

Healing Congregations: A Corrective to the Metrics of Congregational Vitality

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, North American mainline denominations have monitored and measured the markers of congregational vitality in an effort to halt if not reverse denominational decline. The Vital Congregations Initiative of The United Methodist Church (UMC) serves as an illustration of the metrics of vitality, exposing the limitations of a quantitative approach to evangelism and congregational health. Viewed in the context of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter, it becomes clear that congregational vitality requires healing and transformation, not simply church growth. A congregation must recognize its own woundedness as the body of Christ to receive the transformative healing offered by the Great Physician. Only then might this healing congregation offer Good News to a world hurting from corporate and social sin. This article, therefore, offers the idea of healing congregations as a corrective to the metrics of congregational vitality that has taken root within North American mainline Protestantism.

Keywords: Evangelism; Mission; Vital Congregations; Congregational Vitality; Church Growth; Racism; Healing Congregations

Introduction

According to the gospel of Mark 15:25-32, “It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. . . . Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself’” (NRSV). This image of Christ crucified contrasts with the way many Christians usually view the church, the body of Christ, yet it depicts a reality that

many congregations face: the experience of being the wounded body of Christ in need of healing. With this image of Christ crucified in mind, I offer the idea of healing congregations as a corrective to the metrics of congregational vitality that has taken root within North American mainline Protestant denominations over the past five decades.

What the church growth movement is to evangelical Protestantism, vital congregations discourse is to mainline Protestantism.¹ By discourse, I mean a loosely organized yet coherent and ongoing discussion about a commonly recognized topic of shared concern. Since the 1970s, mainline judicatories in North America have

¹ “Mainline” is a contested term. My use refers loosely to the historically influential group of Protestant denominations of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, later reconstituted as the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. For alternative views, see Jason S. Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (New York: NYU Press, 2012),

121; David A. Roozen, “Oldline Protestantism: Pockets of Vitality Within a Continuing Stream of Decline,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research Working Paper 1104.1 (Hartford Seminary, 2004), http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/roozen_article5.html#_ftn2, accessed 26 May 2020.

monitored and measured the markers of congregational health in an effort to halt if not reverse denominational decline. Vital, healthy, fruitful, faithful—the terms vary, but the discourse is consistently focused on how to revitalize existing congregations. The primary characteristics of vital congregations discourse is a mix of anxiety about decline, the metaphor of health, and a focus on the congregation as a site of evangelism and renewal. While Roman Catholic and Jewish organizations have also entered into the discussion,² this discourse is particularly pronounced in the Protestant mainline. “The vision of vital congregations and the need for more churches to live up to that term is washing across the beaches of all denominations,” claimed church consultant Herb Miller in 1990.³ This rhetoric has steadily increased in popularity and persuasion within mainline churches since that time, seemingly in direct proportion to anxiety over an unchecked decline in church membership statistics. Indeed, “vital congregations” is the reigning discourse about evangelism in most North American mainline denominations.

This article offers a critique of one of the most common forms of the discourse of vital congregations: metrics. The Vital Congregations Initiative of The United Methodist Church (UMC) serves as a prime example of the quantitative measurement as an approach to evangelism and congregational vitality. Measurements of vitality can often confirm when a body is healthy. However, what does the discourse of vitality mean for an unhealthy, wounded, ailing, or traumatized

congregation? The context of COVID-19, with social distancing requirements and “shelter-in-place” orders, forced nearly all congregations in North America to forgo in-person worship services for a time, offering an extreme example of a situation in which all is not well. Racial unrest and protests erupting against police brutality and systemic racism compounded the awareness of social illness in May and June 2020, leading to worldwide protests under the banner Black Lives Matter. This article examines the limitations of the metrics of vitality in this context and suggests that these limitations pertain broadly, even when the world is not in the midst of a global pandemic. Many congregations were in fragile health prior to COVID-19 and the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis. When the body of Christ is wounded and when society is ill, the discourse of vital congregations needs a healing corrective.

Anxiety over Church Membership Decline

For nearly fifty years, North American mainline judicatories have engaged in an important discourse on “vital congregations,” arising directly from studies of church growth and decline.⁴ Initial concern about the health of the mainline emerged as anxiety about its shrinking demographics coincided with significant turns to the right in US culture and politics.⁵ At the highpoint of mainline membership, Lyndon Johnson signed into federal law the Voting Rights Act of 1965, marking the

² See, for example, James B. Sauer, *Parish/Congregational Vitality: A Tool for Parish Councils* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 1983); *Indicators of Vitality: In Service of the New Evangelization. A User's Guide* (Washington DC: Archdiocese of Washington, 2010), <https://adw.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/05/IOVGuide.pdf>; Isa Aron, *The Self-Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Synagogue Life*. Revitalizing Congregational Life: A Synagogue 2000 Series (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002); Terry Bookman and William Kahn, *This House We Build: Lessons for Healthy Synagogues and the People Who Dwell There* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006).

³ Herb Miller, *The Vital Congregation*, Effective Church Series, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon 1990), 12.

⁴ One of the first studies of “congregational vitality” was undertaken by the Presbyterian Church in Canada in the

1970s by a committee whose name signaled the ambitious goal of doubling church membership within the decade. Presbyterian Church in Canada, National Committee for Church Growth, *Soundings of Congregational Vitality: The Presbyterian Church in Canada 1976–1980*, National Research Project of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Committee on Church Growth to Double in the Eighties (Ontario: Don Mills, 1981). They were not alone in their ambition. The UMC passed a resolution in 1984 to double its membership by 1992; however, UMC membership in the U.S. decreased 6% during that time.

⁵ My analysis is consistent with that of David A. Roozen, “Oldline Protestantism: Pockets of Vitality Within a Continuing Stream of Decline,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research Working Paper 1104.1 (Hartford Seminary, 2004), http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/roozen_article5.html#_ftn2, accessed 26 May 2020.

apex of liberal politics for more than a generation.⁶ However, after winning federal guidelines for gender equality under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and the legalization of abortion through *Roe v. Wade* in 1972, liberal causes began to falter. The “Christian Right” began to gain ascendancy in national politics. Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, buoyed by a newly mobilized neo-evangelical voter base due in no small part to the support of the so-called “Moral Majority” founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979. The effort to pass the Equal Rights Amendment foundered and eventually failed in 1982. Mainline denominations, accustomed to wielding disproportionate political influence during the heyday of the Social Gospel, the New Deal, and post-WWII institution-building, found themselves in an identity crisis both within and beyond their sanctuary walls.

Dean M. Kelley’s *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* amplified the wake-up call to the mainline in 1972. Church membership numbers were falling, and judicatories began paying closer attention to the church growth paradigm imported to North America in the 1960s by Donald McGavran, the founding dean of Fuller Theological Seminary’s School of World Mission. Embracing sociological research and quantitative analysis as tools for evangelism, church growth theorists emphasized numerical growth as a sign of congregational health. Their focus on numerical growth as the fruit of congregational faithfulness spawned a vast literature of methods and techniques for reaching new persons in Christ and, thus, planting and increasing the membership in local congregations. This movement was widely influential and remains so in conservative evangelical circles.⁷ Was mainline decline related to Kelley’s thesis?

Study of mainline church membership statistics began in earnest among sociologists of religion in the 1970s. The Lilly Endowment sponsored a multi-year, interdisciplinary study through The Hartford Seminary Foundation—including a national symposium entitled, “Church Growth and Decline: Implications for Evangelism.” Results were published in the 1979 volume edited by Dean Hoge and David Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978*⁸ Complicating Kelley’s thesis, these researchers reported that the primary factors contributing to mainline membership decline were not internal to congregations but rather external social and demographic changes.⁹ They thus distinguished between institutional (internal) and contextual (external) factors. Hoge and co-researcher William McKinney, of the United Church of Christ’s Board for Homeland Ministries, conducted a study of more than 3,000 UCC congregations from 1970–1978.¹⁰ The overall membership decline during that period was 10.4%. Their findings were consistent with that of the Hartford study. Furthermore, they discovered that rural congregations experienced a slight gain in membership and that congregations with a greater percentage of older persons experienced greater membership declines. Hoge and McKinney suggested that future studies of church growth distinguish between institutional factors not easily changed, such as size, affluence, ethnicity, and physical plant, and those that can be changed, such as leadership style, programs, level of commitment among members, and amount of conflict.¹¹

By the 2000s, the discourse of congregational vitality had become the default language for mainline denominations to talk about evangelism, church growth, and virtually any other aspect of faithful ministry.¹² A

⁶ Martin E. Marty underscored 1965 as the turning point, marking “a seismic shift” in mainline Protestant presence in the US. Martin E. Marty, “Foreword,” in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978*, edited by Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, 9–15 (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 10.

⁷ See, for example, the Great Commission Research Network <http://www.greatcommissionresearch.com/about-gcrn> (Accessed 26 May 2020).

⁸ Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, eds., *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

⁹ Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, “Some Sociological Conclusions about Church Trends,” in *Understanding*

Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978, eds. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen, 315–333 (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 326, 329.

¹⁰ William McKinney and Dean R. Hoge, “Community and Congregational Factors in the Growth and Decline of Protestant Churches,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22:1 (March 1983): 51–66.

¹¹ McKinney and Hoge, “Community and Congregational Factors,” 65.

¹² While some missiologists and practitioners focusing on faithful inculturation in the North American post-modern context have favored the concept “missional church,” this term has not captured the imagination of judicatory leaders in the way that “vital congregations” has. On the “missional

quick search in August 2020 on the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG), an online tool of the Center for Congregations funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., yielded 600 results for the term “congregational vitality.”¹³ The institutionalization of this discourse was significantly enabled and expanded as an interfaith conversation by the work of Faith Communities Today, a project initiated in September 1995 at Hartford Seminary's Institute for Religion Research. Beginning with their FACT 2000 report, they have generated research surveys and reports about congregational life in the U.S. approximately every five years, with another survey launched in 2020.¹⁴ Spurred by the constant hum of contextual data generated by sociologists of religion, denominations as varied as the Anglican Church of Canada and the Evangelical Covenant Church established initiatives on congregational vitality.¹⁵ Many of these efforts toward renewed “vitality” in the mainline became institutionalized through denominational initiatives funded through judicatory offices.¹⁶

There was much the mainline could learn from the church growth movement's embrace of sociological research and data-driven evangelism. However, the techniques that seemed to work well for non-denominational new church starts, leading to the

phenomenon of the evangelical mega-church, had to be adapted for use in the mainline, which already boasted established congregations in nearly every populated area of the US.¹⁷ The most pressing question for the mainline was (and still remains) not how to plant new congregations but rather how to revitalize existing, ailing congregations.¹⁸ The metaphor of health suffused mainline consciousness. Unease about shrinking membership rolls quickly led to a diagnosis of disease and how to cure it: what factors will improve a congregation's “vitality”?

Metrics of Vitality

What does a vital congregation look like and act like? In his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase describes practices that shape and sustain what we have learned to call a “vital congregation”: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity.¹⁹ Yet, the assessment of vitality in the UMC tends toward quantitative measurement.²⁰ The UMC promoted use of these metrics through the “VitalSigns Dashboard,” a tool developed by the General Council on

church,” see: Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel in Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1998); and the Gospel in Our Culture Network, <https://gocn.org/>.

¹³ Congregational Resource Guide (CRG), <https://thecrg.org/search/results?query=%22congregational+vitality%22>. In contrast, a search on this site for the term “missional church” yielded only 25 results.

¹⁴ Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, “Faith Communities Today: A Report on Religion in the United States Today” (FACT2000), Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, March 2001, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/faith-communities-today-2000-study/>

¹⁵ The Anglican Church of Canada, Resource Category: Congregational Vitality, <https://www.anglican.ca/resource-category/congregational-vitality/> and Evangelical Covenant Church, “Missional Vitality,” <https://covchurch.org/vitality/>.

¹⁶ See, for example, Linda Bobbitt's work: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “What is the Congregational Vitality Project?,” <http://congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/About.html>.

¹⁷ For example, even after decades of membership loss, the number of UMC congregations in the U.S. in 2016 still

numbered over 32,000—more local outposts than the U.S. Post Office.

¹⁸ For example, the UMC's discourse and strategies revolve around “creating new places for new people by starting new congregations and renewing existing ones,” according to this denomination's Four Areas of Focus. Yet, by any measure, the UMC has *too many* congregations in the U.S. The UMC has no strategic plan for closing congregations at the end of their life cycle. The few hundred (at most) new church starts in this denomination are far outnumbered by the tens of thousands of existing churches in need of revitalization or closure. The situation of the UMC is not unique among the North American mainline. Arguably, it takes a vital congregation to successfully seed a new church start, further emphasizing the importance of revitalizing existing congregations within the mainline.

¹⁹ Robert Schnase, <http://robertschnase.com/books/five-practices-of-fruitful-congregations/>; Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

²⁰ Heather Hahn, “United Methodist Church Vitality Increases in U.S.,” UMNS, July 24, 2014, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/unitedmethodistchurchvitalityincreasesinus>. See also Vital Signs, <http://vitalsigns.trendsendapp.com/reports/25/overview>.

Finance and Administration to help congregations track attendance, membership, baptisms, professions of faith, people serving in outreach, and people served in outreach.²¹ Vitality, or the lack thereof, is then inferred from the trends in these statistics. A team of contractors provided the science behind these metrics.

In 2009, the Council of Bishops issued a “Call to Action” and engaged the services of a consulting firm, Towers Watson, to measure vitality in United Methodist congregations.²² The Towers Watson Report engaged in a process called “data mining” to determine what characteristics the most successful congregations share in common. They defined a vital congregation as one with high levels of certain desired, measurable outcomes: membership growth, percentage involved in ministry, engagement in the community, and financial giving.²³ Towers Watson found that 15% of UM congregations across the US showed high levels of these “signs of vitality”; 49% showed medium levels of vitality; and 36% showed low levels of vitality.²⁴ Towers Watson then statistically correlated the available data on the top tier congregations to find out what they have in common. They found 16 characteristics, termed “drivers

of vitality,” though what was measured what not causation but correlation. In short, what they reported about vital congregations is what they learned by studying the most successful congregations and observing what they had in common.²⁵

These metrics seem to be a good coaching technique for congregations in good health wanting to bring their ministries from medium vitality to the next level. Bishop John Schol, a leader of the denomination’s Vital Congregations Initiative (“Team Vital”), reported that between 2010 and 2012, the UMC in the US had doubled the number of “highly vital” congregations, although that number dropped off somewhat in 2013.²⁶ Schol explained congregational metrics as analogous to his yearly physical: he is in overall good health, and his doctor provides a statistical report to help him see how to improve his health.²⁷

However, the habits of the healthy do not necessarily provide the best medicine for the sick and wounded. Statistically correlating the common characteristics of highly vital congregations does not explain how to address the ailments of congregations with lower vitality.²⁸ My primary critique of the major stream of this

²¹ See, for example, UMC, “Vital Congregations: Vital Signs,”

<http://web.archive.org/web/20191123123422/http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/vital-congregations-vital-signs>, accessed March 22, 2014.

²² Between 2010–2012, agencies of the UMC produced not one but two research reports on congregational vitality. UMC Call to Action: Vital Congregations Research Project, June 28, 2010, http://umccalltoaction.org/files/CTA_TOWERS-WATSON_RPTS_45-126.pdf; and General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church, “Toward Vitality Research Project Final Report,” 2012, http://gbod.org.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/Toward_Vitality_Research_Project_FINAL.pdf.

²³ “Implementing the 16 Drivers of Vital Congregations,” <http://web.archive.org/web/20150319043132/http://www.umd.org/vitalcongregations.org/atf/cf/%7B203cf706-8c18-4e10-89b6-3cbe0218535f%7D/IMPLEMENTING%20THE%2016%20DRIVERS%20OF%20VITALITY.PDF>. See also the Council of Bishops, The United Methodist Church, “Call to Action Study Guide,” 2011, <http://umccalltoaction.org/files/CallToActionSG.pdf>.

²⁴ David de Wetter, Ilene Gochman, Rich Luss, Rick Sherwood, “UMC Call to Action: Vital Congregations Research Project,” Findings Report for Steering Team, Towers Watson, June 28, 2010, [http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/what-we-](http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/what-we-believe/documents/call-to-action-vital-congregations-research-project.pdf)

[believe/documents/call-to-action-vital-congregations-research-project.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/what-we-believe/documents/call-to-action-vital-congregations-research-project.pdf).

²⁵ Sheryl Palmer critiqued this research because it did not give adequate attention to the missional nature and identity of the church. She offered a corrective through her research of the missional church movement, specifically focusing on the Gospel and Our Culture Network. “Measuring Vital Congregations: Exploring a Missing Piece in The United Methodist Church’s Current Metric of Measuring Vitality,” DMIN thesis, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2014.

²⁶ John Schol, “Report: Vital Congregations Report,” 2013?, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/news-media/documents/vital-congregations-report-20140724.pdf.

²⁷ Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Mark Teasdale interviews Bishop John Schol, April 11, 2014, 25:15–28:00 min, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkyAf_bnnvY&feature=youtu.be.

²⁸ Furthermore, defining high vitality in relation to the whole provided a statistical ceiling: a theoretical maximum of 50% of UMC congregations can measure “high vitality” according to this formula. “To be considered ‘highly vital,’ a congregation must be in the top 25 percent of all U.S. congregations in two of the four major areas and cannot be in the bottom 25 percent in any one of the areas.” Heather Hahn, “United Methodist Church Vitality Increases in U.S.,”

discourse is its over-emphasis on the metrics of success, obsessing over characteristics found to correlate with perceived congregational vitality to the near-neglect of debilitating factors detrimentally affecting congregational health.

Let me offer an analogy. My brother is in fine health. When he turned forty, he decided to take up running again as a sport. He runs 5k races and adheres to a rigorous training schedule, monitoring his pace and charting his progress each run. He studies sophisticated analytics involving the use of interval training, alternating hard runs and easier runs, and maintaining a running pace at varying percentages of his maximum. In other words, he has studied the best training practices of the most successful athletes, put them into practice, and seen the fruit of his efforts. He now regularly finishes in the top 10% of his age group. One day, though, he pulled a muscle in his back after lifting a heavy box out of the trunk of his car. Obviously, measurement of his running pace after the injury was meaningless: he would have fared poorly; his vitality index as a runner would have been very low. To race again, he had to put aside the metrics of excellence and attend to healing. To regain full health, he needed a physician and physical therapist, not a coach. Many congregations are in an analogous situation. They are the wounded body of Christ. Before examining ways to promote congregational healing, though, it is informative to recall past critiques of metrics as a measure of faithful evangelism and congregational vitality.

Evangelism's Critique of Metrics

In the latter half of the 1980s, William J. Abraham took on the popular, evangelical Protestant church growth movement as a theologically inadequate approach to evangelism.²⁹ While agreeing with the need to connect the practice of evangelism to congregations as the primary locus for life in the kingdom of God, he observed a general "failure to acknowledge the

comprehensive and radical character of Christian initiation" within the movement.³⁰ Yes, church membership is important, he argued, but "there must be genuine initiation rather than superficial initiation."³¹ Regarding "church growth protagonists," he declared, "their focus on numerical church growth systematically distorts the whole ethos of our evangelistic endeavors," risking an instrumentalization of Christian love and friendship.³² Abraham penetratingly perceived that the church growth movement, principally relying on social science methodology, provides the church few tools to grapple with cultural diversity, social and corporate sin, "the radically inclusive character of the people of God," racism, social action, "the reality of injustice and oppression," and "the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to us in the conscience of the church at large."³³ Dwelling on this array of gospel-centered challenges is not the stock and trade of one seeking to become popular among one's affinity group. What then, for the church growth evangelist seeking to earn that fruit of divine favor, numerical increase? Abraham clearly understood that an imbalanced attention to metrics signaled an unhealthy obsession for congregations seeking to live into the reign of God. His was not the first critique along these lines.

George Morris, director of the Institute for World Evangelism at Candler School of Theology, drew attention to idea of "vital congregations" in the early 1980s through a consultation and edited volume. The Institute sponsored a five-day consultation of 100 delegates from Canada, the US, and Mexico to discuss "challenges and issues regarding the revitalization of existing congregations and the development of new ones."³⁴ At that time, discussion of congregational revitalization was still tethered to church growth theory, as indicated by the points of contestation. Already in 1976, church growth promoter Peter Wagner had

UMNS, July 24, 2014,

<https://www.umnews.org/en/news/unitedmethodistchurchvitalityincreasesinus>.

²⁹ William J. Abraham, "Church Growth Theory and the Future of Evangelism," in *Journal for the Academy of Evangelism in Theological Education 2* (1986–87): 20–30. Revised and reprinted as chapter four of William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 70–91.

³⁰ Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 81, 84.

³¹ Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 84.

³² Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 75, 85, 77.

³³ Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 85–86.

³⁴ George E. Morris, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Congregational Development*, World Evangelism Library 3, ed. George E. Morris, vii–viii (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984).

developed a list of the “seven vital signs” of a healthy church.³⁵

Anticipating Abraham’s *Logic* by several years, Morris offered the following assessment: “The congregations we develop must be kingdom-oriented . . . mean[ing] that the local church is essentially evangelistic and missionary, or it is not a church.”³⁶ Then, taking on the cultural pressure to obtain “numerical success,” he warned that this “passion for numerical success and power” must not supplant the priority of authentic witness: “for some, the principles for planting and revitalizing congregations are more determined by sociological and scientific data than by the gospel.”³⁷ His critique of the church growth movement’s homogenous unit principle, which seemed to work well in racially and economically segregated suburban neighborhoods, was pointed: “This strong emphasis upon concentrating on target populations where success is guaranteed could cause us to neglect the city with its economic fickleness, changing neighborhoods, and racial complexity. It could cause us to always take the easy way.”³⁸ Contrary to church growth theory, Morris advocated expending more resources and energy evangelizing in areas that did not yield immediately quantifiable success.

Since Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel to the poor is a concrete sign of the kingdom of God, it also becomes a powerful criterion by which we judge the validity of our congregational development. It will mean that mission analysis always gains ascendancy over demographic analysis and that we concentrate larger and larger amounts of human and material resources in our cities, among the poor of the earth, and with struggling ethnic minorities.³⁹

To be clear, the measure of missional vitality for Morris was not church growth, as such. Instead of measuring faithfulness by the fruit of increased church membership, his “kingdom-oriented” congregation focused primarily on ministry to the poor.

In the same volume, Luther E. Smith offered his vision of “vital congregations,” also in contrast to church growth. First, he recognized the social-contextual complexity that people bring with them to church and defined the church’s mission “to be an instrument which reconciles the world to God.”⁴⁰ Then, defining evangelism as “witnessing to the world so that it recognizes its brokenness and participates in the reconciling process,” he zeroed in on the relationship between congregational development and church growth theory: “The vital congregation’s witness to socio-cultural issues is made without the requirement that its evangelistic efforts result in the increase of its membership. Evangelism is not contingent upon membership growth.”⁴¹ Smith thus offered a clear, direct challenge to the church growth paradigm using the language of vital congregations.

Subsequent critiques of church growth and analyses of vital congregations in the mainline also pivoted around the obsession with numerical results as proof of evangelistic fealty. For example, in a 1990 Wesleyan critique of the church growth movement, Alan Padgett agreed with the general idea that “God desires numerical church growth,” but then asked, “is numerical growth always healthy?”⁴² This rhetorical turn, separating growth from health, distinguishes the discourse of vital congregations from the church growth movement.

Twenty-five years later, Gil Rendle offered a bold defense of metrics and the UMC’s “Call to Action,” in particular. As a church consultant, Rendle is invested in measuring congregational improvement and success. While admitting the limitations of measurement, he

³⁵ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale: Regal, 1976), 159.

³⁶ George E. Morris, “Theological Bases for Congregational Development,” in *Rethinking Congregational Development*, World Evangelism Library 3, ed. George E. Morris, 20–33 (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 30–31.

³⁷ George E. Morris, “Theological Bases,” 31–32.

³⁸ George E. Morris, “Theological Bases,” 32. Indeed, one reviewer of Wagner’s book observed, “there is only a fine line between ‘homogeneous unit’ and racism”: Val J. Sauer, “Review of Wagner, C Peter. *Your Church Can Grow*,” *Foundations* 20 no. 2 (Apr–Jun 1977): 183–187.

³⁹ George E. Morris, “Theological Bases,” 32.

⁴⁰ Luther E. Smith, Jr., “The Vital Congregation: Socio-Cultural Factors,” in *Rethinking Congregational Development*, World Evangelism Library 3, ed. George E. Morris, 34–43 (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 34–35.

⁴¹ Smith, “The Vital Congregation,” 35.

⁴² Alan G. Padgett, “The Church Growth Movement: A Wesleyan Critique,” in *The Mission of the Church in Wesleyan Perspective: The World is My Parish*, Studies in the History of Missions 10, ed. Alan G. Padgett, 137–47 (Lewistown, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 141.

chose to “advance the conversation about, and the use of, metrics as a tool for ministry.”⁴³ He offered five points to support his argument about vital congregations and the UMC: 1) “attention to vital congregations is absolutely essential to the mission and ministry of the [UMC]”; 2) the vitality index developed by “Team Vital” is “an invaluable tool of health for all congregations”; 3) counting is necessary to these tools; 4) “a benchmark is a standard” for measuring “all congregations”; and 5) vitality is distinct from purpose.⁴⁴ Regarding purpose, he was clear that “vital congregations” are a means not an end: “vital congregations are tools . . . by which mission can be accomplished.”⁴⁵ What is this mission, though, beyond the UMC tagline “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world”?⁴⁶ Can mission be measured by more than numbers and measurable outcomes? On this point, he seemed to argue both sides, claiming, “Mission is global but strategy is local.”⁴⁷ He explained, the outcomes to be measured must be determined locally, according to local needs and context.⁴⁸ Thus, he agreed with Schnase’s identification of “radical hospitality” as a vital congregational practice and indicated that what this looks like and how it is measured must be determined locally.⁴⁹ Ultimately, in this book, Rendle sought to promote metrics while cautioning church leaders to stay connected to “our purpose” as a church in mission.⁵⁰

My disagreement with Rendle is that, when advocating metrics, the church’s deeper missional purpose too often gets overshadowed by more immediate and pressing attention to what can be easily quantified. I fully agree that church leaders need to stay connected to the purpose behind our practices and that congregations should exercise radical hospitality, among other practices. However, the metrics of vitality do little

to assist congregations discerning their way through social change and unrest.

The discourse of vital congregations needs to take into account *debilitating factors* to vitality as well as *fruitful practices*. For example, Kirk Hadaway identified the presence of sustained or unresolved conflict (what he termed “serious conflict”) in a congregation as a contra-indicator of vitality, “a very strong predictor of congregational decline,” in the FACT2010 report.⁵¹ Hadaway found that conflicts over leadership and money were most strongly associated with decline.⁵² Yet, attempts to avoid conflict can be just as debilitating. Sustained conflict is a symptom, not a cause, of a lack of vitality, indicating underlying congregational wounds in need of healing. Evaluating an ailing patient according to the benchmarks of ideal health is a shaming technique, not a prescription for recovery. What do we do when dashboards diminish, metrics malign, and fruitful practices fail to produce?

Healing Congregations⁵³

Just as the practice of radical hospitality is a rebuttal to an inquiry by the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus’s day, who asked, “‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” my suggestion to tend to wounded and ailing congregations echoes his answer: “When Jesus heard this, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.’” (Mk 2:16-17, NRSV). Congregations in poor health must attend to healing before it makes any sense to monitor their statistical success. Many congregations are in need of a physician before they can become “vital” according to common metrics. To address both external and internal causes of illness, we need to focus on healing congregations.

⁴³ Gil Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness, and Metrics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 2.

⁴⁴ Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission*, 42–44. For the “vitality index,” see Rendle, pp. 121–2.

⁴⁵ Gil Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness, and Metrics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 12.

⁴⁶ UMC, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: UMPH, 2016), para. 120.

⁴⁷ Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission*, 44.

⁴⁸ Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission*, 44–46.

⁴⁹ Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission*, 32–33.

⁵⁰ Rendle, *Doing the Math of Mission*, 102.

⁵¹ C. Kirk Hadaway, FACTs On Growth: 2010, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary, p. 21, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FACTs-on-Growth-2010.pdf>. This finding is consistent with Dudley and Roozen, FACT2000, 61–62.

⁵² Hadaway, FACTs On Growth: 2010, 21.

⁵³ I first introduced the idea of healing congregations in Darryl W. Stephens, “A Deacon’s Eye for Healing Congregations,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 42:3 (July 2015): 213–19, <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/issue/view/6>.

Social responses to COVID-19 serve as an extreme example of an external, contextual factor affecting congregational health. In mid-March 2020, congregations in the U.S. and around the world discontinued in-person worship gatherings and began meeting for worship online. Many congregational leaders were unprepared for the change, experimenting with social media, live video streaming, and pre-recorded worship services for the first time.⁵⁴ Members and visitors had to navigate unfamiliar technology platforms in order to attend virtual worship services, prayer groups, and celebrations of the eucharist. Theological discussions about the efficacy and appropriateness of online sacraments became urgent. The very understanding of what it means to be church and to lead and participate in corporate worship demanded rethinking. Under these external circumstances, what meaning can be attributed to measuring attendance, membership, baptisms, professions of faith, people serving in outreach, and people served in outreach—the data tracked by the UMC’s “VitalSigns Dashboard”? Congregations were forced to confront the reality of human finitude in the midst of a global pandemic. In this instance, churches found themselves reeling from external devastation. The metrics of vitality were not immediately helpful in addressing this ailment. Neither are the metrics of vitality useful for addressing the cancer of racism in church and society.

The resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests in May and June 2020 exposed the festering wounds of white racism debilitating the church, both internally and externally. Abraham’s critique of the church growth movement for failing to grapple with cultural diversity, social and corporate sin, inclusiveness, racism, social action, injustice, and oppression is directly relevant to the metrics of congregational vitality.⁵⁵ There is nothing inherently justice-oriented about measuring “nickels and noses”; the “vital signs dashboard” cannot discern between injustice and diversity; the metrics of vitality know nothing of social and corporate sin. By an

examination of metrics alone, the school-to-prison pipeline coursing through communities of color throughout the U.S. would be considered a “highly vital” endeavor. Yet, we know that these numbers are not Good News. How then do we maintain focus on initiation and participation in the reign of God?

To focus on health, not growth, requires healing and transformation. In his book *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, Peter Steinke listed thirteen triggers of anxiety for congregations, including growth and survival.⁵⁶ The very metrics designed to promote vitality are themselves a debilitating factor in anxious times. This fact could be dismissed as exceptional if it were not so common. Regarding conflict in local churches, Steinke observed, “A high percentage of congregations are not prepared to face the animosity, to take action to address the problem, and to be sufficiently patient to heal. Rather, congregations develop patterns of survival behavior.”⁵⁷ Congregations and individuals cannot thrive when focused on survival. Jesus did not come so that the church could survive; he came “that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10 NRSV). For a congregation to be the bearer of this Good News, it must trust in the Great Physician and attend to healing the wounds of racism, among other ailments. Only through healing can these congregations become healing congregations for others.

The process of restored health involves a transformation, one that moves from the metrics of success to a full-bodied participation in the reign of God. Loren Mead described one aspect of the transformation that must take place: “Congregations of the future need to be congregations that nurture varieties of sensitivities to the bad news of the world and respond to those many forms of pain. These will be congregations open to more than one point of view.”⁵⁸ Thus, diversity is, according to Mead, an essential aspect of congregational health. And we know, according to Abraham’s critique, that neither the church growth movement nor its mainline offshoot, “vital congregations” metrics, has any fundamental commitment to or significant tool for

⁵⁴ Scott Thumma, “Becoming a Virtual Faith Community: Applying Past Data to New Ideas,” *Faith Communities Today*, March 30, 2020, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/becoming-a-virtual-faith-community-applying-past-data-to-new-ideas/>

⁵⁵ Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 85–86.

⁵⁶ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Bering Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 15–17.

⁵⁷ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, 102.

⁵⁸ Loren B. Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (New York: Alban Institute, 1994), 41.

addressing cultural diversity or “the radically inclusive character of the people of God.”⁵⁹ The dashboard of vitality provides no motivation or guidance for addressing the sin of racism.

Transformation requires all of us, every member of the body of Christ, learning together how to be one in Christ in ministry to all the world. Describing another aspect of necessary transformation, Anthony Robinson, author of *Transforming Congregational Culture*, emphasized that congregations in mission need to shift from being “givers” to being “receivers who give.”⁶⁰ He noted that to insist primarily on being givers “distorts our relationship with God and with our neighbors.”⁶¹ The “vital signs dashboard” cannot measure this distortion. There are, however, tools available for aiding congregations in their transformation from passive acceptance of white privilege to becoming active partners in dismantling systemic racism. Rather than focusing on the metrics of vital congregations, the General Commission on Religion and Race offers guidance in how to engage in vital *conversations*.⁶² Transformation goes well beyond race. The UMC’s Council of Bishops, in its longest running episcopal initiative, declared:

We are convinced that the reshaping of the church and the proclamation of the gospel cannot take place apart from a newly developed sense of community; that is, relationship of the church, including the bishops, with the economically impoverished and the most vulnerable of God’s children. God has chosen the poor, the vulnerable, and the powerless as means of grace and transformation.⁶³

Where among the vital congregations metrics is this means of grace? Ten years prior to the development of their vital signs dashboard, the Council of Bishops

offered only one measure of fidelity: “the evaluation of everything the church is and does in light of the impact on children and the impoverished.”⁶⁴ This measure requires fundamental transformation, beginning with healing.

Healing and Transformation

The church has been in need of a physician for a long time. A time of social disruption can be opportunity for introspection and prayer, allowing congregations to get back to the source of our vitality as a church. Loren Mead located the work of “helping us all become disciples and apostles” in the congregation: “The root of it all is transformation. The transformation of each of us into a disciple whose life has been touched and shaped by Jesus’ good news. The transformation of each of us into a special part of the apostolate Jesus is calling into being to proclaim his reign over all.”⁶⁵ Not easy metrics but faithful, risk-taking mission is the truer measure of vitality. Only after a congregation recognizes its own woundedness as the body of Christ can it receive the transformative healing offered by the Great Physician. And then, only then, might this healing congregation offer Good News to a world hurting from corporate and social sin.

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⁵⁹ Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 85–86.

⁶⁰ Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 66. Robinson subsequently served as general editor for the Congregational Vitality Series of six books published from 2006–2011 by Pilgrim Press as part of the “Congregational Vitality Initiative” of the UCC, each book focusing on a particular practice of ministry.

⁶¹ Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 67.

⁶² <https://www.gcorr.org/category/resource-topics/vitalconversations/>

⁶³ Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, “Community with Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative, Eastertide 2001.”

⁶⁴ Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, “Community with Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative, Eastertide 2001.” For a missiological analysis, see Hendrik R. Pieterse, “Opting for the Margins, Again: Recovering an Episcopal Vision” (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry (GBHEM), The United Methodist Church, 2007).

⁶⁵ Mead, *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, 41–42.

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