



Dear Friends,

Thank you for your interest in joining the [Vital and Thriving Congregations](#) initiative! The goal of Vital and Thriving (V+T) is to unlock the capacity of our congregations to build beloved community, to become congregations that are truer to the vision of Jesus. We've created a space where your congregation can join with others for support and a process of collective discernment as we emerge from the pandemic and innovate your capacity to thrive.

Like the disciples of John 20 huddled together in the upper room, many of our congregations find themselves isolated, fearful, and holding on to one another. They are hungry for any sign that Jesus is with them, and that God has a future for them. Some congregations are stable and have the resources to maintain but sense the changing world is deeming their ministry less relevant and effective. They are looking for ways to form disciples who live and do ministry at the intersection of the Gospel and their neighborhood. There are even some congregations that are growing, active and engaged, and yet wonder whether they are dissipating their energy and missing the mark by just adding more ministries and more staff. They hope to discover their unique call within God's mission, and in turn focus their gifts, extend their reach, and deepen their impact.

The Partnership for the Missional Church (PMC) is the core process we're inviting congregations to participate in beginning next year. (We currently have a pilot cohort of 13 congregations actively engaged in testing the process.) Congregations partner with one another to discover where God is leading us. PMC is a journey of discernment, not a program or strategic planning process. It's a journey to discover each individual congregation's own character and calling.

PMC is a three-year journey in which cohorts of 12-16 congregations together learn how to form Christian community around God's mission in the world. Like sailing, this

process involves skills and habits to help along the journey of missional discernment. Congregations learn these spiritual practices in three phases of discernment:

Year 1: DISCOVERING

- Listening to God
- Listening to one another
- Listening to the strangers God is sending us to

Year 2: EXPERIMENTING

- In building bridges into communities and with the people God to whom God is sending us
- In partnering with others in God's mission in the world

**Experiments are supported by Seed Funding from the Diocese of California.*

Year 3: FOCUSING

- On clarifying your Missional Vocation and a Vision of God's Future for the church
- On setting clear goals, objectives and plans that honor the church's vocation and live into God's promised future
- On letting go of distractions that dissipate energy and resources in too many directions

**Focused projects are supported by sustaining grants from the Diocese of California.*

While the spiritual practices congregations learn along the way —Discovering, Experimenting and Focusing—are all the same, the places they are sent, the partners they find and their role in God's mission are unique. This process develops leaders, builds engagement with and within the congregation, and connects the church with its neighbors. The primary partner we want to rediscover is God! This the work of the Holy Spirit, which blows where she will. PMC can be thought of as congregations learning new ways to hoist their sails and catch the wind of the Spirit.

What will this look like in our congregation?

Creating Cultural Change

A Steering Team of lay members leads the PMC process in each congregation, supported by the V+T team of consultants and reflective practitioners. The Vestry/Bishop's Committee will be invited to check in periodically to review progress and discern next steps from what you are learning. While the journey begins with a small group of adventurous souls, the goal is to involve at least 20% of the congregation through numerous other short-term roles for members and existing groups. Involving more people ensures that what you learn becomes a lasting part of the congregation's life and culture.

Learning from Others

Three times a year, the Steering Team, Spiritual Leaders (priests, deacons) and others from the church meet with teams from other churches. These large Gatherings, led by the V+T team, are a time for biblical and practical training, discerning how God is working among them, and equipping the congregational teams for the work to be done between gatherings.

Cultivating Spiritual Leaders

The congregation's Spiritual Leaders (priests, deacons) have a special role in this journey. Often the congregation's business interferes with their ability to provide spiritual care and leadership, frustrating both members and the leaders. PMC helps alleviate this concern by providing coaching and support to cultivate the spiritual life and role of these leaders.

When congregations complete the PMC journey, they have a deeper understanding of how God is sending them into the community. They have built relationships in the neighborhood and found ways to connect with God's mission in those relationships. And, they have captured those learnings in documents that say who they are, how they are being sent and the future they believe God has for them. Each phase builds on the previous one to help congregations develop capacities in all the arenas in which they will continue to practice in the future.

Is this just another Strategic Planning Process? No.

Many congregations have made huge investments in strategic plans never enacted or well-meaning ministries that began with great promise and slowly faded out. No matter

how beneficial or helpful the plans and ministry may seem, a congregation's culture will unconsciously resist change.

PMC uses processes that enable the congregation to cultivate its own way of being missional. It's organic change from within. In this way the congregation develops new missional practices (Discovering, Experimenting & Focusing) that are becoming part of its culture and likely to last over time. The process will take your congregation from long to-do lists to shorter, focused lists developed through a compelling sense of the Spirit's leading.

Is this just another outreach program? No.

Typically outreach programs engage only a segment of the congregation and follow a "tell, do-for and invite" paradigm. In contrast, PMC engages a broad cross section of the congregation with a "go, listen and do-with" approach. Members of the church who are interested in mission and evangelism usually are interested in PMC because it fits with their dream for the church. But PMC does not emphasize mission at the price of worship, caring or educational ministries. PMC instead frames all these ministries in light of how Christ has sent your church to be part of God's mission in the world. Many devout Christians balk at outreach and evangelism because they do not want to be judgmental or critical of their neighbors.

PMC follows what seems to be the way of the early church, "go, listen and do-with." What would you think of evangelism that leverages what God is already doing in the world (in your community) and finding ways to be part of it? PMC is a pathway for progressive congregations who want to follow Jesus and partner, risk, heal and celebrate the good news of God's love with their neighbors, especially the most vulnerable. It is a resource for people who are yearning to follow Jesus beyond fear and beyond the walls keeping us from each other; it is for people who want to pursue justice, reconciliation and the building of the Beloved Community. In the words of the Presiding Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, this kind of outreach is for those who follow the one who "came to show us how to live God's dream instead of our nightmare."

Next Steps?

We hope that you will prayerfully consider joining the 2023 cohort. To ask questions, or find out more about how to apply, please reach out to our team at

connect@vitalthiving.org. We'll set up a time to speak soon and explore next steps with you.

With prayers for you and your congregation,
Scot+

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P.S.: Follow V+T on your favorite social media platforms!



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