

Vibrant, Vital and Viable Congregations and Faith Communities

VIBRANT is a key word in our PPW Presbytery vision [May 2021]. Vibrant, vital and viable congregations, faith communities, (schools and agencies) filled with vim and vigour. Christ came to give us abundant and vital Life [John 10:10]. PPW wants to support every congregation to be viable and vital, healthy and resilient for the future. The Presbytery wants every congregation to think about how they are we 'Regenerating the Church'? Equipping all the people of God to engage in 'new and renewing' ministries. This document acts as a discussion starter, the difficult things we do not want to talk about, is our congregation viable in 10 years time? At the end of this process we will be able to look to the future - not with fear but with God given hope and vibrancy.

Congregational Viability: How do we define viability of congregations? How do we measure it?

The value of this document is two-fold.

A) It allows congregations to assess for themselves their own viability and vitality.

B) It informs congregations what it is that presbytery assesses when it comes alongside you in a mission study, Joint Nominating Committee (JNC), Life and Witness and other consultations. It is determining how is the congregation is viable and vibrant?

Theological Reflection: 'Parable of the Tenants' is a biblical story – an allegory that has many layers of meaning for us [Matt 21:33-44, Mk 12:1-12, Lk:9-19]. The traditional understanding is that Israel is the tenants of God's vineyard. The messengers in the story are the prophets who down through the ages have called Israel to be faithful with messages of hope and/or doom. Israel behaved wickedly and beat up the messengers and killed the owners' son. Ultimately, we are reminded that the vineyard belongs to God alone.

For us today: God has given us all a vineyard, a church congregation and a building to tend. The presbytery and synod are represented by the agents of God who come with messages of hope and/or doom. Congregations as tenants choose how you will respond to the message. Some tenants will fight to hold onto the property even though the land really belongs to God alone.

The vine is a great image for us of 'regeneration'. There is a great depth to be drawn from our own 'Regenerating the Church 2021' - theological statement when considering regeneration [Green]. Congregations can consider what mission and ministry are we Planting? Pruning? Grafting? Fertilising? Growing, Blossoming and Fruiting? Repotting?

Background: In the next few years 'Here for Good' will make some demands from us as a presbytery and congregations (Synod Feb 2020). Instead of stoning the messengers, lets respond as good tenants and hear the news as hope for a viable church in the long term.

1. Spiritual Viability: Every aspect of our life is an opportunity to bear witness to the Gospel as we find our identity in Christ by following his mission into the world. This includes the way we gather as communities, our treatment of each other. How vital is the Life and Witness of the congregation? Is there regular worship and discipleship, do the congregational members participate? Is the congregation welcoming? Are spiritual gifts recognised and encouraged? Is the congregation meeting church safe and child safe requirements – to provide spiritual safety. Are there activities other than regular Sunday worship? Is there a healthy diversity in the congregation?

2. Missional Viability: The mission of the Crucified God: God who is present in pain and suffering; God beside the marginalized and broken; God with the rejected and oppressed; God who heals the fragile creation. Participating in and witnessing to God's mission is transformational; Are there high levels of involvement in missional activities (not just one or two people)? Does the congregation understand their local context and are they engaged with the community? Is there contact with 'unchurched' people? Are there specific congregational missions (other than renting buildings or giving money to good causes)? Is the missional focus of the congregation known and or owned by the whole of the congregation? Are we connecting with First and Second peoples?

3. Leadership Viability: The simple truth that grounds the life of the church is that the Triune God is ahead of us in the world... Our call is not simply to do 'things better' or to do 'new things', but to allow the Spirit of Christ to regenerate and reshape our life as we join in with God's mission. Is there the existence of a functional annually elected Church Council, with active and capable office bearers? Is the congregation meeting the UCA regulations regarding the role of a congregation? Is there energy and enthusiasm amongst church leadership and a willingness to make difficult decisions, take calculated risks, manage conflict and to be innovative? Ability to fill leadership positions without familial conflict of interest. Are there successors to take on future leadership who are being equipped? How will the congregation manage if another minister cannot be appointed?

4. Property Viability: Every aspect of our life is an opportunity to bear witness to the Gospel as we find our identity in Christ by following his mission into the world. This includes... our use of property, and our love and service in the world. What is the state of the whole site for which the congregation is responsible? (Is there Heritage Listing? Is there disability access and toilets? Is asbestos present?) Are the properties well maintained? Is there an appropriate maintenance budget? Have the Synod OH&S audit requirements been met to ensure the building is safe? What is the density of UCA congregations in your area? Are you in a growth corridor?

5. Financial Viability: The church is called to participate in and witness to this mission; to be mission shaped. Is the congregation financially sustainable? Can this be measured by stewardship, income and expenditure, maintenance budgets, insurance coverage, solvency, reserves and investments? What are the sources of income and how secure are they (especially in the light of COVID-19)? Is the congregation exercising good stewardship of its resources?

6. Placement Viability: Participating in and witnessing to the wonder of God's mission. Joining in with God's mission, centered in Christ and empowered by the Spirit, is our call as a Congregation. Is a ministry placement able to be sustained for 5 – 10 years? Is there willingness to share a minister with a neighbouring congregation? Is there leadership to support a ministry agent? Is there a history of minister burnout in this placement? Is there resistance to change? Is there sexist, bullying or racist behaviour?

7. People Viability: As a Pilgrim people, we invite others to journey alongside us in participating in and witnessing to the new humanity and new creation that God has inaugurated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The size of the congregation – the number regularly attending worship? Are relationship and connections with people being developed? Do people gather at other times? How are people pastorally supported? The regulated minimum number of voting members to form a Congregational meeting is [Reg 3.8.5 (b) 8 is quorum]. Is there familial 'Conflict of Interest' in your Church Council?