



Vitality Ministry Council

“Sharing Vitality” Grants Program Grantee Progress Reports

June 2025 – Annual Meeting & Conference

Introductory Statement from Vitality Ministry Council

In recent years, the Vitality Ministry Council found out that we have been accruing surplus funds year over year, and we were encouraged to find new ideas to utilize those funds to promote Vitality across the NACCC. Some of this has gone to new ways of supporting ongoing ministry and programs we were responsible for, but we've been especially excited and grateful to the NACCC board and staff that this year we were able to put funds towards a grant program that directly supports NA churches and partner programs across the country in the amazing work they are doing for vitality.

We are able to fund 10 grants of \$2500 each. This program is also designed to have ripple effects from the grantees to everyone in the NACCC because it is designed to capture what they are learning, share that information, and support collegial collaboration amongst the NA. There is incredible value in getting inspired by folks in similar circumstances, identifying people even across the country to "talk shop" with on something you're trying to figure out, and to know that will help you pass on your insights to others eventually, too. This report is one of the main opportunities to this, along with a breakout session featuring grantees at Annual Meeting, and eventually a final report.

We think our first cohort of grantees is doing amazing things, and will be wonderful conversation and collaboration partners for others discerning what they can be doing to promote Vitality in their ministries, churches, and communities. There's a wide range of types of projects, but also a lot of relatability for the types of challenges churches are facing and the types of opportunities God is opening doors to pursue. As you review this report, we hope it sparks something that could lead at least to a conversation, if not the pursuit of an idea you sense God stirring for you. And if that's the case, don't forget that you could be a grantee for this same program next year. We hope you do apply – all the key info to do so is at the end of this report.

Thanks again to all those who contribute to the NACCC to make programs like this possible, to the board for their support of new ideas to empower and connect us, to the office staff for their exemplary work supporting councils and churches, and to the grantees for their bold and faithful pursuit of embodying their faith and calls through ministries like you're about to read about.

Robb Tarr – Chair – On Behalf of Vitality Ministry Council

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East Orrington Congregational Church

East Orrington, ME – Pastor Carl Schreiber

Project Overview and Program Updates

Our vision for transforming this underutilized room into a dynamic, multipurpose gathering space for community enrichment is well underway. Below is a summary of progress in each area outlined in our original proposal:

Senior Activities

Three new senior-focused groups are now active and flourishing:

- Senior Exercise & Game Day – Meets Tuesday afternoons and combines light chair exercises with game time. Attendance averages 8–16 participants each week.
- Friends Circle – A daytime fellowship group for crafts, art, and occasional outings. Recently, the group attended a senior resource fair in Bangor.
- Art Group – A gathering for amateur painters to share creativity and fellowship. This group is on summer hiatus and plans to resume in September.

All of these programs are free and open to all, creating a warm, inclusive environment for seniors.

Grief Support

Though not yet launched, an advisory team is developing a structure for a grief support ministry. Our plan is to offer 8-week group sessions with rest periods in between. Community interest has already been expressed, and we anticipate this becoming a meaningful outreach.

Educational Opportunities

Our Thursday evening Book Study Group, currently exploring Max Lucado's 10 Women of the Bible, has grown to 24 participants. A second group may be launched soon due to space limitations.

A new drop-in opportunity titled "Coffee or Tea with the Pastor" is scheduled to begin in late September and will offer open discussion on faith and relevant life topics through mid-May.

Community Meetings

On June 11, local Boy Scout leadership hosted a planning session in the revamped room. Feedback praised the setting's intimacy and usefulness, especially for collaborative meetings. We expect further usage by local educators and civic leaders.

Small Gatherings

While formal promotion has not begun, the space has already hosted:

Three children's birthday parties from the community

A memorial gathering for a beloved 99-year-old town resident

We expect demand to increase as word spreads and more amenities (e.g., playground, basketball court, and large playroom) are integrated.

Before and After School Possibilities

Though still in early development, this remains a long-term goal. We understand the complexity of launching a safe, sustainable program and are not rushing its implementation. However, the space is already being used informally by seniors who enjoy reading, coffee, and rest in the comfort of our new seating and air-conditioned room.

Conclusion and Looking Ahead

This project has already begun to bear fruit by creating a safe, accessible, and joyful space for people of all ages to gather, learn, rest, and support one another. Seniors in particular have found new opportunities for connection, creativity, and care—central to our mission of embodying Christ's love in practical ways.

We remain deeply thankful for your investment in our vision and your partnership in ministry. As we continue to expand our offerings and invite the community in, we look forward to sharing additional stories and milestones in the months ahead.



Faith Community Church

Franklin, WI – Lynn Merkel

In order to increase the vitality of the congregation, Faith Community Church is exploring ways to increase involvement in worship, Sunday School, fellowship, and service. We feel that increased involvement can be a result of increased connectedness between individuals and families and so we are exploring ways to increase that interconnectedness.

Our first project towards this effort was a Kids (and Families) Connect event. The goal of this first event was to gather our church families with school age children to allow them to get to know each other better. Our children attend several different elementary schools, so we want to increase connections outside of Sunday mornings. Grant funds were utilized to purchase dinner (pizza, drinks, etc.) After eating, the children were entertained, educated, and enlightened by a science show led by a chemist who is also part of our Venturing Crew.

Meanwhile the parents gathered to chat and get better acquainted. Prepared questions led to a good discussion amongst the parents. (Initial discussion topics included the following: What is a favorite restaurant your family likes to eat at? Why do you like it? Talk about some good family vacations you've taken. Where did you go? What did the kids like? What did the adults like? Talk about good local spots you like for entertainment (something to do on days off school or weekends). What was your childhood church?) Response to the last question revealed that all but one of the women grew up in the Catholic church, so now they all know they have a common touch point. Earlier questions prompted ideas for future family events.

Next steps for this group will include some family-focused events during the summer, including a movie night at church and a playdate at a local playground.

Beyond the Kids and Families events, we are hoping to work towards increasing community outreach with our already established annual events and reenvisioning some form of small group ministry.

An important thing we have learned in the process so far is that this is hard work and we need to have more leaders invested in this process.

First Congregational Church of Royal Oak

Royal Oak, MI – Nancy Martens

We are starting a yoga class in our church building with the objective that mindfulness and active yoga practice can positively impact both psychological and physical health in children, young adults, and older adults. Health promotion and self-care are especially critical for older populations, who often face social isolation and depression. To address this, our Royal Oak, Michigan church proposed a once weekly Hatha yoga class incorporating breathwork, physical postures, and meditation. This ancient practice has shown promise in improving executive function, strength, balance, and immune function, while reducing depression and isolation across age groups.

The ultimate goal of our program aims to create a welcoming and inclusive space for intergenerational participation, with options for in-person and virtual attendance to ensure accessibility. The mission of community enrichment will be met by encouraging social interaction and fostering community ties before and after classes. Yoga has already gained popularity in schools, colleges, and among older adults seeking alternatives to traditional medicine, and a 2022 pilot study confirmed the feasibility of intergenerational virtual yoga programs. In contrast to for-profit studios that often cater to a narrow demographic, FCC's yoga program will be inclusive, community-oriented, and designed for participants of all backgrounds. Long-term sustainability and scalability will be evaluated after six months.

What was the "why" that helped you discern that this was the right vitality effort for you?

Several church members have been discussing creative uses for our beautiful building and combining "exercise" with fellowship has been top of mind. Church members from varied generations agreed such a program would be valuable.

What are the metrics you are using to know if you are accomplishing what is best for your context? In particular, what definitions of "vitality" are you hoping to see and why?

The initial metric will be the number of people attending yoga classes (both members and community attendees). The initial definition of vitality = "Vibrant, relevant, and engaged with the community"

How does your project offer belonging" to different types of people? Have you found your expectations about what belonging would look like to have changed as part of this vitality project?

Yoga practice is highly adaptable and accessible, i.e. using chair during practice, or simply participating the breathwork and mindfulness.

Mindfulness and active yoga practice can positively impact psychological and physical health. They are great opportunities for people who have been dealing with social isolation and depression transition into new experiences in ways that aren't overwhelming.

What adjustments to your original plans have you found yourself making, and for what reasons? How has this idea potentially spawned new ideas and how are you discerning how to build momentum, be patient, or have other responses?

We are starting with in person classes to take advantage of the sense of connection that brings, as well as appreciate our beautiful physical space in a new way. However, we are also mindful of ensuring as broad of accessibility as possible, so we are also beginning to explore ways to offer zoom or other remote participation in the future.

What is the most important thing you have learned in your process so far that you couldn't have anticipated?

As mentioned above, yoga can have particular demographic associations, but we believe strongly in approaching our ministry with as much inclusion and accessibility as possible. Making sure to communicate that well so people see more potential than their initial impression has been something good to think about.

Is there a piece of advice you think another group that had previously pursued vitality ministry in some form could have given you before you started that would have been the most helpful for how you would have approached your own project so far?

We're interested in any other mindfulness and exercise programming others may be doing at their church?

Foundry Theater Group

United Church of Beloit (WI) – Carol Taylor

The Foundry Theater Group is a nonprofit organization comprised of individuals with alternative abilities, physical and/or cognitive; and/or emotional/mental health challenges. This organization was begun in 2015 by United Church of Beloit member Savvas Mourtzis, and friends Max Dodson, and Jackie Jackson. The theater members represent greater Rock County (WI). They began with three actors and the three founding volunteers, and now have nearly 30 regular actor participants, plus volunteer helpers. Each show is an original work written by the founders. It may be a series of short one-acts, or a longer play, featuring a lot of humor. They of course had to take a hiatus due to covid, but came back strong. Max and Jackie, long time community activists, have known some of the actors for 40 plus years. They have families, children, grandchildren, etc. It has been a blessing to reunite with them via this platform

The name, “The Foundry” honors the industrial history of Beloit. Their mission statement is, “Building character through performance”. Four of the frequent actors have become members of United Church of Beloit.

We knew this VMC grant was a perfect opportunity to support the Foundry and help them improve the sound system in the church fellowship hall. With the grant and other donations, they were able to purchase a mixing board and 12 headset microphones.

They held their annual play titled “Clementine Hotel” on May 30 & 31. The attendance was 90-95 Friday, 120 on Saturday. The audiences were made up of family and friends of the actors, of course, church members, and community supporters. The play was very well received, people laughed in the right spots! It was very helpful, for some of our congregants especially, to be able to hear the performers much better than in the past.

The performers were well coached on use of the microphones. One especially was having allergy issues and he adjusted his mike away from his face when breathing hard. And back when it was his turn to speak. A couple others were shy last year and wouldn't raise their voices. The microphones gave them confidence.

The Foundry Theater Group is diverse and multigenerational, including children, ages elementary school thru high school who help out along with their parents. These youngsters are learning that even differently abled people are children of God and fun friends. The Theater members who belong to United Church enthusiastically participate in most of our events and bible studies. One of the theater volunteers recently joined United as a member. She had a bad church experience in the past, and the support of our congregation towards the theater group encouraged her to check us out. She now attends every week and has started up a handbell choir! There is a great sense of belonging and a family feeling across the congregation and the Foundry Theater Group. The successful performances, supported by the community and the church, have helped the actors to feel empowered and a strong sense of belonging to a wider family.

The volunteers are also advocates for our actors who may not have anyone to speak for and support them. The actors have also developed friendships and mutual support for each other.

The Foundry Theater Group and United Church of Beloit are helping to bring broader attention to the abilities of our performers, which can help the wider community to increase acceptance of people with autism and other special needs.

The Foundry is looking into doing more extensive publicity, advertising, and developing a website supported by the Facebook page. (they may help UCB upgrade our website too!) After the show on Saturday, two potential performers spoke to Savvas to join in the fall, as did a potential sponsor!

We are grateful for the support of the NACCC Vitality Ministry Council!

Missions and Outreach Ministry Council

Of NACCC – Rich Miller-Todd

Our project was to complete a Freedom Journey in South Carolina focusing on aspects of African American life. While our participant group was all white we sought out significant black facilitators to lead us through cultural and historical events that were important in their lives and their community life. The Green Book of South Carolina lead us to African American cultural spots in the Upcountry around Greenville and neighboring towns. Locations visited in South Carolina:

1. Greenville where we toured significant museums of history and art displaying Civil Rights history. Just outside of the city is the Soapstone Church where we met with Mable Owens Clarke.
2. Spartanburg where we met wonderful people and visited several cultural sites and viewed the emancipation flag.
3. Clemson -the home of former U.S. Vice President John Calhoun and the home of Clemson University where we visited the Plantation house on Ft. Hill and the adjacent African American cemetery
4. Westminster where we toured the Rosenwald Retreat School.

The ultimate goal was for us was to have a greater understanding of the African American culture by hearing important historical events and engaging in discussion about cultural matters.

What are the metrics you are using to know if you are accomplishing what is best for your context? What definitions of “vitality” are you hoping to see and why?

1. Time with African Americans relating slavery/segregation, education, religion and urban renewal history. A free and open discussion of issues surrounding race, slavery, segregation and human rights.
2. Exposure to faith and practice of African American Christians
3. Use of the African American Greenbook in guiding our way to cherished cultural locations.
4. Use of cultural museums, schools, cemeteries, parks a library and churches.
5. Use of art and reporting to capture personal growth.

Definitions of vitality

Vitality is translating the journey experience into our daily lives by telling the story.

We are so grateful for our participant-artist Linda Lacey. She came into this exploration with an artist's eye and has added so much to our experience during and the trip. She painted an initial painting which was put up for sale in a silent auction at our Iowa-Nebraska Association meeting in April and financial contributions went to the Sandstone Church. A second cultural painting depicting parts of the Freedom Journey has been completed and will be at the national meeting and conference.

Vitality is also seen in individual discussions and financial contributions to churches and institutions like Mt. Moriah Church, Soapstone Church and Rosenwald Retreat School and those people who stand large in our Freedom Journey experience.

What was your “why?” What made this event the right one to pursue?

It was a God thing! People and places just made sense as it was put together over several months including a complete overhaul involving location and approach.

Naturally our next step will be to determine the focus of a third Cultural Exploration. We started with a Cherokee Exploration in 2024 then completed our Freedom Journey in 2025. Now it will be a council process to determine the nature of a third cultural event.

Possibilities for a 2026 event are uncertain but could look to one of the following: A Hispanic Exploration or a Chinese Exploration. This will largely be determined by an appropriate connection with resources.

I have learned that accomplishing an exploration demands divine intervention. While preparing for the Freedom Journey I went to the Upcountry museum for a 3rd time and stood in front of the Civil Rights Display not knowing that Mable Owens Clarke was lecturing in a nearby hall. As people let out from the lecture three women came by and talked to me about civil rights. One spoke of the lecture and I discovered the book signing for her book LIBERIA, which outlined Mable's childhood under segregation. During that visit, I met Mable Owens Clark. This event changed the trajectory of our time in Greenville.

Suggestion for others considering their own similar ministry:

Begin with a blank slate and read books and articles about your endeavor. Go to possible resources and if one stimulates ideas visit it a second time. Find individuals who may help your process. Don't limit help from outside your initial group!

Important Books for us:

GREEN BOOK OF SOUTH CAROLINA (an African American Culture Guide)

LIBERIA (history of a young girl growing up during segregation)

DAVE DRAKE: POET, ARTIST AND POTTER (Pottery of a slave and later freeman)

NORTH OF MAIN and SOUTH OF MAIN both by Brenda Lee Pryce

Mt. Hope Congregational Church

Livonia, MI – Jeff and Melinda Luchun

Please give a brief description of your project, including ultimate goal, current progress, and what you expect your next steps will be for the rest of the year.

Mt. Hope Congregational Church seeks to be a community hub for local missions in Livonia, Michigan. To that end, we are partnering and seeking to partner with local nonprofit organizations as well as organizations that are in the process of becoming nonprofits that support the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the Livonia community. As the nonprofits we partner with grow and as our partnerships with each of them grow, the number of rental hours they use has increased by three times the amount of our initial projections. Through our Mission Board and our nonprofit partnerships, the church is beginning to engage more meaningfully in local missions. We have two church-wide drives planned to provide needed items for key programs of two of the nonprofits with which we partner. The leaders of both of these nonprofits have, through our Missions Board, spoken during a “Missions Moment” during a regular Sunday service to give the congregation additional insight into how our donations will impact the local community.

What was the “why” that helped you discern that this was the right vitality effort for you?

Missions at our church had become an abstract concept that was completed in some far-away place. This program is helping our congregation become energized to serve our community through concrete examples of missions occurring in our midst.

What are the metrics you are using to know if you are accomplishing what is best for your context? In particular, what definitions of "vitality" are you hoping to see and why?

We are keeping track of the rental hours each nonprofit organization uses and for what programs they are using the rental hours, paying attention to growth month over month. We are also keeping track of the opportunities for local missions that our partnerships with local nonprofits provide. The “vitality” we are primarily aiming for is meaningful engagement in local missions through our nonprofit partnerships.

How does your project offer belonging to different types of people? Have you found your expectations about what belonging would look like to have changed as part of this vitality project?

Our project does offer belonging to different types of people through the programs of the nonprofits with which we are partnering. These programs minister to people with special needs, people who are economically disadvantaged, and people of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. We have not found our expectations about what belonging would look like to have changed as part of this vitality project

What adjustments to your original plans have you found yourself making, and for what reasons? How has this idea potentially spawned new ideas and how are you discerning how to build momentum, be patient, or have other responses?

We have had to adjust our initial rental hour estimates as the needs of the nonprofits with which we are partnering have grown. This idea has inspired our Missions Board to seek deeper partnerships with these nonprofits to provide more meaningful missions opportunities to our congregation.

What is the most important thing you have learned in your process so far that you couldn't have anticipated?

While it seems trite, the most important thing we have learned in our process so far that we didn't anticipate is how important solid relationships with the leaders of the nonprofits with which we are working are to achieving our purposes.

Is there a piece of advice you think another group that had previously pursued vitality ministry in some form could have given you before you started that would have been the most helpful for how you would have approached your own project so far?

A piece of advice that would have been the most helpful for how we would have approached our own project so far would have been to pay close attention to the people and opportunities that God is bringing into the path of your church to hone in on His calling for your local ministry.

North Shore Congregational Church

Fox Point, WI – Lisa Wermuth

Please give a brief description of your project, including ultimate goal, current progress, and what you expect your next steps will be for the rest of the year.

The Board of Christian Enrichment at North Shore Congregational Church in Fox Point, WI is in the process of putting together a Speaker Series for Parents of School Aged children. They have canvassed the community and have found three areas of concern for this population; Big Feelings, Anxiety and Technology.

Their ultimate goal is to serve individuals and the community at large as participants in our faith community. We would be happy to have participants choose to become involved in the life of our church, but our primary goal is to be a service to the community in this outreach effort.

Current Progress: The BCE is currently in talks with a number of speakers, learning their fees, schedules, and requirements for presenting to a group.

Next steps for the rest of the year: -Setting the dates of the events. -Advertising! Meeting the need for childcare while parents attend the sessions and registration of the children. Once these details are established the Board will be recruiting volunteers for the event days.

What was the "why" that helped you discern that this was the right vitality effort for you?

BCE expressed that they wanted to have a compelling reason to draw families from the community into our church building.

The reason for this being the right vitality effort for us: The board felt that there was a need for answers to pressing concerns for parents raising children in the current environment.

There is also hope that the parents and their children will enjoy coming to our church and join us at other times outside the Speaker Series.

The Board is looking to provide a community service by presenting topics that may help parents by booking speakers that respond to their concerns.

What are the metrics you are using to know if you are accomplishing what is best for your context? In particular, what definitions of "vitality" are you hoping to see and why?

Vitality measures: Community engagement Increased attendance and enthusiasm. Attain feedback and evaluation. Enrich the Christian life and be of service to the community. To measure their success, they will provide feedback/evaluation forms after each event.

How does your project offer belonging to different types of people? Have you found your expectations about what belonging would look like to have changed as part of this vitality project?

This project seeks to present a speaker series that will appeal to a broad range of families. Recognizing that many families are going through the same challenges, the BCE hopes to bring the community into our church without being too focused on increasing the number of children attending our Sunday School.

With that in mind they want to serve all different ages through this series by extending an invitation for something of value to the community.

What adjustments to your original plans have you found yourself making, and for what reasons? How has this idea potentially spawned new ideas and how are you discerning how to build momentum, be patient, or have other responses?

Although the original idea is the same, Board members reframed their approach to be one that was to be "of service to the community." Their focus is to make this a service project rather than a recruitment project.

Through research they discovered community organizations who have been providing speaker series in other areas and have learned from what others have done. Some of the things noted were:

- The maximum number of parents attending those talks was 50. The other talks had about 30 parents/grandparents attending.
- All the talks were held at schools.
- The organizations required registration, but did not offer childcare. The lack of childcare is a potential deterrent for parents and we are exploring ways to address that need.
- They did not charge a fee.
- The talks that were attended were in the evening in the winter and during the week.

- One talk partnered with a local bookstore to offer sales of the speakers' books after the presentation.
- One series provided waters and mints to those attending.
- The Board also reviewed the content of some presentations and asked a few to be part of our series.

What is the most important thing you have learned in your process so far that you couldn't have anticipated?

BCE is heartened by the positive response by some of the speakers. Board members went out in the community not knowing what they would find and found that the topics of concern were universal, and were surprised to find similar topics.

Is there a piece of advice you think another group that had previously pursued vitality ministry in some form could have given you before you started that would have been the most helpful for how you would have approached your own project so far?

The Board thinks that they would have been more relaxed about the project if they had a clearer understanding of how long it would take to put a series like this together. The research on topics took and finding the speakers to fit those topics, has been more time consuming than initially anticipated. They are in the early stages of brainstorming publicity and consequently, have yet to tackle the advertising piece which is extremely important. The schedule of speakers has not been set. We are praying for a positive turnout once all the pieces are in place.

In summary, it would have been helpful to have a general timeline for things like booking presenters, creating and distributing publicity, how to set a schedule that will appeal to the demographic they are trying to reach.

St. Croix United Church

Bayport, MN – Clare Gromoll

Please give a brief description of your project, including ultimate goal, current progress, and what you expect your next steps will be for the rest of the year.

We are utilizing the grant to contract with a graphic designer to develop a logo and tagline for our congregation, which was born out of a recent merger. In early June, a small Branding Task Force interviewed four graphic designers and selected one. Our work will unfold across late June and the first half of July. Stretch goals: present the drafted logo and tagline to our Leadership Council in early July, then to the congregation within the context of a mid-July special congregational meeting. Said congregational meeting has been called for the purpose of voting on adoption of a strategic plan (the fruit of a process through which a Strategic Planning Task Force has led the congregation). We look forward to overhauling our website and updating signage once we have our logo and tagline.

What was the "why" that helped you discern that this was the right vitality effort for you?

We discerned that a fresh new logo and tagline would enhance our public image within the wider community. After our October 2023 merger, we engaged in a strategic visioning process across spring 2024 (discerning core values, vision and mission). We anticipated our strategic planning process unfolding across spring 2025 and hoped that said process could incorporate branding with a logo and tagline. We are excited to draw on our values, vision and mission as we craft our logo and tagline.

What are the metrics you are using to know if you are accomplishing what is best for your context? In particular, what definitions of "vitality" are you hoping to see and why?

We anticipate a palpable mix of enthusiasm and relief as we present a logo and tagline to the congregation. Members and friends have been hungry for clarity as one catalyst for the journey forward. We hope that people will feel pride as we ground ourselves in our new identity and share a clearer sense of or call as we interact with our wider community.

How does your project offer belonging to different types of people? Have you found your expectations about what belonging would look like to have changed as part of this vitality project?

As we develop our logo and tagline, I trust the three members of our Branding Task Force (a long-term member with pertinent professional experience, our Office Coordinator with spades of savvy in this area, and me) to work well with the graphic designer to hold in mind a longing to practice radical welcome and belonging among diverse people.

What adjustments to your original plans have you found yourself making, and for what reasons? How has this idea potentially spawned new ideas and how are you discerning how to build momentum, be patient, or have other responses?

We have not needed to make any adjustments to our original plan. We were transparent in naming our \$2,500 budget to the graphic designers we interviewed. The person we have selected is more than likely offering us a steep discount in order to work within our budget. We anticipate that this project will reveal to us further steps we could take to enhance our public image and external communications.

What is the most important thing you have learned in your process so far that you couldn't have anticipated?

Our movement into this effort (forming the Branding Task Force, seeking referrals from our pastor's network of colleagues, interviewing four graphic designers, selecting one) has gone incredibly smoothly. Communication and collaboration have been excellent. We might not have anticipated the process unfolding so easily. We can attest to the boost we have had in being funded by the vitality ministry grant.

Is there a piece of advice you think another group that had previously pursued vitality ministry in some form could have given you before you started that would have been the most helpful for how you would have approached your own project so far?

We are grateful to the NACCC for this grant!

Stony Creek Church

Stony Creek, CT – Jeff Lund

Summary of Stony Creek Church Challenges and Opportunities

Facing a declining church membership due to aging, we will continue inward church facing efforts and services with church members while pursuing church outward community facing efforts, caring for and being of relevance to non-church member residents in the community – “an open upside down umbrella” meaning there are many ways to engage with and serve in the church beyond attending Sunday services.

The Church Strategic Planning Committee has Board and Committee leadership represented on the committee and is actively pursuing five initiatives as proof of concepts to increase church vitality and growth in membership and relevance to the community outside the walls. The two projects described below are being helped by the NACCC grant.

Please give a brief description of your project, including ultimate goal, current progress, and what you expect your next steps will be for the rest of the year.

The project consists of two complementary parts:

Part 1 - Support the ongoing use of the recently completed digital event planning documentation of the many church events held every year (Church Fundraisers events, Church Community Outreach events, and Church Missions events) to... a) facilitate event planning and b) support the recruitment of both church members and non-church member event volunteers.

Part 2 – Utilize expanded social media, combined with the recently redesigned/updated church website, to expand the “footprint” of the church communications regarding church activities – increasing community awareness and attracting broader engagement.

The Ultimate Goal:

Help revitalize church growth by increasing engagement with the community at large, acting as a funnel for various ways to both serve oneself and the community.

Current Progress:

The effort to align and coordinate social media, church website messaging, and event information is underway, including how to achieve more consistency in “message branding”-from community flyers, church lawn signs, and church articles in local newspapers.

Begin exploring ways to implement the “open upside-down umbrellas” activities better serving community residents, and working with local organizations to serve the community.

Utilize the current six months as a “proof of concept” of what can be envisioned and implemented using donations provided by church donors to implement/support change.

Be able to present findings, doings, and impact in the upcoming annual meeting in October, and put to a vote the church membership for future funding and strategic commitment.

What was the "why" that helped you discern that this was the right vitality effort for you?

Our “Why” is simple. Church members seek to live their “Why”: “Loving God, Following Christ, and Serving Community.” Continuing to do more of what isn’t working will not help revitalize our church or return it to growth, sustainability, and relevance in the community we serve. Taking risks and learning from adapting to failures is part of the journey and should be ingrained in our culture.

What are the metrics you are using to know if you are accomplishing what is best for your context? In particular, what definitions of "vitality" are you hoping to see and why?

The success metrics we are using extend well beyond Sunday worship attendance. They also include tracking increased engagement, followers, and views on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, as well as our church website. Furthermore, we are monitoring the rise in participation by non-church members in community events and the growth of partnerships with community organizations. (See the fliers later in our report as an example.)

The vitality we hope to see is an increase in church energy to serve the community in various ways beyond just church members attending Sunday services and supporting fundraisers aimed at funding the church budget.

How does your project offer belonging to different types of people? Have your expectations about what belonging would look like changed as part of this vitality project?

The project aims to expand the footprint and diversity of the church's communications by embracing non-church members and fostering their identification with the church's "Why," as well as being welcoming, affirming, and caring for all.

What adjustments to your original plans have you found yourself making, and for what reasons? How has this idea potentially spawned new ideas, and how are you discerning how to build momentum, be patient, or have other responses?

The adjustments we have made have been to limit the number of initiatives (no more than five) that the Strategic Planning Committee is recommending in pursuing our 6-month proof of concept. Explain how external donations are financing the initiatives outside of the Church Annual Operating Budget as a proof of concept to more engage with the community, to energize church growth possibilities, and eliminate the fear of spending - focusing more on possibilities and agreement that money is not the problem.

Spawning New Ideas?

We have an initiative also in progress as a new idea to explore the renovation of Fellowship Hall for increased use by the community and community organizations.

Discerning how to build momentum, be patient, or have other responses? Better communications to the church membership of progress and comfort with change.

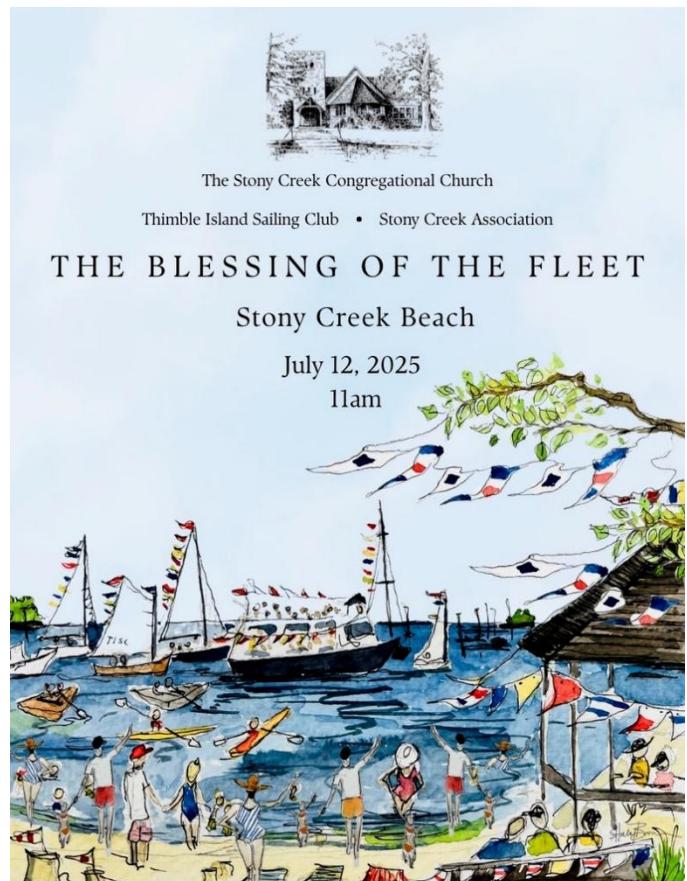
What is the most important thing you have learned in your process so far that you couldn't have anticipated?

Recognize the difficulty of change and understand that not all leaders may be willing to change their habits and what has made them comfortable. Many church leaders today are valued by being "doers," but being busy does not necessarily lead to progress, and realizing that "doing more of what isn't working won't work" is critical. If church memberships are down, what needs to change? What is the "opportunity cost" of trying nothing new?

Is there a piece of advice you think another group that had previously pursued vitality ministry in some form could have given you before you started that would have been the most helpful for how you would have approached your own project so far?

Be specific and clear in your goals and tie your goals and plan of action to your "Why". Get majority leadership buy-in - you will never get 100% buy-in. Be bold. Many churches with an Endowment and cash have closed their doors. Time is NOT on your side.

Two examples of community engagement and community partnerships:



Wisconsin Congregational Association Camps

Wisconsin – Rob Frederickson

Please give a brief description of your project, including ultimate goal, current progress, and what you expect your next steps will be for the rest of the year.

For over 50 years, the WCA has run an annual, one-week camp for youth. (The only exception was 2020, when camps were closed due to the pandemic.) Since 2003, our camp “home” has been Mt. Morris Camp & Retreat Center in central Wisconsin. WCA Camp is open to students completing grades 3-12. Prior to the pandemic, 50-70 youth typically attended, along with about 20 staffers. In recent years, participation has been 30-50 campers and about 15-18 staffers. Each year, the camp week has a theme. This year (July 13-19), it’ll be “Splash Bash,” with worship/program/content/discussion segments focusing on selected Bible stories involving water. Each day at camp also includes games, sports, pool time, crafts, free time, snacks, cabin devotions, and campfire. WCA Camp is overseen by the WCA’s Youth & Camp Committee, and staffed by volunteers—some of whom are staff members at WCA churches; some of whom are lay people. Many of the counselors are young adults who are former WCA campers. This promotes meaningful mentoring-type connections and leadership growth.

We have reached out to all 70+ of the NA churches in the states bordering Wisconsin—by old-school snail-mail letter, and through multiple rounds of emails—encouraging them to invite their 3rd-12th grade students to consider journeying to central Wisconsin this coming July 13-19.

We think “Splash Bash” is going to be awesome, and we’d love to welcome some new faces! As an incentive to make the trek across state lines, and to give WCA Camp a try, we’ve promised a \$100 discount to each camper hailing from outside Wisconsin. We intend to use the “Sharing Vitality” grant money for this purpose. In addition to the snail-mail and email we’ve sent, the NA office (thanks, Maggie!) helped to get the word out about this opportunity via its social media platforms. Also, Rev. Joe Hackett (First Congregational Church of Rochester, WI) took word to April’s NA Ministers’ Convocation, encouraging attendees to pass this opportunity along to the families of their churches.

What was the "why" that helped you discern that this was the right vitality effort for you?

Last year, we became aware that none of the state/regional associations that border Wisconsin have active youth camp programs. Our understanding is that the Minnesota and Midwest (Illinois and Indiana) associations are in the process of dissolving entirely. Meanwhile, we've heard that the Iowa-Nebraska and Michigan associations not currently offering youth camps. That seems to leave the WCA's camp program as the only remaining one in the western Great Lakes vicinity. Given that reality, we certainly didn't want to "hide our light under a bushel," and we certainly did want to invite youth from the NA churches of our neighboring states to join us for what many of our kids call "the greatest week of the whole year!"

What are the metrics you are using to know if you are accomplishing what is best for your context? In particular, what definitions of "vitality" are you hoping to see and why?

With regard to WCA Camp in general, we of course would love to see attendance climb back to, or at least toward, pre-pandemic levels. But specifically in reference to the "Sharing Vitality" grant, we will of course be carefully tracking who attends WCA Camp from beyond Wisconsin's borders. However, as of this writing, no non-Wisconsin kids have registered for this year's camp. The early (lower fee) deadline was May 31. The final deadline, after which registration is closed, is June 27.

Our intention is to carry over any unspent money from the grant to next year, when we would again offer discounts to out-of-state campers. Our hope is that WCA Camp would become a spiritual "home away from home" for Congregational students of neighboring states, just as it already is for many Wisconsin kids.

How does your project offer belonging to different types of people? Have you found your expectations about what belonging would look like to have changed as part of this vitality project?

In the most straightforward sense, this effort spurs us toward expanding "belonging" at WCA Camp beyond Wisconsin kids. While the site is in central Wisconsin, the staff members are Wisconsinites, and the organizational and financial core is the Wisconsin Congregational Association, we're now prompted to think of our potential reach in regional terms—not strictly defined by state lines.

Coincidentally, these last couple years have also found us wrestling with the concept of “belonging” as it pertains to gender identities and other demographic categories. Our deliberations have led us to publicly put forth the following statement for WCA Camp:

Modeling inclusivity:

First off, you don't have to be officially affiliated with a Congregational church to come to camp. Friends from other denominational backgrounds are always welcome. However, please understand that this is a Christian camp. We will pray, sing praise songs, talk about Jesus, and seek deeper understanding of God.

Additionally, please note that the WCA Camp leadership team strives to be welcoming and affirming toward all participants—campers, counselors, and other staff members. We seek to be open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, disability, or sex (including sexual orientation, gender identity, and pregnancy).

What adjustments to your original plans have you found yourself making, and for what reasons? How has this idea potentially spawned new ideas and how are you discerning how to build momentum, be patient, or have other responses?

For us, I think the most salient phrase in this question is “be patient.” While I'm somewhat surprised that no non-Wisconsin kids have availed themselves of this opportunity thus far, I think our committee recognizes that it may require more than a year for this to become widely known and gain significant traction.

What is the most important thing you have learned in your process so far that you couldn't have anticipated?

Again, for me (and I believe for our committee), the expectation was that at least a handful of non-Wisconsin kids would jump at this invitation to attend WCA Camp at a substantially discounted cost. We've learned that making inroads is more difficult than we initially thought.

Is there a piece of advice you think another group that had previously pursued vitality ministry in some form could have given you before you started that would have been the most helpful for how you would have approached your own project so far?

You could say “it takes a village,” or if you prefer you can call it an “all of the above” strategy. For a new idea to take root, it’s wise to mobilize a robust team and utilize multiple channels of communication. Leverage local church contacts...but also connections with state and regional associations, the NA office staff, the NA’s elected leaders, clergy, parents, and other current or potential stakeholders. Use paper. Use email. Use social media. Rinse and repeat. Rinse and repeat.

Going forward:

I will not be attending the NA’s annual meeting, as I’ll be on a mission trip to Hosanna Industries in Pennsylvania that same week. However, the Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith is, among many other wonderful things, 1) attending the annual meeting, 2) a member of the WCA’s Youth & Camp Committee, 3) an age-level director for this year’s WCA Camp, and 4) a member of the Vitality Ministry Council. I trust that she can speak and answer questions on behalf of the WCA regarding the grant.

My term of chairperson of the Youth & Camp Committee officially ends at the close of the camp week on July 19. The aforementioned Rev. Joe Hackett will be succeeding me in that role as of that date. Joe is of course familiar with the grant, and the plans related to it.

Finally, I’ll take this opportunity to reiterate my personal thanks, and the wider gratitude of the WCA, to the Vitality Ministry Council for funding this effort!

Vitality Ministry Council “Sharing Vitality Grants”

Request for Proposals

Vitality Ministry Council is tasked by and works with the NACCC to encourage and support the strengthening of church life in member churches. This includes a range of activities related to developing and supporting clergy and lay leaders, finding and promoting practical church resources, and cultivating resources and opportunities that enhance the vast range of issues that comprise church vitality.

For the upcoming year, the VMC has an extra amount of available funds to specifically focus on supporting churches to be exploratory, ambitious, but especially collaborative and generative in ministries that develop the vitality of the local church – not only in strict numbers, but in breadth of expression, depth of learning and growth, meaningfulness of connection, and shared experience of true thriving. **We are inviting proposals of ministry programs to be funded up to \$2500 this year towards such goals.**

If you are interested in applying for these funds, please keep in mind the following areas of emphasis that will be considered for a program's suitability, and expectations recipients should complete if awarded the grant:

Proposals that emphasize the following elements will be given preference for selection:

- **Collaboration** – cohort applicants, or applications with plans for convening a cohort are especially appealing. This could be geographic, remote based on affinity, etc.
- **Plan for Sustainability** – funds would ideally be used as a boost for a program to develop and be able to continue as proposed in the future with other funding sources if needed.
- **Scalability/Replicability with Contextualization** – funds would ideally be used to cultivate development of ministry rather than stand alone events or simple maintenance of a program. Showing consideration of how that appropriately fits relevant circumstances is also important.
- **Holistic View on Vitality** – programs that can help churches develop in some of the other areas listed above beyond sole focus on attendance best fit the goals of this project.
- **Community Connection/Impact** – programs that are not just insular, but give a way for what is developed within the church to mindfully impact those around us best fit this project's goals.

Grant recipient programs will need to commit to the following activities in partnership with the Vitality Ministry Council in the coming year if selected:

- Production of materials like program planning guide, best practices, lessons learned, suggested questions for contextualization, etc. that will be made available to other NACCC churches that are looking for ideas to develop their vitality more.
- Participation in a webinar or similar interactive means of sharing the story of your program, how you see it sustaining, and what other churches can learn from your experience for their own ministry context.
- Availability of a point of contact in the future if other questions would like to consult with someone experienced in their own related vitality efforts.

Our goal with this grant program for this year is to highlight and enhance the amazing efforts being made by member churches across the NACCC, and provide more opportunities for collegial learning, encouragement and support between member churches so that vitality development can be done through shared lived experience and a strong sense of common cause – not just through outside resources with less sense of connection and familiarity.

Proposals of no more than 3 pages can be sent to the Vitality Ministry Council through Laura Wright (lwright@naccc.org) by November 1, 2025. The Council may dialogue about refining the proposal for final approval, with award decisions being announced in December 2025.

NACCC Vitality Ministry Council Opportunity for 2025-26 SHARING VITALITY Grant

Enhance Ministry Thriving and See Impact Grow Through a SHARING VITALITY Grant!

One of the hottest topics for churches to wonder about and discuss today is “vitality.” How do we get it, sustain it, or recapture it? More importantly, what part of the church does it refer to and what does it look like in practice? There are member churches out there who are currently exploring and answering these questions in new and exciting ways. The NACCC Vitality Ministry Council believe these creative endeavors are worth supporting financially to see what they can inspire.

In 2026, the NACCC Vitality Ministry Council is prepared to offer 10 one-time grants to active member churches (or church cohort groups) of \$2500 each to support new or expanding ministries or projects that involve churches being exploratory, ambitious, collaborative and generative as a way to enhance the vitality of the local church.

The two main goals of these grants is to 1) give a boost to ministries that have otherwise felt out of reach or unattainable due to cost, and 2) to provide a platform to share what you’re doing with fellow churches. We believe there is amazing potential in every ministry that we want to help unleash. If your church has an idea that you believe could benefit yourselves and others, submit a request **to the Vitality Ministry Council through Iwright@nacc.org by November 1, 2025.**

“SHARING VITALITY” Grant Details

- All active NACCC member churches can apply. A church cohort anchored by an active NACCC member church can also apply even if it includes some partner churches of other denominations or traditions. Cohorts may be formed by geography, or by ministry affinity, etc
- Applicants must submit a proposal of no more than 3 pages which should include a narrative of the project goal and a simple budget for use of funds.
- Grant Applications must be received by email on or before November 1, 2025.
- Awardees will receive notice of award in December 2025 to receive funding and begin projects in January 2026.
- Churches and/or cohorts can apply for any amount up to \$2,500.
- Applications will be reviewed and approved by members of the NACCC Vitality Ministry Council and NACCC Staff.
- Awardees will stay in communication with the Vitality Ministry Council and NACCC staff as projects progress, including about ways their ministry lessons and examples can be shared with other NACCC churches looking for ministry options that could be adapted to their context, and for support around implementation.
- Program information about those awarded and their midway progress through the year will also be shared by awardees in collaboration with the NACCC and Vitality Ministry Council at the NACCC 2026 Annual Meeting and Conference in Massachusetts.