

March 23rd, 2015

Dear Friends in Christ,

Enclosed you'll find information regarding a new venture for our synod-Fostering Vibrant Faith. This multi-year effort, which will be brought forward at this year's synod assembly, is designed to help congregations pass on Christian faith to all the children God has entrusted to our care. At the heart of Fostering Vibrant Faith is the conviction that congregations' most critical work is to equip caring adults (parents, grandparents, godparents, etc.) to exercise their vocation in homes and other circles of care, fulfilling the promises they make to the newly baptized in the rite of Holy Baptism.

The Vibrant Faith Frame challenges us to move away from assuming that faith formation is solely "the congregation's job" and toward recovering the crucial role of homes and other circles of daily care in nurturing faith. That is, congregations' most critical work is to equip caring adults (parents, grandparents, godparents, caring Christian adults, etc.) to exercise their vocation in homes and other circles of daily care to fulfill the promises that we all make to the newly baptized in the rite of Holy Baptism. Our synod is seeking to change the culture of congregational life by lifting up the role of homes and other circles of care in planting and nurturing faith in all our children and is inviting at least one-half of its congregations to equip adult disciples of Jesus Christ to invest themselves-through ties of kinship, concern or promise-to bear responsibility in concrete ways for the bold promises that are articulated by all believers during the rite of Holy Baptism. Specifically, we invite you to:

- 1. BECOME AN "IMMERSED" CONGREGATION:** Within each conference, the synod will identify and recruit two Immersed congregations that will commit themselves to dive deeply into the Vibrant Faith Frame by (a) bringing participants representing 10-20% of the congregation's average weekly worship attendance to an all-day Vibrant Faith Training Event on Saturday, (b) participating in a second full day of training, in the congregation, on Sunday, (c) receiving monthly coaching sessions via conference phone call or Skype from a Vibrant Faith coach for the next two years, and (d) participating in annual on-site visits with Vibrant Faith staff over the next two years. The monthly coaching visits will involve 1-2 staff from each of a conference's Immersed congregations being coached together. These staff, in turn, coach the leaders of the congregation's Vibrant Faith team.
- 2. BECOME AN "INVOLVED" CONGREGATION:** Within each conference, the synod will also identify and recruit three Involved congregations that will (a) bring teams of 5-8 congregational leaders to their conference's Vibrant Faith Training Event on a Saturday, (b) have their team stay after the training event for an additional 90-minute "jump start" coaching experience on the same Saturday, (c) receive bi-monthly coaching sessions via conference phone call or Skype with Vibrant Faith coaches for the next two years, and (d) participate in annual onsite visits with Vibrant Faith staff over the next two years. The bi-monthly coaching sessions will involve 1-2 staff from each of the three of a conference's Involved congregations who, in turn, will coach a congregation's Vibrant Faith team.
- 3. BECOME AN "INQUIRING" CONGREGATION:** Also within each conference, Inquiring congregations will be able to send their pastors, church staff and/or lay leaders to the conference's Vibrant Faith Training Event (Saturday only) in order to introduce folks to the Vibrant Faith Frame and initiate a process within these congregations to decide how they might travel deeper into this pathway toward renewal.

Please share the enclosed information with your Congregation Council and other congregational leadership groups responsible for passing on Christian Faith to the next generation. Please ask your key congregational leaders to learn and pray about Fostering Vibrant Faith and to consider ways to get your congregation involved as an Immersed, Involved or Inquiring congregation. Then please fill out and return the enclosed Fostering Vibrant Faith response form to the Western Iowa Synod office as soon as possible. Six Vibrant Faith Training Events will be offered throughout our synod, starting in September of 2015. Now's the time to get on board!

If you have questions, please contact Lynn at [lynn.egesdal@wisynod.org](mailto:lynn.egesdal@wisynod.org) or call her at 712.732.4968x448. We want your congregation to make an informed, faithful decision about how you will be part of Fostering Vibrant Faith.

By God's Grace,

Bishop Rodger Prois

## WHAT IS VIBRANT FAITH MINISTRIES?

Vibrant Faith Ministries is a catalyst for Christian congregations, communities and households striving to practice vibrant faith in a dynamic world. The organization (originally called the Youth & Family Institute) was founded in 1987 by Dr. Mert and Irene Strommen. The Strommens' vision was to take the best research and academic insight, embed it in the Christian theology of the cross, and instill an evangelical spirit of ministry to help congregations strengthen families and nurture faith.

The first home for The Youth & Family Institute was at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 2010, the organization's name was changed to Vibrant Faith Ministries to reflect a renewed focus on all facets of the faith formation process, including organizational structures, leadership development, household practices, long-range planning and execution of strategies, and all the generations in the home and congregation.

## WHAT ARE "VIBRANT FAITH PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES"?

The Vibrant Faith principles and practices aren't "programs" as such. It's a compelling vision for how to pass on the best gift imaginable: a life-shaping faith in Jesus Christ. These principles, or core assumptions about how faith is formed, include:

1. Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships - often in our own homes.
2. The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and ministry of the home.
3. Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too.
4. Faith is caught more than it is taught.
5. If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults.

**FOUR KEY faith practices** are categories of spiritual practices designed to help people experience God and live their faith. They include:

- Caring Conversations
- Devotions
- Service
- Rituals and Traditions

## WHAT KINDS OF INVESTMENTS ARE CONGREGATIONS ASKED TO MAKE?

All congregations of the synod are asked to make this project a **focus for their fervent prayers**-in weekly worship, in meetings of congregational leaders, wherever church members live and work and pray.

Congregations are being asked to **invest some of their "human capital"** in this project by sending participants to the Vibrant Faith Training Events and (if they choose) by considering becoming Immersed or Involved congregations in this project. Participants in Vibrant Faith Training Events will be invited and empowered to lead their congregations into embedding Vibrant Faith principles and practices into home and congregational settings.

Congregations that choose to participate at any level of involvement are asked to **invest some of their financial resources** in the training, coaching and on-site-visits that are central to this project.

- **Immersed** congregations will contribute \$5000
- **Involved** congregations will contribute \$2500, and
- **Inquiring** congregations will contribute \$25 per participant who attends a Vibrant Faith Training Event.

Immersed and Involved congregations will be able to make their contributions in **up to five payments, spread out over three years**. Immersed and Involved congregations will also be asked to (a) pay \$10 per participant in the Vibrant Faith Training Events to help cover the cost of food (for Saturday) and materials. Immersed congregations will be responsible for hospitality and food for the Sunday portion of the Vibrant Faith Training Event, which will be held on-site in each

Immersed congregation. Immersed and Involved congregations will also be expected to provide hospitality and food for those participating in the annual on-site visits by Vibrant Faith Ministries staff members. Our Synod will invest funds in this multi-year project, asking participating congregations to invest in the total actual cost with the synod assisting on an as needed basis.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

If your congregation is part of a **multi-point parish**, you may participate as a "congregation" in this project, provided that all congregations in the parish are fully committed to participating and that the parish names one Vibrant Faith leadership team to spearhead the project in the whole parish.

You will notice that this is **NOT about "the traditional nuclear family"** as that term is often used (e.g. "a mom, a dad, 2.1 kids and a dog"). We know that families nowadays come in all sizes and shapes and that some are even reluctant to use the term "family." That's why we prefer the language of homes, households and other circles of care. The point is that caring Christian adults need to be affirmed and encouraged in passing on faith to the children and youth in their lives--however and wherever they interact!

**Coaching and on-site visits play an important role in fostering transformation.** As helpful as it is to attend a Vibrant Faith Training Event and make use of the concepts, perspectives and resources of VFM---coaching and on-site visits help congregations live into faith forming principles and practices. As the Vibrant Faith Frame---is introduced into the warp and weave of congregational life, it will evoke resistance. Coaching and on-site visits (in the company of other congregations going through the same experiences) adds immense value to the initial Training Event experience.

### **We feel good about our congregation's Christian education and youth ministries. Why should we participate?**

PLEASE DON'T DOWNPLAY OR STOP DOING ANYTHING your congregation is already doing to pass on Christian faith to all the baptized! This project is about adding value and fresh opportunities to your congregation's current "menu" for passing on faith. Many congregations in the synod are already doing some of the activities that VFM prizes, e.g. giving Bibles to third graders. Let's keep doing that--and add other "milestones" to the life of faith which we can celebrate in our churches! Of course, over time working with the Vibrant Faith principles and practices, you may find that your congregation does faith formation (a traditional Sunday School may morph into an inter-generational Sunday School, for example) differently than in the past. But we don't start with the assumption that everything old must disappear in order to consider the new ideas that the Vibrant Faith will introduce.

### **Our congregation is interested in participating but we're currently without a called pastor. Is this still possible?**

Diving into the Vibrant Faith principles and practices is a great thing to do during an interim time in a congregation's life. Most congregations that are calling a new pastor are already using the interim time to clarify their values and goals in ministry and this training and coaching process can bring focus to that. Congregations "in interim" often worry about "treading water" or growing stagnant; embracing this initiative is an antidote to that. Congregations seeking to participate during an interim time will want to make sure that (a) their interim pastor is "on board" with this and (b) that the continuation of the Vibrant Faith principles and practices will be an expectation of the next pastor who is called.

### **Should we participate if we only have a few children or youth on our membership rolls?**

First, ask yourselves, "Just exactly who are 'our' children?" Are we counting all the children and youth who live in our community--some of whom have no church home?" In the majority of our synod's counties there are more children and youth (age 18 and younger) than there are senior adults (age 65 and older). Second, ask yourselves, "How many children and youth are the children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, or godchildren of our congregation's members? How might participating in this project help us caring Christian adults relate better to the youngsters we love and care about--wherever they live--in ways that help them grow into their full identity as children of God, in Christ?"

**We want to be an Immersed (or Involved) congregation. How do you suggest we find the money?**

Although Immersed and Involved congregations can certainly build the costs for participating in the Fostering Vibrant Faith project in to their annual operating budgets, most congregations will probably seek out designated gifts or draw upon off-budget ("restricted") funds in the parish. This is the kind of project that people in our churches have been waiting for, longing for, praying for-and many of them will be ready to make "second mile gifts" (above and beyond their annual giving through the congregation) for this worthy effort. Some congregations have endowment funds or foundations from which a grant might be sought. Immersed and Involved congregations will be invited to make up to five payments (an initial payment when your Vibrant Faith Training Event is held and payments every six months thereafter). The synod will function as the fiscal agent for this project and will issue invoices to Immersed and Involved congregations during the two years of their involvement in the project.

**Fostering Vibrant Faith Response Form**

Name of congregation/parish: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address. (P.O. or address) \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of person filling out this form: \_\_\_\_\_

**Our congregation wishes to participate in Fostering Vibrant Faith by (check one)**

- Becoming an **Immersed** congregation
- Becoming an **Involved** congregation
- Becoming an **Inquiring** congregation
- Learning more about this project (please contact us for a conversation).

**Please return this form ASAP to the Western Iowa Synod ELCA**

318 E 5th St, Storm Lake, IA 50588

(712) 732-4968

or fax it to 712.732.6540

or email it to – [lynn.egesdal@wisynod.org](mailto:lynn.egesdal@wisynod.org)

Thanks!