

Comment

*Hauna Ondrey, editor, teaching fellow in church history,
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

What characterizes a thriving congregation? What fosters vitality, and by what fruit might we assess it? The goal of the congregational vitality emphasis within Start and Strengthen Churches is that every Covenant congregation become a “healthy missional church,” which the ministry area defines as “pursuing Christ” (healthy) and “pursuing Christ’s priorities in the world” (missional). Assessment tools (PULSE), coaching, and workshops (Veritas, EPIC, ONE) guide established congregations on a path of corporate self-reflection toward greater vitality. It is these initiatives this issue explores and assesses.

In the opening article, John Wenrich, director of congregational vitality, grounds vitality in the person and work of the Holy Spirit, as both the Spirit of truth, enabling congregations to speak the truth about themselves, and the Spirit of life, breathing new life into old bones. Research results follow from two doctor of ministry projects that assessed the perceived success of vitality initiatives within congregations.

Ryan Eikenbary-Barber studied the impact of the vitality pathway as a whole on a single congregation. Through feedback collected in focus groups and surveys, he concluded that the pathway’s greatest impact was facilitating healthy conflict negotiation and commitment to deep cultural change.

Surveying a broad sample of Covenant congregations, Corey Johnsrud sought to establish how the Veritas seminar fosters increased capacity for mission. His research revealed that the principal felt-benefit was gaining language and opportunity to corporately take stock of present reality. It further revealed a common conflation of mission and evangelism. Both studies revealed the importance of truth-telling, reliance on the Holy

Spirit, and adaptive leadership in the pursuit of vitality.

Wenrich, Eikenbary-Barber, and Johnsrud converge in their insistence that no transformation precedes an honest account of that which is in need of transformation. All emphasize further that this commitment to seeking, accepting, and telling the truth is a necessary starting point that will lead nowhere if not acted upon in reliance on the Holy Spirit. Taken together, the authors call the Covenant to conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit (Wenrich), productive conflict (Eikenbary-Barber), and a restored tension between mission and friendship (Johnsrud).

Interact with these authors and arguments on [Forum: Dialoging with the Covenant Quarterly](#), where you'll find further resources and discussion.