

2024

THRIVING CONGREGATIONS INITIATIVE

ANNUAL REPORT



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
Pam Christoffers
Dr. Pippa Younger

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Nourishing Vocation: Reimagining Congregational Callings in Unimaginable Times

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KEY OBJECTIVES

- 1** Conference on Worship, Theology, and the Arts
- 2** Presentations and Programs
- 3** Assessment and Evaluation
- 4** Pastoral Accompaniment

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- **Conference on Worship, Theology, and the Arts (CWTA)**
 - Embraced a paradigm of practitioners, by practitioners, and for practitioners.
 - Focused on nourishing participants' vocational understanding in daily themes: "Called," "Nourished" and "Sent."
 - More than doubled attendance from 2022, including professional and lay leaders from 27 states and six denominations.
 - St. Olaf ELCA Pastors led worship, modeling high quality, accessible worship and different styles of compelling preaching.
 - Spotlight Sessions were led by NVP pastors and lay leaders to provide practical suggestions.
- **Presentations and Partnerships**
 - Conducted Webinar series on Critical Concerns.
 - Continued Living Catechism with 7 pilot projects.
 - With the Lutheran Center, co-sponsored an event on Christian Nationalism, featuring Rev. Angela Denker.
- **Assessment and Evaluation**
 - Conducted surveys and interviews to understand the project's impact and value, including a comprehensive assessment of all professional congregational leaders in NVP Cohort #1.
 - All CWTA evaluation measures scored over 4.0 out of 5.0.
- **Pastoral Accompaniment**
 - Continued regular one-on-one time with Cohort pastors.
 - Discerned a need for a coaching pilot for NVP pastors to allow for more lay leader engagement with the Director.

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



Pam Christoffers

Associate Director of
Congregational Thriving



Dr. Pippa Younger

Administrative Assistant
for The Lutheran Center
and the Nourishing
Vocation Projects

BY THE NUMBERS

167

Total congregations whom we've supported; 27 congregations have participated in learning community cohorts.

653

Congregations represented in all events.

2,415

Individuals from congregations participating in the program from cohort congregations - not inclusive of individuals from high impact events

4,787

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

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OBSERVATIONS

• Positive, Adaptive Change

We have begun to internalize the difference between 1) creating and distributing exceptional resource material to foster dynamic programming, and 2) supporting positive, adaptive change through dynamic programming and exceptional resource material that we create and distribute. Through our own discernment work, we have come to understand that the fundamental call of the NVP is to do the latter. Leading with our call to support positive, adaptive change moves congregations away from looking for the “next cool program,” and toward a foundational process of spiritual formation and renewal that opens the congregation to essential changes so that they can thrive. We have made significant changes in process, implementation, and experiences to ensure the adaptive change is possible.

• Responding to Emerging Concerns

We have learned of the necessity of being responsive to emerging concerns for the sake of resource development and educational opportunities, especially around intersections with critical concerns facing congregations and the world. Originally, we created Near and Now Integrative studies and held webinars on topics that we had identified in our application - young adults, diversity, economics, well-being, and digital ministry. While those topics continue to be important, we have learned to continue to be responsive to emerging concerns so that our work continues to be timely, contextual, and relevant for the congregations we serve.

• Valuing In-Person Experiences

From CWTA 2024 we learned in new and poignant ways of the value of in-person experiences. Cohort 1 launched in person at CWTA 2022. The pastors and lay leaders in that cohort are more connected than the pastors and lay leaders in Cohorts 2 and 3 that launched virtually in the intervening time between CWTA 2022 and CWTA 2024. While part of that connection may be due to the size of the cohort, the in-person experience was most definitely a contributing factor. At the same time, it was valuable to observe the ways that those who formed relationships online in Cohorts 2 and 3 enthusiastically engaged with one another in-person. Cohort 4 launched a few months prior to CWTA 2024. Most of the congregations had representatives at the conference. In the time since CWTA 2024, the value of the in-person experience has had a definite, positive impact on their engagement with one another and with the project as a whole. While not all in-person experiences need to be large, communal gatherings, in-person experiences facilitate deeper engagement and connection. This in turn seems to create sustained commitment to one another and the project as a whole. Hence, we have learned to elevate and support in-person experiences so that participants can root their NVP experiences and relationships in embodied, real time together, thereby creating and nurturing a rich climate for mutual accompaniment and support.



SUSTAINABILITY

- We began meeting with a Leadership Education Sustainability Coach in December, 2024.
- Discernment around Sustainability and or scaling will continue through 2025



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STORIES

1

Bethany Lutheran Church in Woodhull, IL is a Cohort 3 congregation under the pastoral leadership of Rev. Laurie Hensley. As a result of participation in NVP and CWTA, Pr. Laurie and Lay Leaders developed "Faith Formation 4 Everyone," an intergenerational education time that connects Biblical call stories with our everyday lives. They have used the VOCARE spiritual practice, Near and Now studies, and several NVP materials for Advent and Lent. Pr. Laurie writes, "Eight years ago, this congregation was nearly ready to close. Now, we are alive and vibrant. Our financial position is wonderful (offerings exceeded our expenses for the 4th straight year after COVID), we have increased our church membership by 47 people in less than 4 years, our average worship attendance now averages between 70-80 every Sunday, and youth come to church! This is an exciting time at Bethany and we are thankful!" Pr. Laurie identifies the NVP and CWTA as opportunities that came along at the right time to enhance transformation that was already in progress.

2

Trinity Lutheran Church in Crookston, MN is a Cohort 2 congregation led by Rev. Gregory Isaacson and Rev. Michael Ozaki. During January 2024, Trinity's leadership determined that they were called to be a leader within their wider community to encourage and foster collaboration. Pr. Greg asked for assistance in developing a VOCARE congregational leadership retreat. Director Cox created the VOCARE Discernment Retreat Conversation Process Guide, and Pr. Greg led the retreat with five area congregations participating. Each considered their own ministry, and collectively imagined their shared ministry. The retreat was intentionally designed to encourage Openness to the Spirit's call. As a result, these five congregations developed a shared worship plan for Summer 2024, which provided additional Sundays of respite for each of the clergy and laid the groundwork for additional ministry collaboration for the sake of the wider community. Additionally, based upon their CWTA 2024 experience, the leadership chose "Called, Nourished, Sent" as their fall programming theme. Through this theme they explored both the personal and congregational dimensions of call.

3

Zion United Church of Christ in Delaware, OH is a Cohort 3 congregation under the pastoral leadership of Rev. Beth Gedert. Pr. Beth, in conjunction with lay leadership, has imagined and developed creative ways to engage the whole congregation in the NVP. From an introduction to vocation as "life on purpose for the common good" on Baptism of our Lord Sunday, to Lenten lunch conversations, to a summer sermon series, to Bible studies with the Near and Now resources, Zion has actively sought to integrate the NVP into existing congregational ministries, meeting people where they are, opening them to the movement of the Spirit. In this process, Zion has spread out NVP engagement to introduce the language, practices, and experiences, encouraging people to be creative and "make it their own." This led to development of new and creative ways to engage the VOCARE spiritual practice. A particularly imaginative idea is a "Values Bracket", developed by a young adult from Zion in conjunction with "March Madness." Pr. Beth explains that while this is especially engaging for younger members, everyone has gotten into the spirit and now looks forward to it every year.

4

Augustana Lutheran, led by Rev. Jan Peterson, is a Reconciling in Christ congregation located in a diverse Midtown neighborhood in Omaha, NE. The congregation began participating in the Nourishing Vocation Project in August, 2023. Pr. Jan has always told the congregation that they must listen for God's voice, and through listening we would see the passions and gifts of the congregation. After the NVP team met for a few months deepening their own spirits through use of the Near and Now studies, Pr. Jan states, "We decided it was time to gather the congregation using the VOCARE Discernment Retreat. A large percentage of the active members of the congregation participated in one of the two retreats. The conversations were life-giving as attendees both lamented the difficult times and celebrated the life-giving moments in the congregation. Ultimately the members discerned the congregation's top three core values: Outreach, Worship and Progressive/Reconciling. The congregation began discussions with St. Matthew Lutheran Church regarding the possibility of a Shared Ministry arrangement. Questions about 'Is this what we are called to do as a congregation?' came from others, not the pastor. Pr Jan firmly believe this is due to their work with NVP.



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WHAT COMES NEXT?

- Complete Assessments of Cohorts 2 and 3.
- Meet with College Advancement colleagues to discuss the impactful storytelling and impact that program colleagues can provide to support fundraising efforts.
- Hold quarterly Coffee Hours for all Cohort members (including those who have technically “concluded” the NVP).
- Steward Cohort 4 with Cohorts 1-3 acting as mentors.
- Steward Pastoral Coaching Pilot.
- Continue ongoing development, implementation, and distribution of A Living Catechism.
- Highlight examples and evidence of “thriving” from NVP congregations in each CWTA Newsletter.
- Begin planning CWTA 2026: Nourishing Vocation – Every Time. Every Age. Every Place.
- Engage in strategic discernment regarding sustainability or scaling.

