

2023

THRIVING CONGREGATIONS INITIATIVE

ANNUAL REPORT



**NOURISHING
VOCATION**

The Nourishing Vocation Project invites individual participants and whole congregations to deepen their understanding of God's call upon their life and work so that they might more intentionally live life on purpose and engage in ministry on purpose for the common good.

PROJECT LEADERSHIP

Dr. Jo Beld
Rev. Dr. Charlene Rachuy Cox
Sabrina Bakken
Dr. Pippa Younger

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Nourishing Vocation: Reimagining Congregational Callings in Unimaginable Times

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KEY OBJECTIVES

- 1** Resource Development **2** Presentations and Programs **3** Pastoral Accompaniment **4** Partnerships

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Completion and Distribution of High-Impact Materials
 - Discerning our Values Exercise
 - The Called Life Exercise
 - My Living Faith Exercise
 - 52 additional Near & Now Integrative Studies
- Growth of Strategic Partnerships
 - Northern Illinois Synod, ELCA
 - Church Anew
 - National Council of Churches
 - Life of Faith Initiative
- High-Impact Events
 - Lent in a Box with Church Anew
 - Congregational Resourcing Event, Northern Illinois Synod, ELCA
 - Synod Assembly, Northern Illinois Synod, ELCA
 - Fall Theological Retreats – Indiana/Kentucky Synod and Western Iowa Synod, ELCA
- Elevation of Diverse, Young Adult Voices as Project Writers
 - Near & Now Integrative Studies
 - Engaging the Living Word Resources for Teaching and Preaching
 - Advent Devotional
- Growth of Campus Engagement
 - Student Project Fellows who blog, research and lead webinars, liaise with NVP congregations
 - Vocare spiritual practice introduced to over 175 students
 - Vocare spiritual practice introduced to staff at the Life on Purpose retreat

KEY AIMS

- To support congregational thriving by nourishing vocation.
- To assist St. Olaf College, and potentially like institutions, to discern and deepen an understanding of vocation in relation to congregational vitality

OUR TEAM



Dr. Jo Beld

Vice President for Mission
Project Director, Nourishing
Vocation



Rev. Dr. Charlene Rachuy Cox

Director of Programming,
Engagement, & Innovation for
Congregational Thriving



Sabrina Bakken

Assistant Director of
Programming & Administration



Dr. Pippa Younger

Administrative Assistant for
The Lutheran Center and the
Nourishing Vocation Project

BY THE NUMBERS

23

Congregations participating in the program ~ *this number does not reflect the 140 congregations of Northern Illinois Synod.*

1,868

Individuals from congregations participating in the program (as members of a congregational cohort).

3,491

Individuals participating in the program (including those participating in one or more high-impact event & individuals who are members of a congregation participating in a cohort).

511

Congregations represented in all events.

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OBSERVATIONS

- **Lay-Led, Rostered-Leader Supported Ministry**

The primary lesson from this year is a growing appreciation for Spirit-empowered, lay-led, rostered-leader supported as an essential paradigm for ministry. The congregations in the NVP that are bearing the most fruit are those who intentionally make space for the Holy Spirit by stepping out of an expectation for a quick, predictable, linear process. They are using the resources provided to lean into spiritual renewal, deepened relationships, and an openness to discernment. In those same congregations, the project is predominantly led by lay people with the support of rostered and other professional leaders. .

- **Spiritual Growth Tools**

The *Vocare* spiritual practice functions like leaven in both individual people's lives and in the life of a congregation by creating a rhythm that leads to deeper conversations and new insights. When *Vocare* is accompanied by significant engagement with the Near and Now Integrative Studies, relationships are deepened, community is enhanced, empathy is strengthened, and an openness emerges to engage in new ministry opportunities. Spiritual renewal leads to missional renewal amid changing contexts.

- **High-Touch Training**

In-person, high-touch training with the Director of Programming, Engagement, and Innovation is more effective than virtual training and equipping events. While in-person engagement is necessarily limited because of our nationwide strategy, opportunities to be physically present with one another have resulted in greater engagement by those particular pastors and congregations.

SUSTAINABILITY

- The work of the project has had a transformational impact on congregations and individuals. A sustainability plan is currently under development. Potential sustainability goals include:
 - Curate a library of impact stories with an emphasis on student impact.
 - Secure endowments for staff positions in the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community that support the work with congregations within and beyond this project.



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STORIES

1 First Lutheran Church in Worthington, Minnesota is a Cohort 1 congregation. In the summer of 2022, their leadership team began a summer, mid-week evening worship service using the NVP lectionary and Near and Now Integrative Studies. Throughout the summer, they averaged 15 worshipers. After evaluating their experience, they adjusted plans for their summer 2023 mid-week services. They moved the service outside, shortened the time, used the Evening Vocare Liturgy with Holy Communion, based the homilies off of the Part 2 Near and Now Integrated Studies, and concluded each service with a neighborhood ice cream social. By the end of the summer, they averaged 45 worshippers with several neighborhood families. Children in those families are now regular participants in their after school, mid-week activities. They drew on practices from their ecclesial tradition (worship), adapted their ministry to their changing context and gained greater clarity about a particular component of their mission. Pr. Jeanette McCormick states 'The gathering started mostly with people who were opting for a Wednesday evening service because of weekend travel plans. Over time, the gathering grew with others who heard about the joyful time together and wanted to be involved.'

2 First Immanuel Lutheran Church in Chicago, Illinois used the Near and Now Integrative Studies in their adult Bible Study from August through December. Through the conversations nurtured by the study, two members who are both in recovery formed a friendship and volunteered to start and lead a regular Narcotics Anonymous group and an Alcoholics Anonymous group at the church. The leadership affirmed this decision, and a new ministry outreach began. They drew on practices from their ecclesial tradition (Bible study), explored a need in their context, and gained clarity about their mission. Lead Pastor Anne McCall says "The VOCARE questions have generated deep discussions that have resulted in building close relationships. 'Near and Now' is allowing the Holy Spirit to do amazing things in our group!"

3 Pr. Sara McSwords began forming Beloved United Methodist Church in Marysville, Ohio as a mission start in January of 2023. During Lent, she utilized the NVP materials provided through Lent in a Box for midweek "Beloved Connections Gatherings," where participants studied scripture using the Near and Now Integrative Studies, connected, dreamed, determined core values by using NVP values discernment materials, and planned. Attendance grew each week. Beloved launched weekly Sunday worship on Palm Sunday, April 2, 2023 with over 100 people. Pr. McSwords says 'The sermon and study series with RCL and with Jonah created space for me and my congregation to ask questions such as what are our values, are we open to what God is doing in us and through us, and how are we called to do and be in this season. These questions have been formative as we have been planting this new church community. I am so very grateful for the new connections and resources through NVP that have helped me feel less isolated and alone in leadership and ministry in our polarized climate'

WHAT COMES NEXT

APRIL

- Launch of Cohort 4

JULY

- St. Olaf College Conference on Worship, Theology, and the Arts: Nourishing Vocation