

The Holy Spirit and Congregational Vitality

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Denmark's Roskilde Cathedral is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is the first Gothic cathedral built in Scandinavia, with construction going back to around 1170 CE. In 2015 I taught at a summer festival of the Mission Covenant Church in Denmark, held a few miles from the town of Roskilde. As I toured this magnificent building, my eyes were drawn to the private worship box of King Christian IV (d. 1648) and Queen Anna Cathrine (d. 1612), where the queen's motto is inscribed: *Rege me D[omi]ne Spiritu Sancto tuo*, "Lord, lead me with your Holy Spirit."

This spiritual yearning of a seventeenth-century Danish queen inspires my own journey with the Holy Spirit—a journey that, in recent years, has taken on new significance in my life and ministry. Although I became a follower of Jesus forty-five years ago, the mystery, discovery, and adventure I now experience through the Holy Spirit marks a time of spiritual rebirth in my union with Christ. After twenty-one years in pastoral ministry and ten as director of congregational vitality for the Evangelical Covenant Church, I am convinced that the key to congregational vitality is listening to the Holy Spirit and responding in action. I have found this in my life experience, and I find it in Scripture, which tethers the vitality of the church to the Holy Spirit. We cannot speak of congregational vitality without beginning with the Holy Spirit. It is this conviction that shapes the pages that follow, in which I seek to establish the role of the Holy Spirit in awakening the church. My hope is to raise our awareness of and dependence on the Spirit so that the gospel burns more brightly in our congregations and in our own hearts.

The Spirit of Truth and Power

The letter to the seven churches in the book of Revelation is like a vitality assessment handbook for churches. If we date the time of John's revelation to 95 CE, the churches addressed are at least thirty years old. They are no longer church plants as they were during the time of the epistles; they are now established churches. As decades of entropy diminish the health and growth of these congregations, each message comes as a customized assessment of vitality.

The same exhortation concludes all seven assessments: "Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Eugene Peterson says of this repetition, "Whatever differences there are between the churches, two things are constant: the Spirit speaks, the people listen. Churches are listening posts."¹ A recent Reuter's article about hearing loss among seniors referenced a study that found a positive correlation between hearing impairment and risk of death. It concluded, "Hearing impairment is at least a sign of, and possibly a contributor to, an older person's survival odds. Hearing impairment can directly affect a person's health and wellbeing."² Could the same be said of churches with a "hearing impairment"? As churches age, do they listen to the Holy Spirit less and less while protecting the status quo more and more?

The Holy Spirit suffers no hearing loss as he declares to the churches what he hears from Jesus. This is the fulfillment of Jesus's teaching on the Holy Spirit in John 16:13–14: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."³ What an amazing experience it must have been for the Apostle John to witness the unfolding of Jesus's words as he receives and records the vision.

The stable⁴ church of Laodicea sees itself as wealthy and in need of nothing, but Jesus provides a radically different commentary: "But you

1. Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 45, 48.

2. Madeline Kennedy, "For Seniors, Hearing Trouble Linked to Greater Risk of Death," *Reuters*, October 2, 2015.

3. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the NIV.

4. We classify four types of established churches in the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC): healthy missional, stable, critical moment, and at-risk. These four types of church-

do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17). How’s that for a lack of self-awareness? This proud, self-sufficient, sleepy church needs to wake up and repent. Jesus loves these churches, but sadly there is not even a place for him at the table in Laodicea, a violation of first-century standards of hospitality. Jesus is locked out of his very own church, knocking on the door, desperately trying to get back in. Jesus shouts to the people inside: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3:20). This verse is not about evangelism as it is commonly preached, but about congregational vitality! The church does not even realize Jesus is absent from the table. They don’t know what they don’t know.

The other stable church is Ephesus. It has forsaken its first love (Revelation 2:4) and is commanded to remember the height from which it has fallen (Revelation 2:5). Again, there is a lack of self-awareness and desperation regarding their current reality and trajectory. They aren’t even in love with Jesus anymore. They are going through the motions of ministry without the kiss of the Holy Spirit. Despite presenting a good image on the outside, the Laodicean and Ephesian churches need an awakening.

“Whoever has ears, let them hear” (Matthew 13:9). This clarion call for discernment reveals the essence of congregational vitality. Churches that discern the movement of the Spirit and respond accordingly are the churches that thrive. These are the churches that overcome and live into the promises of vitality that accompany each assessment.⁵ Often this, response calls for repentance. In John 14:16–17 (RSV), Jesus identifies the Holy Spirit as Counselor and the Spirit of truth: “And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.” A counselor gently draws out the inner truth of another person in order to bring awareness and healing.⁶ This is what the

es flow out of Revelation 2 and 3. The four church types are also represented by the four types of soil in Jesus’s parable: fertile, weedy, rocky, and hard packed (Luke 8:4–15).

5. It may be, however, that the Holy Spirit tells the church to choose “living legacy.” Living legacy churches conclude their ministry with dignity and grace, celebrating what God has done over the years. Through this sacrifice, the church contributes to the planting and revitalization of other churches. New life emerges from their sacrificial gift. Jesus teaches this kingdom principle in John 12:24.

6. See Proverbs 20:5, “the purposes of a person’s heart are like deep waters, but a person of understanding draws them out.”

Holy Spirit does, bringing to congregations both comfort and conviction.

It is generally well-known among believers that the Holy Spirit empowers the church for mission (Acts 1:8). An equally significant role of the Holy Spirit is often overlooked or even feared: helping churches tell the truth about themselves by assessing their current reality and trajectory (John 15:26).⁷ This is what we find the Holy Spirit doing in Revelation 2–3. The Spirit delivers Jesus’s assessment to each church, for each church is accountable to Jesus. Jesus wants each church to see itself as he sees it—to become aware of, and *accept*, his “assessment” of it. Awareness (knowing it) and acceptance (owning it) are often the first steps in moving forward with God.

Many churches are drawn to the Holy Spirit for power but not for truth. They want revival without the repentance, comfort without conviction, fire without heat, assets without assessment. They want the fruit without working on the root. Jesus said, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). You will know the truth—that’s reality. The truth will set you free—that’s vitality. There is no vitality without reality. To want all of the vitality without any of the reality is to negate or ignore the truth-telling ministry of the Holy Spirit.

In vino veritas, “in wine there is truth,” is a Latin idiom from the ancient Greco-Roman world. It refers to the condition of being drunk with wine: the inhibitions come down, and the truth comes out. Living within this very culture, Paul instructs the Christians in Ephesus not to “get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead,” he says, “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). There is something intoxicating about the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit, the inhibitions of pride, fear, and shame come down. We are able to tell the truth about ourselves in a civil, compassionate, and Christ-honoring way.

A Chinese proverb says, “The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right name.”⁸ Churches often have an easier time telling the truth about Jesus than they do about themselves. Telling the truth about our current reality and trajectory is no less a work of the Spirit than a powerful miracle, sign, or wonder—a lot less glamorous to be sure, but no less significant. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of power *and* the Spirit of truth.

7. Dallas Willard prefers “strengtheners” to “comforters” as a translation of *paracletos*. *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 277.

8. Gil Rendle, *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), 9.

Power and truth must go hand in hand in congregations as they do in the person of the Holy Spirit. Power without truth is dangerous;⁹ truth without power is lifeless. Power without truth is abusive and arrogant; truth without power is dry orthodoxy.

The Person and Work of the Spirit

Nor can we, as churches or individuals, have the *power* of the Holy Spirit without submitting to the person of the Holy Spirit. This would be the magic sought by Simon Magus in Acts 8:9–25. As Andy Crouch writes in *Playing God*, “The dream of magic is to have power, the ability to make something of the world, without suffering, without relationships and without risk, which are all ways of saying the same thing.”¹⁰ It is a way to grow without change and change without pain. Just like Simon Magus, some churches think they can purchase this magic power through a transaction or a program: “Vitality in a box for \$499.”

The Holy Spirit is not a New Age, impersonal, cosmic energy field but a person (Acts 5:3).¹¹ The Holy Spirit is God (Matthew 28:19) and is therefore worthy of our worship, love, delight, and devotion. Milliard Erickson explains:

The Holy Spirit, being divine, is to be accorded the same honor and respect we give to the Father and the Son. It is appropriate to worship him as we do them. He is someone with whom we can have a personal relationship, someone to whom we can and should pray. The Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is the particular person of the Trinity through whom the entire Triune Godhead works in us.¹²

For many years I thought it misguided to focus on, pray to, or even entertain the idea of having a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. I was taught that the Holy Spirit’s primary role is to glorify the Son (John 16:14), and everything else the Spirit does is subservient. I remember

9. I was painfully reminded of this while teaching vitality in Berlin. Touring World War II sites, and especially at the Holocaust Memorial, I was struck by the fact that power devoid of truth made the Third Reich so dangerous, abusive, and evil.

10. Andy Crouch, *Playing God, Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 43.

11. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 861.

12. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 846, 862.

hearing the Holy Spirit compared to a spotlight, always shining the light on Jesus while remaining in the shadows. Wayne Grudem offers a corrective to such a notion:

It seems more accurate to say that although the Holy Spirit does glorify Jesus, he also frequently calls attention to his work and *gives recognizable evidences that make his presence known. The work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest the active presence of God in the world, and especially in the church.* After Jesus ascended into heaven, and continuing through the entire church age, the Holy Spirit is now the *primary* manifestation of the presence of the Trinity among us.¹³

It is following the Holy Spirit wherever the Spirit leads that makes Christianity so adventurous and refreshingly unpredictable. The Spirit's movement reminds me of the knight in the game of chess. "The knight's curious sidelong move is the deepest genius of chess; it is the one piece that does not move in linear fashion; the one piece with geometry of its own, the piece that goes its own way, the mystical piece."¹⁴ What a beautiful description of the unusual and curious movements of the Holy Spirit.

The wild and creative Breath or Spirit (*ruach*) hovered freely and effortlessly over the waters at creation (Genesis 1:2). The giving of the Spirit at Pentecost established the church. Scripture ascribes to the Spirit the work of regeneration (John 3:5), the spread of the gospel (Acts 6:5–7), the writing of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16), the planting and vitality of congregations (Acts 9:31; 13:1–3), intercession (Romans 8:26), edification of the body through spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7), sanctification (Galatians 5:16–26), and adoption into God's family (Romans 8:13–17). The testimony of Scripture reveals the essential work of the Holy Spirit in the kingdom of God and in our union with Jesus.

13. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 634–35, 642. See also Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 25: "The Spirit who inhabits us is not mute, restricting himself to an occasional nudge, a hot flash, a brilliant image, or a case of goose bumps. How could there be a personal relationship, a personal walk with God—or with anyone else—without individualized communication? Nothing is more central to the practical life of the Christian than confidence in God's individual dealings with each person. We can get by in life with a God who does not speak. Many at least think they do. But it is not much of a life, and it is certainly not the life God intends for us."

14. Brian Doyle, "Chessay," *The University of Portland Magazine*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2015).

From beginning to end, Jesus's life and ministry are empowered by the Holy Spirit. The gospels speak of the Spirit's role in Christ's conception (Matthew 1:18–21) and presence at his baptism (Luke 3:21–22). Jesus is "full of the Holy Spirit" and is led "by the Spirit in the desert" (Luke 4:1), leaving the wilderness in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14). During his inaugural address in the synagogue, Jesus applies to himself the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1). Jesus is full of joy in the Holy Spirit when the seventy-two return with a good report (Luke 10:21). Jesus is able to do miracles and drive out demons because of the Spirit's power (Mark 3:22–30) and is himself raised to life by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11). N.T. Wright says of this union of Living Word and Holy Spirit that "the Spirit indwelt Jesus so richly that the Spirit was known as the Spirit *of* Jesus."¹⁵

When it comes to being filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus sets the example for us to follow. Jesus viewed his own body as a temple (John 2:19–22). Our bodies too are designed for the Holy Spirit to take up living residence. Paul asks the Corinthian church, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16, NRSV; cf. 6:19). As apprentices of Jesus, we must learn how to offer ourselves more fully as a residence of the Holy Spirit, so that we can join Jesus more fully in the mission, overflowing with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

Conscious Dependence on the Holy Spirit: A Covenant Distinctive

Jesus commands the church in Sardis to wake up (Revelation 3:2). I believe it is the Holy Spirit who causes this awakening to occur. When we "awaken," we see our current reality and trajectory, repent, and take the appropriate next steps. Led and energized by the Holy Spirit, we move from anemia to vitality. As we become more attentive to the Spirit, I believe that more of our churches will wake up. It is no coincidence that the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States were called "The Great Awakenings." I yearn for this continued awakening through the Holy Spirit in my own life and in the life of

15. N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 163.

Covenant congregations. Our sixth affirmation reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit who

instills in our hearts a desire to turn to Christ and who assures us that Christ dwells within us. It is the Holy Spirit who enables our obedience to Christ and conforms us to his image, and it is the Spirit who enables us to continue Christ's mission in the world. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to us as individuals and binds us together as Christ's body.¹⁶

I am convinced that one of the reasons more Covenant churches are not healthy and missional is we are not greatly and consciously depending on the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Covenant theologian Donald Frisk's assessment sixty-five years ago still rings true today:

Often one hears the complaint that the Christian Church lacks power. But in the Holy Spirit unlimited power is available—power which is released through prayer and action. The mediocre lives which multitudes of Christians love do not require great strengthening and hence there is little evidence of its presence, but let a Christian seriously attempt the demands of the Lord in the church and community and strength would be given in proportion to the task. What world-shaking things the church could accomplish if we prayerfully accepted the full responsibilities that now confront us.¹⁸

It is my fervent prayer that as Covenanters, we celebrate this affirmation and live into it with greater intentionality and teaching. "Living with God," writes Helen Cepero, "means discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit as that Spirit seeks to both comfort us and challenge us to live with God in an ever fuller, ever more responsive and responsible way."¹⁹

These are complex times for the church in North America, and the

16. *What Does the Covenant Church Believe? A Brief Look at Covenant Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications).

17. By "healthy" I mean pursuing Christ, and by "missional" I mean pursuing Christ's priorities in the world. With input from superintendents and directors of church vitality, I estimate that less than 20 percent of Covenant churches are healthy and missional, with the majority being stable, critical moment, or at-risk.

18. Donald C. Frisk, quoted in James R. Hawkinson, *Glad Hearts: The Joys of Believing and the Challenges of Belonging* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2003), 345.

19. Helen Harmelink Cepero, "Living with God: A Trinitarian Understanding of Spiritual Formation," *In Spirit and in Truth: Essays on Theology, Spirituality, and Embodiment*

Covenant Church is no exception. Alice Mann, senior consultant for the former Alban Institute, writes,

Society deposited people on the doorsteps of our churches in the 1950s. But that marked the end of an era of privilege for Christianity in North America. It is the cultural disestablishment of Christianity by secular, political, and alternative religious forces. Some see this as bad news to be fixed, but I would encourage you to see it as an opportunity to clarify your congregation's identity, purpose and outreach.²⁰

Many pastors were never trained for the world in which we now live. Christendom is dead; secularization is the new normal. Just as in the time of Jesus, the church does not occupy the center of culture and must learn how to be ministers of the gospel from the periphery. Many are confused and bewildered. It seems ministry is less effective each year. Yet perhaps the Holy Spirit will use this displacement to awaken and missionalize the church today, as he did in Acts 8. It is time for the church to press the reset button and step forward, not shrink back. We need the Holy Spirit to blow through the valley of dry bones and restore life, hope, unity, passion, and purpose. O Breath of life, fit your church to meet this hour!²¹

Application

Congregational vitality is the by-product of two activities: doing faithful ministry over a long period of time and the movement of the Holy Spirit. This divine-human partnership is the impulse that makes ministry both natural and supernatural. Fruit grows as the Holy Spirit empowers human effort. There are some congregations that emphasize the divine aspect of this partnership to the exclusion of the human side: "What we do here almost doesn't matter. It's all about God, not us." Churches that rarely or never take action forget that the church is called to be the hands and feet of Jesus. There are other churches that emphasize the human side of this partnership to the exclusion of the divine: "Holy Spirit? Who's that?"

in Honor of C. John Weberg, ed. by Philip J. Anderson and Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, 222–38 (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2006), 234.

20. Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; 2000), 18–19.

21. "O Breath of Life," *The Covenant Hymnal, A Worshipbook* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1996), no. 599.

Churches that rarely or never interact with the Spirit are limited by their own resources and power. There is human activity no doubt, but little of the Spirit's anointing. Dallas Willard provides a helpful description of this divine-human partnership:

The importance of the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be overemphasized. But today, our practice in Christian circles, in general, is to place almost total emphasis on the work of the Spirit of God for or on the individual. Reliance upon what the Spirit does *to* us or *in* us, as indispensable as it truly is, will not by itself transform character in its depths. The action of the Spirit must be accompanied by our response, which . . . cannot be carried out by anyone other than ourselves.²²

How can we respond to the Holy Spirit and enter fully into this divine-human partnership? How can we, as apprentices of Jesus, train to live in more conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit? There are many ways to train. I will suggest only three.

1. Use the agenda of thirds in your leadership team meetings.

Most churches spend their precious meeting time talking about two de-motivating factors: money and attendance. No wonder few people want to serve in leadership! The agenda of thirds offers a different way of doing meetings that foregrounds the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Divide your meeting time by three, devoting each section to the following sequence of questions: (1) How is the Holy Spirit at work in me? (2) How is the Holy Spirit at work in *us*, both in our church and out in the community? (3) Based on how the Holy Spirit is at work in and around us, what decisions do we need to put on the table? In the beginning, this agenda may feel awkward and even esoteric, but I encourage you to trust the process. This practice reminds us that in the church we are not captains of industry whose bottom line is to satisfy shareholder expectations. Rather, our role is one of spiritual leadership, and this involves a different kind of approach than Madison Avenue. I do believe that the church can learn many good things from the business world, especially when those principles are simply describing human behavior. But these behaviors need to be practiced with a listening ear to the Holy Spirit and under the lordship of Christ, who is the head of the church (Ephesians

22. Willard, *Hearing God*, 348.

5:23). The agenda of thirds attunes us to the Spirit's presence and helps us live into the divine-human partnership that is our birthright in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:20; cf. Acts 15:28, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...").²³

2. Develop a system whereby people discover, deploy, and develop their spiritual gifts. Most churches operate with a volunteer-based culture, looking for warm bodies to fill ministry slots. But the Apostle Paul presents a more meaningful way to recruit based on spiritual gifts: "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). In this gift-based culture, the role of the pastor is not to do the work of the ministry, but to equip others to do the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:10–16). One of the keys to congregational vitality is to develop a system, class, or small group that helps people discover their gifts for ministry. This gift-based approach to congregational ministry is much more life-giving than resorting to guilt or gimmicks to entice volunteers.

As we serve in the area of our giftedness, we experience a deep sense of satisfaction. Apathy disappears. Eric Lydell, memorialized in the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* puts it this way in the script, "God made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure." Exercising our spiritual gifts, in God's partnership with the Holy Spirit, is one of the greatest joys of living in kingdom. The healthy missional marker of sacrificial and generous living and giving not only refers to generosity with treasures, but also to spiritual gifts for the strengthening of the church.

3. Walk the congregational vitality pathway. The congregational vitality pathway postures a congregation to discern the Holy Spirit and respond accordingly. It provides language and a process that empowers churches to discover and follow the Spirit's leading. The four types of churches and ten healthy missional markers²⁴ provide a holistic, biblical

23. I encourage leadership teams to read books on discernment and divine guidance. Dallas Willard's *Hearing God*, and Ruth Haley Barton's *Pursuing God's Will Together* are both excellent. Churches may also want to teach a workshop on divine guidance and discernment.

24. The ten healthy missional markers are centrality of the word of God; life-transforming walk with Jesus; intentional evangelism; heartfelt worship; compelling Christian community; transforming communities through active compassion, mercy, and justice; global perspective and engagement; sacrificial and generous living and giving; culture of godly leadership; and fruitful organizational structures. All of these markers are undergirded in prayer and the working of the Holy Spirit.

means of measuring vitality and connecting more fully with the Holy Spirit. Henry Cloud recently blogged, “People who meet their goals follow a path; they don’t just get lucky or work harder.”²⁵ The same applies to congregations. The vitality pathway provides a number of common experiences and opportunities for the Holy Spirit to speak and for us to listen. Exercises such as finding your biblical story; establishing a process of pervasive prayer; taking the PULSE assessment;²⁶ and learning how to have civil, compassion, and Christ-honoring conversations are all opportunities for the Spirit to work.

Discerning the Holy Spirit is a dynamic process that takes time. It is not a magical incantation or technical quick fix that will solve our problems overnight. Trusting the process is half the battle. On the vitality pathway, we learn how to manage our anxiety, how to hold up the mirror of Scripture, how to laugh again, and how to re-engage with God in the mission. The pathway is an organic approach to congregational vitality that helps us acquire new skills and open our ears to the Spirit.

Any approach to congregational vitality that is not rooted in the person and work of the Holy Spirit lacks supernatural power. In September of 2015, I spoke at the building dedication ceremony for Countryside Covenant Church in Milbank, South Dakota. This small town and country church had been on the pathway for a few years. They had experienced some “high highs” and “low lows.” Mark Chapman, pastor of Countryside, told me after the worship service:

I would not be pastoring here today without the vitality pathway. I would not have understood what was going on around me. I would have panicked and bailed... honestly. The pathway gave me language and understanding. It gave me the ability to be a non-anxious presence. It gave people at church confidence to follow me... The pathway, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is why I am where I am today.

I am told that a large number of Covenant pastors are nearing retirement. More and more of these pastors are boldly and selflessly leading their congregations through the pathway. Harvey Fiskeaux, pastor of the

25. Henry Cloud, “Daily Dr. Cloud Inspiration,” July 16, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/CRofPinedale/posts/848146848605790>.

26. As part of the congregational vitality pathway, the PULSE assessment helps to determine whether a church is healthy missional, stable, critical, or at risk.

Covenant Church in Nome, is one of them. Led by the Spirit, he desires to leave a legacy of vitality.

I have had two growing convictions through the years that have fueled my vision and passion as a pastor in rural Alaska. One is the necessity of viewing the church as the living body of Christ himself. Jesus said, “I will build *my* church” (Matthew 16:18). The other conviction is the indispensability of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the life of the pastor and church (Acts 1:8). The pathway embodies both. I am convinced that through the vitality pathway our best days are ahead.

It is such a joy and honor to work with veteran pastors like Harvey. These are the pastors who are willing to put the health of their congregations above their own anxieties regarding retirement. If you are a Moses who is nearing retirement, I invite you to prepare your congregation for the Joshua who is coming next. You can do this, with the help of the Holy Spirit, by leading your congregation through the congregational vitality pathway. This could be your finest hour as a pastor!²⁷

Conclusion

At its core, congregational vitality is a spiritual awakening, a movement of the Holy Spirit that often happens in surprising ways—ways in which the church did not anticipate. Cultivating a sense of mystery and a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit makes us more open to moving forward with God. Congregational vitality is not a feeling or a fad that is here today and gone tomorrow. It is deeply rooted in Scripture. Congregational vitality is born out of a fresh awakening of the Holy Spirit among people with an earnest desire to live more fully with God and for God. Debbie Bogart, a vitality facilitator from Alaska sums it up well, “If you are going to do the pathway without the Holy Spirit, it won’t be done.”

“‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6).

27. John Maxwell insists that “there is no success without a successor” (<http://www.johnmaxwell.com/blog/are-you-busy-building-sandcastles>, February 10, 2014).