

Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches in the United Church of Christ

The Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches in the UCC strive to describe the combination of practices, attitudes, and attributes that foster vitality in faith communities in the United Church of Christ.

To be faithful is to journey in the way of Jesus, by the grace of God. The Preamble to our denomination's Constitution states: *[The United Church of Christ] affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.* In each setting of the United Church of Christ, faithfulness describes the commitment not only to oneself, one's neighbors, and God, but also to "what's next." **Recognizing that each Local Church's needs and goals are as unique as its community, the expression of faithfulness can be viewed as an ongoing discussion of these commitments.**

Vitality is the outward sign of inner spiritual and communal work within a Local Church. Recent research¹ invites the Church to understand congregational vitality as the ways a community of faith connects to God, each other, and the world. Though the word "vitality" is sometimes used in conversations regarding congregational size or growth, congregational vitality transcends participant numbers. Local churches experiencing vitality may or may not be growing numerically, but they do demonstrate spiritual growth, healthy community, institutional well-being, and faith-inspired engagement in the wider community and world.

The Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches are intended as *a holistic discernment tool* for a Local Church's self-reflection and self-assessment on areas of strength and areas of development. The forty-eight Local Church Marks are organized into eight categories: Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practice; Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions; Shaping Church Community; Organizing Community with Intention; Building Leadership Skills Within Local Churches; Caring for the Wider Community; Working Together for Justice and Mercy; and Living Into United Church of Christ Identity.

A Local Church may engage with the Marks during a Local Church's annual comprehensive assessment of its ministry and when the Local Church is in discernment about its well-being and future. Unlike a checklist of tasks to complete or goals to reach, the Local Church Marks invite ongoing and deepening engagement over time. There is no endpoint or "achievement" of the Local Church Marks—just as there is no endpoint or "achievement" in the life of faith. It is recognized that a Local Church is always developing its connections and commitments. It is

¹ 1 Linda Bobbitt, "Measuring Congregational Vitality: Phase 2 Development of an Outcome Measurement Tool," *Review of Religious Research* 56:3 (2014): 467–84.

38 anticipated that Local Churches will engage more intentionally with different Local Church
39 Marks during different seasons of their life. **The list of Marks is not exhaustive or exclusive;**
40 **Local Churches may identify additional Marks that foster vitality in their context by**
41 **drawing on their shared stories, wisdom, and experiences.**
42

43 Each section of the Marks contains both general and specific practices that foster vitality, and the
44 sections may be considered in any order. To help the Local Church engage in discernment about
45 its own strengths and growing edges, consider using the Grow Your Church board game, or other
46 resources from the national setting to explore the Local Church Marks in more depth.
47

48 **MARKS OF FAITHFUL AND VITAL LOCAL CHURCHES IN** 49 **THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

50

51 **Exhibiting a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practice**

- 52 ● Loving God, following Jesus Christ and his teachings, being guided by the Holy Spirit,
53 and living a life of discipleship.
- 54 ● Praying actively and embracing a diversity of spiritual practices.
- 55 ● Creating space for the Holy Spirit to work through Christian practice and worship,
56 including the sacraments.
- 57 ● Practicing ongoing collective discernment of the Local Church's mission and vision.
- 58 ● Showing a commitment to lifelong spiritual development and faithful stewardship.
- 59 ● Encouraging opportunities for all to practice sabbath and spiritual renewal.

60

61 **Engaging Sacred Stories and Traditions**

- 62 ● Exhibiting knowledge, understanding, and continuing study of Scriptures.
- 63 ● Making relevant the sacred stories and traditions of the Gospel and the Local Church
64 community in worship, proclamation, and witness.
- 65 ● Embracing risk-taking and a spirit of innovation as exemplified in the Gospels.
- 66 ● Understanding the history of the Christian Church and approaching the future of the
67 Christian Church with curiosity and wonder.
- 68 ● Creating faith formation opportunities across generations and learning styles.
- 69 ● Shaping practices and liturgies so that all may experience love, belonging, and dignity.

70

71 **Shaping Church Community**

- 72 ● Celebrating that all people are made in the image of God, and practicing an ongoing
73 commitment to inclusion and accessibility.
- 74 ● Relating to one another with gentleness, kindness, and compassion, with sympathy,
75 empathy, and healthy, life-affirming behaviors.
- 76 ● Welcoming the stranger into community and celebrating the transformation they bring to
77 the Local Church.

- 78 ● Developing healthy boundaries in relationships with one another and with pastoral
- 79 leadership.
- 80 ● Inspiring a culture of generosity and faithful stewardship, including the financial support
- 81 of the Church.
- 82 ● Creating and tending to faithful approaches to conflict.

83

84 **Organizing Community with Intention**

- 85 ● Assessing the congregation's ministry to celebrate areas of vitality and discern areas
- 86 needing attention or strengthening.
- 87 ● Stewarding the resources of the Local Church wisely, using financial best practices and
- 88 procedures for accountability.
- 89 ● Maintaining transparent organizational policies that communicate roles, responsibilities,
- 90 and expectations for staff and volunteers.
- 91 ● Supporting employees with just and generous compensation and benefits, in conversation
- 92 with Conference compensation guidelines.
- 93 ● Balancing transparency and confidentiality appropriately in employment related
- 94 decisions.
- 95 ● Implementing safe conduct and abuse prevention practices and policies to foster a healthy
- 96 environment for all people, particularly vulnerable individuals.

97

98 **Building Leadership Skills Within Local Churches**

- 99 ● Empowering the Church to be faithful to God's call, reflective of Christ's mission, and
- 100 open to the Holy Spirit.
- 101 ● Preparing the future of God's Church by fostering openness to change among leadership
- 102 and creating responsive governance structures.
- 103 ● Supporting and deepening the inextricable connection of faith and action.
- 104 ● Nurturing gifts for ministry among lay people and equipping new generations of faith
- 105 leaders.
- 106 ● Working collaboratively with continuing commitment to intercultural awareness and
- 107 sensitivity.
- 108 ● Ensuring accountability, transparency, and responsibility through written policies, just
- 109 practices, and regular assessment of ministry.

110

111 **Caring For the Wider Community**

- 112 ● Providing hope and healing for one another and to a hurting world.
- 113 ● Responding to the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of individuals and the
- 114 community.
- 115 ● Nurturing care and compassion for God's creation and those impacted by environmental
- 116 harms.

- 117 ● Practicing humility and respect with all people and groups who have been harmed by the
118 Church or who are un/under-represented in the Church.
119 ● Seeking to understand the lived experiences of the wider community, particularly those
120 whose experiences differ from those in the Local Church in identity, ability, age, gender,
121 race, and/or religion.
122 ● Partnering with wider community groups by collaborating and being responsive to their
123 directly expressed needs.
124

Working Together for Justice and Mercy

- 125 ● Practicing the extravagant hospitality of Jesus in worship and community.
126 ● Drawing on the liberating activity of God throughout Scripture to confront injustice and
127 oppression locally and globally.
128 ● Understanding community history and cultural context in order to be present to the needs
129 of the community.
130 ● Building relationships of mutual trust and interdependence, in order to better care for and
131 be cared for by one another, always honoring the humanity of those with whom we
132 partner.
133 ● Dismantling physical and cultural barriers that hinder accessibility or inhibit connection
134 or relationship with the Local Church and community.
135 ● Identifying and working to overcome explicit and implicit biases in the life of the
136 Church, including within the Local Church. [Implicit biases are negative associations that
137 people unknowingly hold. They are expressed automatically, without conscious
138 awareness.]
139

Living Into United Church of Christ Identity

- 140
141 ● Exhibiting a commitment to the core values of the United Church of Christ: continuing
142 testament, extravagant welcome, and changing lives.
143 ● Witnessing to the United Church of Christ value of inclusivity through loving God and
144 neighbor.
145 ● Celebrating the richness and diversity of UCC history and theology, and practicing UCC
146 covenantal polity as a Local Church.
147 ● Engaging with the various settings of the United Church of Christ, including other Local
148 Churches, as well as the Association, Conference, General Synod, and global ministry
149 partners.
150 ● Demonstrating an appreciation for and participation in the ecumenical and interfaith
151 partnerships of the UCC and participating in local partnerships.
152 ● Living in covenantal relationship by practicing the UCC Congregational Code.
153
154

155 [1] Linda Bobbitt, "Measuring Congregational Vitality: Phase 2 Development of an Outcome Measurement Tool,"
156 Review of Religious Research 56:3 (2014): 467–84.
157