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Congregational Vitality Bible Study #1: Four Characteristics of Vibrant Churches, a Brief Bible Study Based on the Gospel of Mark

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General Information

This series of Bible studies, based on the Gospel of Mark, is intended to support lay leaders as they help their churches grow in vitality. The underlying principle is to help people be disciples of Jesus and focus their churches on the future. These studies, accessible to anyone, have been crafted so that lay people can host a small or large group in their church for learning, conversation, and fellowship. The foundational concepts used throughout the series can be more deeply pursued through attending The College for Congregational Development. This series is a work in progress, so we hope that people will adapt these materials as best fits the needs of their congregation.

Overview

In the Gospel of Mark (chapter 2, verse 25), the Pharisees criticize Jesus for letting his disciples pluck heads of wheat on the sabbath. The disciples are hungry, and the Lord of life knows how important it is to eat. Jesus is willing to think about things differently in order encourage life and growth.

So, Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food?” (Mark 2:25).

Just as eating was essential to the disciples’ lives, so our growth as churches depends on food. Except as churches, our “wheat” to eat is less like bread and more like things we pray over, reflect on, and do. In this lesson, we focus on four key characteristics of congregations that are growing and thriving. As we talk about these four, imagine a single stalk of wheat growing under God’s sunshine, and think about the shaft of wheat and the fullness of the grain as growing

stronger, the more attention we give to these four things. Just as God is the giver of the wheat, so we look to God to help us grow our ability to do the ministry of Jesus.

Vibrant churches have four key characteristics in common.

- 1) They promote an individual's growth in relationship with God.
- 2) They promote relationships between individuals, through which they experience God and go deeper.
- 3) They follow the outward action of Jesus – going beyond their church, to the “other” (as part of God's reconciling of all things), and create relationships of interdependence with the communities, organizations, and businesses that are in their “neighborhood.”
- 4) They use their missional purpose to support their survival.

#1 Vibrant churches promote growth in relationship with God

We left long ago the time when people went to church because it was the “respectable” thing to do. Now, if someone is in church, they feel a yearning to be close to God. But, as spiritual directors and companions know, it’s common for people who feel drawn toward God to later feel drawn away again. It’s simply part of being human.

Even Jesus, the Son of God, experienced his humanity as he was drawn into the wilderness. No sooner had his baptism occurred, “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:12-13).

Question: When was a time when you felt distant from God? What did that feel like?

But already Mark has given us the key for how to survive and exit the wilderness in verse 4. “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” We meet people where they are in their undoubted imperfection when we openly acknowledge the need of all persons to receive the grace of God and grow. This can be done in so many ways: offering the sacramental rite of reconciliation, openly talking about our human vulnerability and God’s care, promoting ongoing spiritual growth through opportunities to learn to pray, connecting faith with the daily practice of life, and many other ways. In addition, some people have sustained injury through no action of their own, and this may have led to a “wilderness” experience for them. They also need opportunities to connect with God. The churches have the power, through their lay leaders as well as their priests, to help people go deeper with God – in trust and in love.

Question: Reflect on a time when you developed more trust in and love for God. What might have been happening at your church to help that happen? What can you imagine doing to help others have an experience that helps them grow with God?

#2 Vibrant churches promote relationships between individuals, through which they experience God and go deeper.

We often feel the most energized when we are doing things that Jesus did. Perhaps, because we were made in the image of God, we feel better connected when we reflect who and how God is.

One of the fundamental patterns that Jesus lived is available to us too. It's called "Gather, Transform, Send" in the College for Congregational Development. In short, wherever Jesus went, he *gathered* people up and helped them feel part of God's big agenda of healing, salving, redeeming, and restoring the world. They felt themselves *transformed* by Jesus' presence, fellowship, teaching, and acts. And then they were *sent* by Jesus to help others experience this too.

Go no further than Mark chapter 1, verses 16-18 to see this in action:

"As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him."

Jesus' way of being was to be in relationship with other people, and he did it in a very practical way. He moved, met people, talked to them, learned about them, helped them, and loved them. Jesus created nets of friendship, and these relationships linked people so that they could grow and do the ministry of God.

Question: Reflect on a time when something happened at church that helped you get to know and trust other people. How did this come about? What was necessary for it to happen? Do you think such a thing could help others go deeper with God and each other?

#3 Vibrant churches follow the outward action of Jesus – going beyond their church, to the “other” (as part of God’s reconciling of all things), and create relationships of interdependence with the communities, organizations, and businesses that are in their “neighborhood.”

Find a map of the lands through which Jesus travelled. Think about where the Gospel of Mark starts. John the baptizer is at the river Jordan, attracting people from Jerusalem and the countryside of Judea. Jesus came down to that site from Nazareth in the region of the Galilee. Then the Spirit of God drove Jesus to the wilderness outside of Jerusalem. Then Jesus went back up north to Galilee, where he walked along the Sea of Galilee. Then to Capernaum – in the town as well as out to the country places. But that wasn’t enough. Then Jesus took his new disciples to all the neighboring towns too, throughout the region. All that in one chapter of Mark. Jesus was on the move! Jesus’ inclination was always to go out – to keep moving to more people God’s big agenda of healing, salving, redeeming, and restoring.

Remember the principle that we often feel close to God when we are doing the things that Jesus did? This is true of churches also. Often, churches that are reaching beyond themselves (their members, church property) are ones that are feeling the Spirit of God moving powerfully.

Let’s look at the time Jesus reached beyond himself and his circle of disciples to the man with leprosy (Mark 1, verses 40-42).

“A leper came to him, begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately, the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.”

Notice that the leper came to where Jesus was. But Jesus had to be willing to go against the social norms of his culture to be with the leper instead of sending him away. Jesus’ cultural norms might have resisted the presence of the leper. We might also feel resistance while we’re trying to be the church. There’s a temptation to stay inside our church walls, to not introduce ourselves to our neighbors because we’re concerned about being seen as “proselytizing,” to refrain from having conversations with local businesses. This temptation might be even stronger if those of us inside the church have been here so long that the neighborhood has changed around us, and we feel disconnected from what’s going on around us.

But we can follow the example of Jesus and speak to the ones in our midst – introduce ourselves to our neighbors, as neighbors. We can develop relationships of inter-dependence with them – relationships of equals, with equals, who are mutually benefitting from their connection.

Question: Take a moment to draw a map of the area within a mile of your church and where your church is located. Was it easy? Are there blank spaces on your map? What do you notice? What are you curious about?

On your map, you might have drawn the location of homes, businesses, local government buildings, non-profits, parks, and parking lots. Make a plan for how to learn how to become part of a web of interconnected neighbors. And then put the plan into action. More likely than not, as we get to know our neighbors, God will shine a light on how to develop these relationships in ways that will be life-giving for us.

We often feel most alive, and our churches feel most meaningful, when we are following the outward motion of Jesus – out of the church, into the world, where God already is.

#4 Vibrant churches use their missional purpose to support their survival.

All churches need to know “who” they are. Not only their history, but also their missional identity. Who/what is your church as it manifests the healing, salving, redeeming, and restoring ministry of Jesus? And what’s your church’s “why”?

Jesus’ disciples learned this early on. Mark chapter 1, verses 36 – 38 tell us: “Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.’”

Jesus is on the cusp of becoming a mega-church pastor. Everywhere he goes, people are flocking to him. It would have been so easy for Jesus to settled down and make it big. But instead, Jesus says, let’s go! Let’s keep the mission of God moving. Instead of building an institution, Jesus built a movement and a way of life.

Institutions provide benefits. As institutions, churches can be an anchor in their community, a known place of welcome, a place for solace and healing, a place for renewal and organizing action. But it’s also true that, sometimes, we can get so busy taking care of the needs of the “church” that there’s not enough energy and resources to ask whether we’re living our missional purpose as well as “keeping the church going.”

When ministry becomes more focused on surviving than spreading the good news to others, the church may be in “chaplaincy” mode, focusing mostly on caring for the people already in the church. To be clear, worshipping God and the spiritual care of people in the church are two *very* important things. But, when that is all that we can do, churches may be in decline.

Question: What was the “why” of our church 20 years ago? What’s our “why” now? Does it feel compelling and relevant to the people inside and outside of our church? And if not, or we’re not sure, what could we do to prayerfully explore how we might do the ministry of Jesus in the future?

If your church is anything like “normal,” you may have gotten comfortable with doing the things that members expect to happen – even the good stuff! But the past doesn’t plan our future. We do. So, take this opportunity to look carefully at what God might be calling you to do in this

time, in this neighborhood context. Everything that Jesus did with his disciples was about teaching them to continue his ministry beyond his death and resurrection. And that's our purpose too.