



Holy Innovations Project Description

Thesis

Congregations that make the paradigm shift *from* valuing and supporting what members do in and through the congregation *to* affirming and equipping the baptized for all that God is doing for the sake of the neighbor in and through our daily lives will experience vitality and renewal.

Goals

- Stir up a culture change that frees congregations to make the service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life the central focus of our mission.
- Equip congregational leaders to:
 - 1) put the service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life at the center of the congregation's purpose,
 - 2) see and shape all that the congregation does as a means of supporting and empowering such ministry,
 - 3) recognize and affirm the ministry that God is already doing in our daily roles and relationships, and
 - 4) develop new means of valuing and reporting the congregation's vitality in terms of God's ongoing activity in our daily lives.
- Revive language that empowers us to live into the reality that the church exists both as a gathered and a scattered people, and that our ministries happen both through our congregational activities and through our daily lives.
- Provide the necessary resources and networks that will empower congregations to make this paradigm shift and empower people who are looking for purpose and meaning as they follow the way of Jesus.

Background and Direction

The predominant lens through which we see ministry to the world is programs and initiatives of the congregation and the larger church (e.g., shelter meals, food pantries, World Hunger Appeal, and the Malaria Campaign). While these programs and initiatives are critical, needful, and should continue, we have created a gap between faith (predominantly that which happens "at church") and daily life. We have inadvertently trained our people to see ministry as *something extra*, above and beyond what we normally do, *if* we have the time and the interest. Our singular focus on ministries organized by and through congregations blinds us to the countless ways in which God is at work in our everyday lives as family members, friends, students, workers, volunteers, and citizens.

The good news is that the priesthood of all believers is embedded in our denominational DNA. This bedrock principle, built on the twin pillars of grace and vocation, finds expression in extensive systems to engage our people in congregational ministries, but our efforts to live it out in daily life lag in comparison. While our people are very aware that they are called to be God's hands, feet, and voices in their daily lives, they are largely unable to describe what this looks like in concrete terms. This is the gap that this project seeks to bridge.



The paradigm shift in our thesis (above) will reduce stress on congregational leaders, replacing our usual assessment of vitality (producing programs designed to draw participants and contributions) with a new understanding, both of a congregation's purpose and how we assess vitality. At the same time, we will reduce the stress and guilt we inadvertently place on our members by replacing our repeated requests to do *something extra* for or through the congregation with affirmation of and support for all that God is *already doing* in our daily lives.

Expectations

- We are looking for congregations where both rostered and lay leaders are committed to moving into a new paradigm (this is different than those that say they want congregational renewal, but are really harboring assumptions about becoming an updated version of a 1960s church).
- We will be clear that this is not only about a paradigm change, but it is specifically tied to discipleship. By that we mean that congregations are committed to connecting faith with everyone's callings to follow Jesus in all the roles and relationships of their daily lives. We are most interested in congregations that can make this connection the core priority of their work. This doesn't mean that they have to drop everything else; instead it means that everything (worship, youth ministries, small groups, council/staff) derive their direction from this priority and each area of ministry is expected to contribute to the achievement of this goal. (There is an additional conversation about our corporate callings, but that likely will come later in the paradigm shift.)

Process

This project aims at nothing less than a paradigm shift, not the implementation of yet another new program, a short-term focus, or the pet project of a few people. This project does not seek technical changes, but adaptive change (Ronald Heifetz), and will require sustained effort and support over a long period of time.

The project spans three calendar years:

Year One (2023)

The first full year lays the groundwork for years two and three:

- The participating synods recruit five congregations each for the project. Participating congregations should be a) willing and ready to engage the project seriously and b) represent a diverse cross-section of what the ELCA strives to look like.
- Once selected, congregations establish guiding teams consisting of the rostered leader(s) and four to six members. The rostered leaders are trained first, then recruit the guiding teams that are then trained by Life of Faith leaders.
- Congregations are connected with coaches who serve as accompaniment and accountability partners through the project.
- By the end of year one the congregations will have constructed their plan for years two and three of the project. (See the **Congregational Formation Process** document for details on the first year.)

Objectives for Year One

- Commit not to growing church members but disciples who are equipped to follow Jesus in their daily lives.
- Prayerfully listen to God and one another for the sake of discipleship in the world.

- Leaders understand, are able to explain and articulate the first steps in making the needed culture change (not just adding another program).
- Leaders are aligned, ready to work together and communicate regularly on the project.
- Able to name key challenges and goals.
- Identify the language that will lead congregations forward.
- Construct plans for years two and three of the project.

Years Two and Three (2024-25)

The second and third years will consist of implementation of the congregational plans.

Periodic meetings to check progress and provide additional training will be held. The focus will be on support and sharing what congregations are learning in their context.

All participating groups will be part of a private social media group where learnings (both successes and challenges) are shared. The coaches will ensure that this platform is used regularly.

Evaluation and gathering of insights will occur both at the beginning and throughout the project.

Planning for the years to come based on what has been learned will be built in to the end of year three. We will work intentionally not only to assure that congregations continue building on what they have started, but that participants will become advocates and promoters who work to spread the work of the Life of Faith Initiative.

Coaching

Coaching will be provided throughout the project. Coaching sessions will be held regularly (as frequently as once a month). There will also be periodic meetings as synodical cohorts, in order to surface the highest amount of learning.

Evaluative Measures

By engaging in regular program evaluation, all participants will gain understanding into the effectiveness of this project, document areas of success, identify potential areas of weakness, and gather direction for project improvement.

Evaluation of the project will focus on five key areas:

- Spiritual vitality of individual worshippers.
- Vitality of the congregation as a collective body.
- Use of language around vocation and ministry (both at the individual and congregational levels).
- Impact of changing language on individual and congregational vitality.
- Congregational plans to sustain and expand the work of the project (this will become a focus during the latter portion of the project).

To best assess change in each of these areas over the course of the project, evaluation will be part of the regular fabric, with assessments being taken on an annual basis, beginning in Year One.

In evaluation, it is a best practice to employ multiple methods. This helps to address different, but complementary questions and, hopefully, increases the ease with which a coherent story can be told from the data. The evaluation of the project will use:

- Questionnaires and interviews with leadership and worshippers from participating congregations.
- Content analysis of sermons, newsletters and other published content from the congregation.
- Content analysis of personal blogs and lay testimonies of worshippers.

Project Budget

It is expected that the costs of the project will be borne by the participating congregations and synods, and by the churchwide organization as follows:

Congregational Expenses

Congregations naturally ask about the amount that should be budgeted to implement this work in the congregation. The *assumption* is that this is an initiative that is in addition to the what the congregation already does. Ultimately, the *goal* is that eventually there will be no part of the congregation, including the budget, that will not be integrated in this work. At the same time we recognize that there will be a transitional period to get there. We expect that congregations will pay for the cost of coaching (\$600/year). Each congregation will also be invited to develop a portion of the budget for years two and three to help bring their plan to life. (As an example, one congregation set aside \$10,000 in the first couple years to allow them to bring in speakers, develop a logo, pay for special services, etc.)

Synodical Expenses

Participating synods will contribute \$2,500 per year to cover approximately one-half of the costs of training, coach mentoring, and the project coordinator.

Churchwide Participation

The ELCA's Holy Innovation Program (Campaign for the ELCA funds) has committed funds to cover the other half of the project. All the contributions will be administered by the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, which is serving as a fiscal agent for the project.

Spiritual Practices

Prayer, encounters with Scripture, and discernment will be built in throughout the project. Dwelling in the Word could be used throughout the training (Year One) and implementation (Years Two and Three). Luke 10:1–12 or Ephesians 4:11–13 could be the focus. Each training session will end with prayer, using some of the intentional prayer practices found in the Discipleship Coaching curriculum, and congregations will be encouraged to carry such practices into Years Two and Three.

Congregational Selection Criteria

We are looking for congregations with:

- alignment of rostered and lay leaders who are ready to work together to move (or are searching for a way to move) into a new paradigm that connects faith and daily life;
- readiness to focus all congregational ministries on growing disciples who are equipped to follow Jesus in their roles and relationships in daily life;
- prayerful listening to God and one another for the sake of discerning God's will for their vision;
- representation of the diversity of both the church and the world around us (we expect synods to recruit congregations from diverse contexts and demographics);
- openness to engaging in practices that intentionally and vigorously reach out to the vast diversity of God's creation;

- honest, open, and effective communication that promotes unity and faith-filled resolution to conflict;
- leaders who are able to patiently and persistently navigate the joys and challenges of culture change, and are able to explain the beginning steps of culture change with enthusiasm for the potential transformation that can occur, both individually and communally;
- willingness to designate a leadership team for the project that represents the diversity of the ministry setting and the community; and
- ability to provide \$600/year for coaching.

Description of Congregational Vitality

The ELCA’s current description of vital congregations is: “Communities of Jesus that nurture life-changing relationships with God, one another, and the world.”

In keeping with that *and* in order to lift up the intent of the Life of Faith Initiative—shifting away from recognizing only ministries organized in and through congregations by bridging the gap between faith and our daily lives—we offer this description.

Vitality is evident in communities of faith that:

- Enable and embolden one another to bridge the gap between faith and daily life by rediscovering the calling given in the waters of baptism to love and serve our neighbors in all our roles and relationships.
- Equip God’s people to nurture relationships with God through scripture, prayer practices, story, and personal testimony to the many ways that God is present in daily life.
- Practice discernment and active listening to gain a strong sense of God’s ongoing, active presence in the world, and have the faithful imagination to identify and act on the ways that we are called to participate in God’s purposes in the world, both corporately and in our individual lives.
- Use faithful imagination to identify and act in the ways that align with God’s purposes for our neighbors. This includes the practice of radical hospitality to welcome the excluded, the practice of courage to dismantle systemic racism, and the practice of inclusion to build the Beloved Community.