) *"The action of imbuing something with new life and vitality."* (OED) **Synonyms:** *reanimation, rebirth, regeneration, rejuvenation, renewal, resurgence, resurrection, resuscitation, revival.*

Healthy Congregations are Vital Congregations

Who are vital congregations? It is the woman who joyfully joins her church for worship, because there is a new energy and a genuine compassion present there. It is the people who do the difficult work of letting go of what they have always understood their congregation to be in order to minister to the needs of their community. It is the untrained young mother, supported by her pastor and church, who has a passion for reaching out to young African American girls, or the earnest leader who imagines with others about how to be a living sanctuary amidst gang violence outside their doors.

Everywhere you turn, God, in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit is doing this new thing for the church! *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43:19*

Now is the time that God longs to reveal in wonder the revitalizing of the Church in our communities, our cultures, our nation, and throughout the Earth! The question is - do we perceive it? Do we wait expectantly ready, hope-filled and faithful to experience the transforming wonder God has planned, or are we fearfully anxious, indifferent, and paralyzed to change? Are we merely existing in "glory days" gone by, or are we courageously emboldened to live as disciples of Jesus Christ today?

By redirecting our mind to the living God, by reforming and being re-formed in Jesus Christ, and by reinvesting in genuine relationships, we can faithfully follow as disciples of Jesus Christ. We can join in the revitalizing power of the Holy Spirit with existing congregations. We can be a small part of God's redemptive plan, until we worship in the fullness of the kingdom. The vision: *By the power of the Holy Spirit, and in authentic relationships with mid-councils, we seek to equip, nurture, and support church leaders to empower their congregations to renew, recover, and live more fully into faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ.*

The Revitalization Initiative of the PC(USA) is not a quick-fix, one size fits all program; it is not a guarantee that all existing congregations will survive in their current forms. It is not our aim or intent to assume we know every particular church, nor presume it is our job to tell them what to do. What we can do is humbly walk in trusting relationships grounded in love for God and for one another. We can show up, and seek to faithfully discern; we can, do the necessary, joyous, and difficult work of change, in order to live into the will of God *together*. We can be the church of Jesus Christ.

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12: 1-2

The triune God is the giver of vitality and life, and the Holy Spirit is powerfully working to revitalize the Church in the fullness of Christ's resurrection and reign. The Revitalization Initiative of the PC(USA) seeks to discern the Spirit's path forward for existing congregations, so that all might become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in word and identity, in action and in worship. Our hope is to unite the people of God, to walk together in seeking God, experiencing transforming wonder, and living into faithful discipleship to our God who is not finished yet.

9 Then God said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11 The he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."
Ezekiel 37: 9-14

There is no denying that we live in critically anxious times. A nation plagued with race riots reminiscent of a scarring past never truly reconciled. Words like "Christian" and "religion" are marred for over a decade, leaving sixty-four percent of adolescents claiming they find no need for the church today. Mounting fear permeates an ever-growing decline in the PC(USA) and all denominations, as churches everywhere seek relevance and strive for resilience. Scholars attest that we are entering the next Great Awakening. Some say it is an uphill battle, a crisis of faith, a heart problem. Sunday worship remains the most segregated hour in America. Our churches have become inwardly focused corporate institutions of programmatic systems. Our faith has become good morals derived from therapeutic and distant God. Our questions are about maintaining buildings, rather than addressing why no one is coming in them. Is it any wonder, as people in our culture search for meaning, they do not see the church as offering any significant help for the journey? Since many have experienced the church as being against them and too political, they have given up on the church, or feel the church has given up on them. Since they have not seen a lifestyle worthy to follow, they continue to look for a way that will satisfy their deepest desires and longings. Yet, we know the victory in Christ Jesus is sure!

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. 5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." Revelation 21: 3-6a

Christ's home is with us. Christ's life-giving Spirit is making all things new. God wants to be known. God wants to be in relationship with us from the day God walked with humanity in the garden, to the day God called Hagar by name in the wilderness, to the day God revealed the Son, Jesus Christ in human flesh. God wants to reveal the awesome mystery of God's wonder to us all. We just have to perceive it. We have to open ourselves to receive it. Therefore, we believe that if we walk together, and we look to the God who longs for us, then perhaps we might encounter the wonder of God that transforms all things and changes us forever.

Then maybe we will do church, share church, indeed be church in ways different than ever before. Maybe we will have the courage and conviction to do the necessary work to be transformed and to change, so that Christ's light shines through us and needs are met. Maybe we will have the reconciling conversations, and come together in ways we have never known by the power of the Holy Spirit. Maybe we will engage again the practices that take us deeper into God's love, our love for one another, and our love for the people around us. Maybe we will transcend culture, and reflect the kingdom of God with rich diversity of every kind, and all who are lost and broken and searching in this world might find their place in the family of God. The boldly daring part about this Initiative is the fact that we dare to dream and imagine that God might allow us to be a still small part of the coming Kingdom; the new thing that Christ is doing; the home that God is building among mortals. And perhaps all it takes is the people of God coming together and calling out to God. Perhaps it is as simple as: loving God

and loving one another, in order for us to see God's kingdom coming and God's will being done in the most wondrous ways.

It starts by showing up; by entering into relationship together and seeking the triune God revealed in wonder. The vision is simple: the denominational center leaders, showing up with mid-council leaders, who show up with pastors, who show up with parishioners, and seek the will of God and the Spirit's direction in calling all disciples of Jesus Christ to follow. In relationship together, we will prayerfully discern, honestly reflect, and share in the rich histories of congregations, while confronting harsh realities of brokenness and sinfulness. We will look to confess who we have been and where we are as congregations. In looking at our past and naming our present, we can more honestly discern, in spirit and in truth, where God is leading us to be in the future.

The second year of the Initiative will be about living into three revitalizing actions of missional clustering, re-forming the ways we are church, or witnessing to resurrection as we experience death. We will seek to faithfully walk with courage and hope into the new thing Christ is doing. Each context is different, each church is particular, and so the PC(USA) will attempt to resource and offer revitalization facilitators and coaches who can help mid-council leaders and pastors address the discerning needs of particular congregations and walk with them in their actions of revitalization, as they seek to follow as faithful disciples in God's plan.

We will also help to capture stories. For every church that is facing the reality of death and remembering its legacy of life, we hope to support you in capturing your story and sharing in the grace and promise of resurrection and new life in Christ. For those whose mission has become unclear and their community has changed around them, and they discern the Spirit's movement to revitalize in mission and ministry, we want to help share your story. We want to convey a church that faithfully follows the Lord in great hope, whether it is witnessing in death, changing into revitalized life, or completely transforming from all it used be into an entirely new chapter and life. Each church, each member, has a story to tell, and it is one this culture and the world needs to hear.

As we seek faithfulness and dare to imagine where God is leading us to follow, we will offer resources that will help plant new roots and build sustainable new systems to tend to the people of God and carry out mission and ministry together. We will encourage pastors in cohorts to pray and discern together, so relationships of support remind us that we are not alone. During this two-year initiative, we hope it will be a beginning, a fresh start to the denomination coming together at every level, and supporting one another as a part of the Church of Jesus Christ. We will be present together as difficult realities are faced, as churches face death and begin to mourn. We will walk together with those who are doing great things and have hit the peak of growth and ministry, and those who are starting to see that taper off and decline. We will help one another dare to re-envision and reform where the Spirit is leading them, and how they are being called to be church together in their ever-changing context. Together, we will celebrate revitalization of people and places that have truly experienced the wonder of God, and we will sit together when efforts fail and hope is wavering. Truly, we believe that the time of Great Awakening is now. Christ is doing a new thing. Do we perceive it? Are we open to it? And will we have the courage to faithfully follow as disciples of Jesus Christ? That is our prayer and our hope!

Ray G. Jones III
Associate Director for Evangelism
502-569-5280
Ray.jones@pcusa.org

Kathryn Threadgill
Associate for Vital Congregations
502-569-5085
Kathryn.threadgill@pcusa.org

