

# St. Matthew ELCA – Omaha

## Vitality Initiative Responses: Summary

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### **Key Takeaways**

We are still collecting data; these are the key takeaways from what we have heard so far with our internal congregation interviews (January 2022):

- **Weak congregational identity**  
Most respondents were **unsure or didn't know our church's vocation**.
- **Low energy**  
Words used to describe the congregation: **stale, tired, low energy, lacking creativity**
- **Need to grow the congregation**  
This was **mentioned in every interview**.
- **Youth ministry has declined and needs to be strengthened**  
Responses specifically mentioned having a paid staff member and a preschool.  
Many listed **vibrant, thriving youth ministry as the 'most alive' time in our church**.
- **We currently have a leadership void**  
Much concern over the
  1. **Lack of identified leaders in the church and who will step up to move things forward;**
  2. **Impact of covid and health concerns on the pastor and his long-term ability to continue full time in his role.**
- **Need to be open to doing things differently and radical change**  
Respondents **recognize the need to try different approaches**, even if difficult.
- **We have hope for the future!**  
Congregants **truly care about our church** and want to see it continue to serve God and our neighbors.  
**Younger respondents tended to have more concrete action items and ideas for change.**

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***"We need to stop chasing ghosts and the past, and we need to build to the future. We need to rebuild ourselves up from the foundation."***

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***"If we are going to be a successful congregation, we need to have some hard conversations about what needs to change to give us a jolt of energy to move forward."***

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## When has our congregation felt “most-alive” in the Spirit and centered in vocation?

- ~15 years ago: thriving youth ministry and Sunday school and services were full every Sunday
- Service opportunities to help outside the congregation (e.g., food pantry, LFS, etc.)
- In-person service
- When we had a lot of younger married couples and young families that were very active in the church.

*“Seeing the various ministries, the Disability Ministry, youth group, general congregation was very welcoming, enjoyed the contemporary service.”*

*“More alive when there were kids around.”*

*“During the Market place VBS when adults and children were working together.”*

*“When youth directors led thriving youth ministries; youth spoke of great spiritual experiences..”*

*Lutheran Catechism: “Being a newly baptized Lutheran, I didn't know this -- it was my first exposure to Lutheran beliefs.”*

## When has our congregation experienced fear or anxiety around change or opportunity for mission?

- During the process of becoming a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) congregation.
- When we changed long-time church activities (e.g., ice cream social location) and service days/times/formats.
- During pastoral changes/call process
- When the congregation has had significant financial difficulties.
- Pandemic – “Will this congregation survive?”
- Omaha population moving further west (~1990s)
- Conflict with pastoral activism or perceived activism (e.g., ‘political’ sermons, same-sex marriages, etc.)
- During staff changes (e.g., Youth ministry, administrative, music director).
- Concern about the impact of Pastor Glen’s diagnosis and his ability to continue pastor duties full-time.

*“I fear that we lost members due to the "Reconciling in Christ" initiative.”*

*“Will St. Matthew (it's people) ever return? Will this congregation survive?”*

*“Our congregation right now is not youthful. There are some days that we don't go to church because we don't want to potentially get the older folks sick.”*

*“If I were new to the church and I walked in now, I would not stay because there are very few children and no youth programs.”*

## What do believe the vocation of this congregation has “seemed” to be 50 years ago? 25 years ago? Most recently?

### 50 years ago:

- Outreach to the community (new Sunday school started; growing a mission congregation).
- Bringing faith to the neighborhood
- Emphasis on welcoming and growing the church and Sunday school

## 25 years ago:

- Outreach expands – Tanzanian ministry, Mosaic, thriving Youth ministry and VBS (Marketplace).
- Neighborhood church; “The Welcome Place” branding; expansion of staff
- Thriving ministries (e.g., puppet ministry mission trips, shut-in visits, in-home bible studies, couples/family clubs)
- Large benevolence fund
- Facility repair and expansion

## Most recently:

- Unsure/don't know/trying to figure it out (Note: This was said often!)
- RIC and promoting inclusion, diversity, and equity
- Serving those outside the congregation (food pantry)
- Expand service types (contemporary – jazz service).

## When and for what reasons has our congregation struggled in the past?

- Individuals struggling w/the ELCA sexuality study, RIC, and acceptance of LGBTQ folks.
- Decline of a vibrant, thriving youth ministry to one that is now non-existent.
- Financial challenges
- Getting more congregation members actively participating, especially younger members.
- Conflicts w/pastors or paid staff
- Fear of change
- Declining membership and giving

*“Some people just don't like to mess with the way things are, not knowing that it can hurt a congregation's growth.”*

*“Not bringing in children, there is a whole generation of young adults that don't seem to care. If we are not reaching the children we are not going to get the parents.”*

*“I always felt bad when my kids were the only ones attending Sunday School.”*

*“We are struggling now...When our congregation is torn, we struggle.”*

## Looking towards our congregation's future, what dreams for our vocation do you think God has for our congregation?

- Collaborate with other congregations
- Grow past, present, and future ministries, especially youth ministry and outreach
- Revitalize worship
- Grow Sunday school/faith formation opportunities
- Grow ministering to an aging congregation
- Serve our community more – more neighborhood engagement
- Rebuild, bring energy, and fill leadership void

*“St. Matthew can lead and work with the cluster in making the cluster stronger. There is a missed opportunity with every congregation individually struggling. We need to be working together.”*

*"The church is very inclusive and welcoming to new people. Even if there was an after-school club at St. Matthew for kids, that would be a great way to get people in the door. The neighborhood is expanding."*

*"We need to focus on getting bodies in the building before the church closes down!"*

*"If we had a preschool, we would send our kids there. I drive my kids across town to go to another church's Lutheran preschool."*

*"We need to 'freshen up' our look in the church building and Sunday school classrooms."*

*"For the younger population, this needs to be done on the social media platform to get the engagement and response time. We need to expand our presence on Facebook. The online service has been a good thing, but I haven't participated. I go to church for the social. I would love to see a way to tithe electronically that isn't monthly. The app was too cumbersome to use. Why not leverage St. Matthew on newer platforms? Even adding a Venmo logo to the church's bank account will make it super easy for folks to donate."*

*"We need to stop chasing ghosts and the past, and we need to build to the future. We need to rebuild ourselves up from the foundation."*

*"People like to be a part of something. Needing the right pastor for this point in time. What we need now is vastly different than what our needs were when pastor first arrived."*

## **How might God's dream for our congregation involve risk and discomfort?**

- Congregant growth regarding LGBTQ acceptance and providing a safe space for all
- Shifting the view by some in the congregation of Christianity as 1) a means to get to heaven, 2) consumer-oriented mindset.
- Difficult conversations and actions to move forward and do things differently.
- Anxiety and conflict over resources (financial, human, leadership vacuum).
- Current congregation conflicts

*"Let's focus on bringing the kingdom of heaven to our neighbor."*

*"We can't fall back on the "way we have always done it", we need to be evolving and changing in how we express ourselves, we need to be able to let go of some "old patterns" being okay with screwing things up, trusting in God to get us to where we need to be next. Stop holding on to the past, we need to change and evolve, stick with our core tenants."*

*"One of the reasons this will be so hard is that our church is still so divided about the sermons (love them or not). We don't have a clear majority one way or the other. This will make or break the congregation. Want more put into youth. People look for an active youth ministry to choose a church, and we haven't had one since 2017."*

## **Additional comments**

*"It is fatiguing to have the same sermon content over several weeks."*

*"Sermons seem to be very dark/down lately, and I think that this has turned off a big portion of the congregation."*

*"With the social media items and how to gather a fresh pool of people, we need to find someone with that skillset. People like testimonials and know who we are. This would be nice to do on a social media platform. Making it easier to donate is a big thing."*