In preparation for (your name of your Episcopal church) to enter into a time of self-study and discernment, the parish leadership is seeking the perceptions of the parish about its own life together. Enclosed is a Congregational Self-assessment Survey which will assist the Canon for Congregational Life and the parish leadership in determining parishioner’s perceptions of how things are going at (the name of church), New Hampshire so that we can, together, consider where we go from here in the maintaining and growth of the parish and its strength. This study was requested by our vestry of our Canon for Congregational Life as a way to establish what we think is going well and not so well in the areas of growth (external) and community life (internal) factors.

Please pray for the Holy Spirit to assist you in the discernment around these questions about life together in the parish. You may see some questions in this survey and think “I don’t know!” or “I do not have access to these numbers!” but that is ok. Just make a choice of A or B or C or D based on your “gut”. In other words, what seems closest to the truth based solely on what you know or think or perceive. Your survey is PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL and will not include your name. If you write on the survey or attach a letter, please include your name, however we are asking that you only circle your 24 choices and return the survey by mail to the church or drop it off at the church. Please work with only the answers provided and please answer every question, even if you are guessing based only on your perceptions.

Charles LaFond, Canon for Congregational Life will tabulate answers in each category, multiplying totals by positive and negative factors and creating a set of mathematical quotients which will then be placed on a quadrilateral grid which will show the parish where it perceives itself to be, giving us a baseline from which to begin planning. The results will simply indicate one of four “kinds” of parish life and from that we will begin to consider what the parish says about itself and what that says about how the parish should be doing discernment of vision and strategic planning.

Your participation in this survey is essential and we do hope you will be kind enough to take the 10-20 minutes needed to fill this out and mail it in so that we can begin the good work of building the parish for its future. If you have a couple in your family, it would be helpful if each adult member of the family were to take this survey and return it to the designated person for collection and assessment analysis.

In each category, please select the response that most closely describes your perception of your congregation by boldly CIRCLING THE LETTER closest to the response of your choice (note: you will often not be able to be sure of one or another answer. Please simply circle the letter closest to your gut perception of what seems to be the right answer based on what you perceive.)

Charles LaFond

Charles LaFond, Canon for Congregational Life
Growth Factors

1. Membership in your congregation has:
   A. Declined for the past three years
   B. Declined in the past year
   C. Increased in the past year
   D. Increased for the past three years

2. Attendance in worship has:
   A. Declined for the past three years
   B. Declined in the past year
   C. Increased in the past year
   D. Increased for the past three years

3. Participation in Christian Education opportunities has:
   A. Declined for the past three years
   B. Declined in the past year
   C. Increased in the past year
   D. Increased for the past three years

4. The number of non-members served by our congregation has:
   A. Declined for the past three years
   B. Declined in the past year
   C. Increased in the past year
   D. Increased for the past three years

5. My perception is that the percent of ACTIVE members in our congregation is between:
   A. 0-55%
   B. 56-70%
   C. 71-85%
   D. 86-100%

6. The number of DISTINCTLY DIFFERENT worship service options in our congregation is:
   A. 1
   B. 2
   C. 3
   D. More than 3

7. The number of ongoing outreach ministries of our congregation is:
   A. 0-3
   B. 3-6
   C. 6-9
   D. More than nine
8. My perception is that financial support through pledging to God through this parish for the past three years has:
   A. Declined
   B. Increased less than 10%
   C. Increased 10-25%
   D. Increased more than 25%

9. Awareness of our ministry and mission throughout the surrounding community is:
   A. Very low
   B. Low
   C. High
   D. Very high

10. My perceptions around visitors to our congregation:
    A. Generally come only once
    B. Usually return at least once
    C. Usually return regularly
    D. Generally become involved in the ongoing ministry

11. It is my perception that we contact visitors:
    A. Not at all
    B. By letter or phone within a week
    C. Personally within the day of their first visit
    D. By contact within 48 hours of the first visit

12. We offer age-specific ministries to:
    A. 1 or 2 age groups
    B. 3 age groups
    C. 4 age groups
    D. More than 4 age groups
Stability Factors

13. The percent of active members in leadership positions
   A. 0-15%
   B. 15-35%
   C. 35-55%
   D. 55-100%

14. The percent of the congregation with a clear, shared understanding of the mission of the diocese
   A. Less than 10%
   B. 10-40%
   C. 41-75%
   D. More than 75%

15. The percent of the congregation with a clear, shared understanding of the mission of the parish
   A. Less than 10%
   B. 10-40%
   C. 41-75%
   D. More than 75%

16. Hours leadership spends per week in meetings doing planning and management
   A. More than 5
   B. 4-5
   C. 3-4
   D. Less than 3

17. Hours leadership spends per week together in prayer, Bible Study, faith sharing etc.
   A. Less than 3
   B. 3-4
   C. 4-5
   D. More than 5

18. Percent of total ministry and program taking place away from the buildings of the parish
   A. Less than 10%
   B. 10-20%
   C. 20-30%
   D. More than 30%

19. We address the financial needs of the congregation using
   A. No special efforts
   B. Annual campaigns
   C. Regular conversations about money and giving using the diocesan plan
   D. Strategic involvement, inclusion, and vigorous asking in a year-round program
20. Our primary measure of effectiveness or success is
   A. Growth in numbers attending
   B. Growth in numbers of those involved in leadership
   C. Growth in numbers of people served
   D. Growth in the spiritual commitment and faith formation in people’s lives

21. Worship, education, fellowship and service opportunities are:
   A. Independent program emphases of the congregation
   B. Loosely related in focus, but developed independently
   C. Coordinated to support the primary focus of our congregation
   D. Tightly integrated, designed and implemented collaboratively

22. The number of hours the priest works per week on average is:
   (note: if your clergy work part time, please multiply your answer to fit a full time paradigm – for example – if the priest is paid a half time salary and works 35-40 hours per week, you would answer (A) etc.)
   
   A. 80-70
   B. 70-60
   C. 60-50
   D. 50-40

23. The location of our parish is:
   A. Vital to the success of our ministry
   B. Very important to the success of our ministry
   C. Nominally important to the success of our ministry
   D. Unrelated to the success of our ministry

24. The charisma, energy and image of the priest we choose is
   A. Vital to the success of our ministry
   B. Very important to the success of our ministry
   C. Nominally important to the success of our ministry
   D. Unrelated to the success of our ministry

Thank you for taking the time to complete and return this survey. This self-assessment is essential to our collective moving forward towards strength and vitality as a church.
Grace Church, East Concord

Congregational Vitality Survey Report
Tuesday, February 19, 2013

The Rev. Canon Charles LaFond
Canon for Congregational Life
The Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire

Introduction:

Throughout September and October, a survey of 24 questions covering growth and stability in congregational life was filled out by 29 respondents. The level of participation itself is a matter over which to be very thankful and indicates a congregation which is invested in its common life.

Due to the inclination of our society to label things “good” and “bad” or “right” and “wrong” or “successful” and “not successful,” it would be easy to see the results of this survey as being just another such label. To do so would be to completely misunderstand the process of congregational development and would also be either overly demoralizing or overly encouraging depending on the viewer’s perspective of the results and their preconceived context.

We live in a culture which loves numbers over fidelity and growth over depth. A parish could be very large with high Sunday attendance and high pledging and could still be unhealthy if, for example, the congregation was cut off from ownership by a power-hungry clergy person. Similarly a congregation could be small and have only the pledges needed for its size but could at the same time be deeply committed, highly involved and very lean with great spiritual depth.

So the beginning of Congregational Development by the diagnostic tool of a survey and results such as the one we are using is just a bench-mark to determine what the congregation thinks about itself. The congregational development consultant uses this information as a place from which to begin the process of discernment (hearing God’s call as to what to do and how to do it) and strategic planning (making a plan with measurable goals and objectives which meets the goals discerned).

Bigger churches or bigger budgets do not indicate how faithful the congregation is or perceives itself to be. And more active churches with high numbers in pews on a Sunday morning says nothing about the impact being made on people’s lives.

The survey taken by congregants is designed to indicate what kind of church the congregation considers itself to be on two axis: stability and growth.

Each diagnostic category is named for a kind of body type since the church is the “body of Christ.” The work of Dan R. Dick and his book Vital Signs: A pathways To Congregational Wholeness was influential in the development of this process. The four categories in which churches can find themselves are:
**Retrogressive**: congregations where there is growth purely for the sake of growth without infrastructure or necessary formation. Commitment is to growth and development in specialized areas. There is high impact on human life and leadership is diverse. Due to size, small-group work is essential. Retrogressive churches can be very large and risk shallow formation.

**Lean**: congregations which have made the difficult decisions about program and size which leads to fewer programs, fewer services, narrow focus of ministry and possibly a resulting narrowing of congregation size.

**Wasting**: a congregation is decline, deep denial or dysfunctional stagnation. The physical metaphor is that of a leg which has been immobilized and so has lost muscle mass. This leg, with therapy, could regain strength. So too could this type of congregation.

**Vital**: a congregation which is highly stable, strong and growing due to the attractiveness of the liturgy, programs, mission, education, spiritual depth and welcome of the congregation.

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**Survey Results for Epiphany Episcopal Church, Newport, New Hampshire**

The data from 30 survey respondents stretches from moderately wasting, through moderately vital.

What follows are two sets of criteria which consider both “wasting” churches and “vital” churches since your congregation has answered this survey with self-identifying choices which straddle these two kinds of congregational self-assessments.

First, we will consider a set of characteristics which are generally present in churches which perceive themselves as “vital.” It is into these criteria that the parish wants to move over the next few years by the planning choices it makes.

Secondly, We will consider a set of characteristics which are generally present in churches which perceive themselves as “wasting.” This set of criteria is paired with antidotes to each criterion. These “wasting” criteria are not, in themselves descriptions of what this parish experiences but are rather, simply the kinds of things which are dealt with in parishes which have answered questions about themselves in the ways your parish has.

**Vital Congregations: What we know about them**

**Introduction:**

Vital congregations are the healthiest form of church existence and the fact that most of your congregants see themselves (11) in this or in the trajectory towards it (another 6) means that this form of church life is within grasp of the parish and can be achieved simply by making a few adjustments to existing norms which can send the parish further away from “wasting” and deeper into “vital” or “lean.”
A vital congregation is a parish with a vibrant inner life and considerable spiritual depth. It has a sense of its call to reach out into the community even if it has yet to achieve all of its goals in this area. A vital church usually has a good leader with a solid spiritual life who is disinclined to put up with dysfunctional acting out of personal agendas within the community. Vital churches draw good people and send others finding new playgrounds. Vital churches focus more on their ministry than on their self-promotion and they take both discipleship and stewardship seriously. Vital churches tent to take surveys like this one by request rather than by imposition. They want to improve and they want to be open about their successes and their failures. Vital churches are intentional about planning rather than letting the parish simply grow haphazardly. Vital churches are full of people who are motivated, well-prayed, disciplined about spiritual; practice and engaged in the process of becoming.

**Main Issues faced by vital congregations:**
There are generally a few key issues involved in vitality, many of which most vital congregations enjoy. These may or may not apply to every vital congregation nor are many congregations entirely “vital,” but these are simply usual issues for most vital congregations.

1. **Identity:** Vital congregations tend to have a very clear sense of community. The question in these congregations is not “I” but rather “we” which is a disposition close to the heart of the gospel. Vital churches are not likely to allow even the most powerful or wealthy or loud individual voices overpower or sway the whole parish congregation. There is a welcome in vital churches which does not coerce but offers the “Come and see…” which is so prevalent in John’s gospel. This congregation is who it is and welcomes people to its own sense of clear identity if those who come feel called and desire to stay and become part of the community.

2. **Purpose:** there is a clearly discerned and a clearly articulated sense of purpose in a vital church. A vital church is usually in sync with its denominational trajectory and theology and polity so that they are not hemorrhaging energy by trying to re-invent the core of how they are. They usually exist for others to know Christ and to heal a broken world. They are not self-serving as much as they are other-serving. Vital churches tend to have short ways to describe their church to others and make “church” more of a verb than a noun. They do not change their ways simply to please people. Visitors can take them or leave them but they are who they are and they can articulate who they are.

3. **Focus:** In vital churches there is a balance between and an integration of the inward focus and the outward focus. Vital churches tend always to be striving for the next level of service both to their congregants and to the outside world to whom they go to call and to minister. This balance of focus on spiritual personal depth and service to the larger community is a common trait of vital churches. In larger churches with poor leadership (“obese”) and smaller wasting churches, leaders are often not able to articulate how people integrate what they hear on Sunday with how they live their lives the rest of the week.
4. **Discernment**: Vital churches are churches in which prayer is a priority. They are churches which truly believe that God has a hope for each of us and for each congregation and they are working through prayer and silence to seek that discerning awareness of God’s calling. In vital churches, prayer is a core value and its strength tends to inform all conversations about what the church should be doing with its resources. Periods of discerning silence are not strange to people in vital churches. In wasting and obese churches, silence is a strange and frightening thing to be covered up with action and speaking. In vital churches, there is no one voice which tells everyone what to do – including the voice of the clergy. In a vital church God’s hope seems to bubble up from within many voices and is agreed to and affirmed by many more. In vital churches vision is not announced nor is it imposed. Rather, vision emerges and infuses all of life in the parish.

5. **Guiding Values**: A vital church tends to have a set of named core values which guide what they do. These values usually form around: 1. Placing community above the individual; 2. Placing the community of the world before the community of the parish, 3. Seeking to become like Christ. Vital churches are not perfect but they do tend to exhibit grounding in healing, loving, grace, justice and acceptance while rejecting judgment, division, petty arguing, manipulation, hostility and dishonesty in any form in which they might appear. Vital churches have a very clear sense of purpose, focus and vision grounded in the desire to be Christ-like in all things as a community and as individuals.

6. **Impact Awareness**: Communications take a very high priority in a vital church. The congregation discusses within its own ranks what impact it is having on the community and the larger community around the parish talks about the impact of the parish on the larger community. Impact awareness most distinguishes between an unstable and a stable church. The vital churches are asking how they are like Christ and how the world is better off for their existence. Vital churches work with individuals who develop comprehensive and strategic plans which have measurable objectives which feed impact awareness.

7. **Leadership**: A vital church tends to share leadership within the entire community, seeking to lift up every baptized person into the leadership which best suits them. There is an environment which encourages people to take responsibility for what happens in the parish and so there is a low dependence on staff and on the opinions of the clergy. Membership is not measured by worship attendance nor is it measured by the giving of money. Membership is measured by involvement in things which feed the church and feed the world. In vital churches, leadership is collaborative and shared. Vital churches do not emphasize effective leaders as much as they emphasize effective leadership. Because leadership is spread throughout the community, change is something which a vital church can handle easily and gracefully.

8. **The role of the clergy**: In a vital church, the clergy are allowed to exist primarily as spiritual guide, pastor and resident theologian, leaving meeting attendance and chores to the wide diversity of involvement in the congregation. The vital church has a clergy leader who does not need to be in charge and who has time to study, pray, write, visit and care for his or her own well-being in a balanced life. Clergy in vital churches work only the equivalent of 50 hours in a full time position and encourage that kind of life-balance in the congregation.
through the preaching office and through good modeling. Clergy in vital churches spend very little time in meetings. Meetings are replaced with ministry for them.

9. **Program design**: Like its counterpart “lean,” the vital church has no unnecessary programs. Everything which is offered is offered for a reason and not a whim. Everything is part of a larger plan which is focused on becoming Christ-like and reaching out to the world. Everything is aligned with the mission, vision and strategy of the congregation as designed by the congregation. Program options are intentionally limited in vital congregations and curriculum is limited to core classes, groups or experiences.

10. **Organizational Structure**: Flexibility is the key to the success of vital churches. The goal is peak efficiency and so flexibility is held up as central to the philosophy of leadership in this kind of a congregation. In vital congregations, the needs are established, then the function is designed for the needs and then the form is constructed for the function. Structure adapts to the needs rather than being based on past history or present inclination. Simple, lean and flexible are the key words to describe vital parishes. In vital parishes programs and services exist only if they are meeting the goal. If they are not meeting a key focus goal then they are dispensed with so as not to rob energy from the core needs. In vital churches, leaders (lay and ordained) are chosen for spiritual maturity and are trained with that trajectory as a clear focus. In vital churches, there is balance between the academic (life-learning learning, not intellectual elitism), the spiritual and the practical.

11. **Money**: In vital churches there is a very low emphasis on giving money simply because it is very easily given. People are so invested in leading what it means to be a Christian and so involved in programs and so invested in the plan and the goals of the church and so committed to being in community at church (worship and mutual support) that giving flows naturally out of the centrality with which church membership is held in the lives of the members of the parish. That we learn, that we spend time together and that we give to the budget of this central community in our lives is a way of life and not an act of obedience. It is central to vital churches that every member gives sacrificially and that wealthy members have their larger gifts channeled into special funds and planned giving so that the annual pledging is not funded by any one person much more than any other. In vital churches people talk about money freely and they assist each other with the topic as conversion of life. Where people trust each other, this willingness to discuss money and all other “private” aspects of human life is taking place.

12. **The role of worship**: In vital churches there is a great diversity of worship for two reasons. First, a diversity of worship is possible because the clergy and worship leaders (deacons etc.) have been removed from an overwhelming attendance of meetings, have given that work over to the laity, and are freed up to do what they were trained for – visiting the poor, sick marginalized and creating meaningful opportunities for preaching and worship. Secondly, vital congregations offer diverse worship because they are aware that people worship differently and are attracted to different kinds of worship with different needs and expectations. Vital congregations offer a diverse series of opportunities for a person to encounter the Risen Christ just as restaurants offer a diverse series of choices for consumers to encounter and enjoyable mean which meets the biology and tastes of their body. This is
not to be all things to all people but it is to acknowledge that some encounter Christ in silence and some in music and some in study and some in teaching. Some encounter Christ in lights blaring and arms waiving while others in lights dimmed and prayers simple. This broader offering appeals to a broad audience and is therefore a central act of evangelism. Worship designed for the taste of the clergy is clerical narcissism at its worst. It is not unusual for small but vital churches to offer 6-12 worship experiences a week of varying kinds nor is it unusual to find that Sunday worship experiences are very divers in the day while kept as central to the life of the congregation.

13. **The role of education:** In a vital church, it could be said that if you are not learning you are not a Christian. Although many would not put it quite that way, this expresses the centrality of learning in a vital church. Learning and formation are essential to the vital church and everyone is involved in life-long learning in one way or another. In vital churches there is always more to learn and that learning with teaching and reading are central ways of life in vital churches. Bible studies, classes and small group meetings focus on core curriculum for the entire church community so that learning, like involvement and pledging are not options but central ways of life for all members and proposed to new-comers in just that way. In a vital church, if you want to be a member of our church, you actively learn, you actively attend worship, you actively work for the community outside the church walls and you actively pledge. Not to do those things is to be on a fringe and in vital churches people are either in or are being strongly encouraged to be in the midst of these activities. People for whom that is too demanding a way of church life are welcomed to find less-demanding churches which they inevitably find also less engaging and less attractive.

14. **The congregations’ relationship with the community:** The core value of vital churches is that the transformation which occurs in the church building and in the small-group gatherings is not for anything other than propelling congregants out into the local community and world with sleeves rolled up to work for peace and justice and compassion. A vital church is well-known by the surrounding community for all the good it does. In vital churches, people are being trained to be evangelists in every aspect of their lives – at home, at work, in neighborhoods and in the market place. Vital churches are involved politically and socially as well as spiritually.

15. **Connection to the diocese and the wider church:** In vital churches, there is support of diocesan initiatives and payment of assessments to diocesan and national structures. The sense of community which is experienced by people who are members of a vital church extends to a deep understanding of community in the wider church.

**Summary of Vital Churches:**
Very few churches are entirely vital churches just as very few churches are entirely wasting, obese or lean. What we do know however is that vitality is the goal for church existence and not simply swelled ranks on Sundays or large budgets on spread sheets. Vitality in church can be as present in a congregation of 20 and in a congregation of 200. In fact, the larger a congregation gets, the more fragile its vitality becomes. Vital churches have clear focus, exhilarating energy and spiritually centered and balanced life-styles. In vital churches, God comes first, community comes seconds and the individual comes last. In vital churches “church” is not a noun but is
rather a verb. Building a vital church is very hard work and is done not because it is easy or even universally popular but because it is the right thing to do.

Because the congregation of the **Church of the Epiphany in Newport** identified themselves in both the wasting and the vital quadrants of the quadrilateral survey graph, it is only fair to balance an awareness of vitality with an awareness of wasting characteristics and their antidotes so that in planning we can work to slowly move the parish more firmly into vitality and away from wasting.

**Wasting Congregations: What we know about them**

**Introduction:**
“Wasting” congregations do not necessarily find themselves in this diagnosis due to their own misdeeds or poor leadership. The closing of a textiles plant which made the town vibrant can send a congregation into “wasting” simply because that wasting is the prevailing situation of the town or are in which the church was built. On the other hand, most wasting congregations find it easier to lay the blame at the feet of someone other than their own inability to be so attractive as to attract people to their door and then keep them in their programs.

The life-reality of wasting congregations is that they want things to be better but do not want to change how they are doing things. Often, people in wasting congregations do not really know what they want except that they do not want what they have. This is not all bad since it is possible to catch a vision for what a parish does want or what God seems to want for them (discernment) and quickly be on a road towards the kind of change which returns the parish to vitality.

**Main Issues faced by wasting congregations¹:**

There are generally a few key issues involved in wasting, many of which most wasting congregations face at some point in their decline and out of which they can grow only because they have identified them and are willing to make key changes towards a vital series of strengths. These may or may not apply to every wasting congregation, nor is any congregation entirely in any one of the four quadrants of congregational diagnosis, but these are simply usual issues for most wasting congregations base on congregations which answered the questions in the survey they way yours did. Knowing what our “dis-ease” is, goes a long way to making the kind of change which moves a congregation from wasting to vital.

1. **Identity:** They either lack a sense of identity or they hold an identity from some era in the past to which they cling. If there is an identity is tends not to be around mission but rather around an event or an idea. The wasting church usually thinks of itself as “friendly,” a term which may or may not be shared by visitors.

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¹ Understandings of commonalities aligned among wasting, vital, obese and lean parish self-assessments are based on detailed studies of 700 congregations whose answers to the questions in the parish survey are similar in trajectory.
**Therapeutic antidote:** To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting a process must be begin which involves parishioners in discerning and planning for new strength and growth. The parish needs to be led into an outward way of living and must form around a strategic plan which focuses on mission and community life.

2. **Purpose:** In wasting churches the baseline for purpose is church attendance. Attendance at other functions such as Christian formation or mission-driven outreach is responded to by cries of being too busy. Often wasting churches are characterized as places which exist to support or give comfort to a small group of people for whom change is unattractive.

**Therapeutic antidote:** To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting a new vision of outward mission-centered ministry to the poor and the marginalized would need to be developed. This will also greatly assist in stewardship efforts as a case-for-support is developed and agreed to.

3. **Focus:** Stable congregations tend to balance internal and external focus whereas wasting parishes tend to have an internal focus; an interest in attracting people “to come to us” rather than sending congregants out into a community to joyfully draw people in. There is a pervasive tendency of wasting congregations to have a pervasive attitude of victimization. Such may or may not be the case, but if one feels one’s needs are not being met, one finds it hard to meet the needs of others.

**Therapeutic antidote:** To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting gifts in management, planning and church growth would need to be engaged at all levels of leadership with strategic planning which creates a new culture of outward looking and energetic attachment to a mission and vision.

4. **Discernment:** One telling difference between vital and wasting congregations is the time spent by leaders and congregants in prayer, study and conversation around God’s call. The problem is that we often see the creation of a vision as a programmatic function something we work to create when in fact, vision is something discovered through prayer and discernment.

**Therapeutic antidote:** To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting the clergy and vestry would need to be united in leading the parish to deeper commitment to prayerful discernment, study and commitment to conversion-of-life.

5. **Conflict:** Wasting congregations often do not have a proactive approach to conflict. Too often small groups have conversations outside formal meetings and set up a “we” / “they” dynamic which serves to erode effective communications.

**Therapeutic antidote:** To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting clergy and vestry need to be united and committed to a culture in which conflict is openly expected, identified and dealt with quickly. At times, it may be necessary for outside counsel to come into mediate conflict or to teach conflict resolution skills.

6. **Impact awareness:** Wasting congregations tend not to have a clear way to evaluate the impact of their ministries on their participants. It is generally considered “enough” to attend Sunday liturgy and manage a budget.
Therapeutic antidote: To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting clergy leadership and lay leadership need to be able to inspire diverse forms of involvement in programs an liturgical forms other than Sunday attendance at the primary service or services.

7. Leadership: Often, a too small contingent of people is involved in the leadership of a wasting parish either by design or by default or both. This often leads to a deep sense of pain and exhaustion on the part of leaders and fear or resentment on the part of non-leaders. Usually a “magic answer” is being sought from outside rather than from within the existing talent and faithfulness of the congregation. This is the other side of the proverbial coin in which the fault of failure is external and inspires victimization.

Therapeutic antidote: To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting clergy leadership is essential. The parish would need to grow and the clergy person needs to inspire the kinds of changes which would enable growth and stability and make the congregation an attractive one to join. Generally, growth is a matter of offering a diverse set of liturgical and social opportunities which meet various needs and provide a menu from which people of different tastes and personality types may choose. With growth, leadership work could be spread among more people and with more frequent turnover of responsibility.

8. The Rector, Vicar or Priest-in-charge: Low morale, a lack of shared responsibility, ambiguity of calling, a lack of rest and playfulness, physical and emotional problems, stress and burnout are common in clergy of wasting parishes. When a priest’s “call” is replaced by a priests’ “to do list,” the parish is hurt and the clergy is demoralized. It is essential in wasting parishes that clergy are encouraged to maintain balance and to seek mentoring and community outside their vocation. Loneliness and isolation can easily become overwhelming in a wasting parish. Lay involvement becomes essential to keeping the clergy from becoming overwhelmed with tasks which distract him or her from that for which they were trained and that which was the core of their sense of call. The clergy are pastor, theologian and liturgist.

Therapeutic antidote: To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting the congregation must “own” the tasks of management in the parish and must work towards vital or lean status so as to attract more members which will spread the work-load more broadly.

9. Program Design: Generally in wasting congregations, program is designed for internal comfort rather than for a mixture of internal comfort and external evangelism. Program must be integrated into the larger vision of the church’s call to become something it is not yet.

Therapeutic antidote: To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting an external focus would need to be adopted by the leadership and congregation. Change would need to be embraced and not rejected.

10. Money: Money is an obsession in most wasting congregations. The paradox is that churches which focus on money have the greatest money problems, whereas churches which focus on spiritual formation and community building have the least money problems. A reactive rather than a proactive approach to money is often the case in wasting congregations. Healthy
churches discern what they are called to do, get input as to that mission, design a ministry plan with budget and raise the funds based on the involved and excited congregant’s investment into the plan in which they have each had a part in developing.

_Therapeutic antidote:_ To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting, emphasis on money will need to be replaced by emphasis on formation, mission and community building. Money is given by people who feel invested in the mission and involved in its design.

11. **Worship:** Because wasting parishes tend to have low participation, everything tends to be crammed into a Sunday morning – meetings, worship, recruitment etc., making the worship experience frenetic at best and exhausting at worst and allowing for little transcendence, discernment or adoration. Visitors sense that the need they had for joyful adoration in a liturgy is met with frantic activity and possibly dull worship. When a person’s spiritual and social needs are not being met, they will choose a different congregation.

_Therapeutic antidote:_ To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting a process led by clergy and vestry would need to inspire attendance at meetings and classes at times other than liturgical events.

12. **Education and Formation:** In wasting congregations, Christian education and active spiritual formation tends to be a low priority. There tends to be a high level of compartmentalization which is a cancer in the spiritual life. There tends to be little or no relation between how church life and home life are interconnected.

_Therapeutic antidote:_ To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting Christian formation and education would need to be given a high priority and these offerings would need to be both diverse and very attractive to both congregants and visitors. It becomes essential that education and formation be located on core formation issues. Programs such as EFM can be of great help in this area.

13. **Connection to the local community:** In wasting congregations, the local community will know little or nothing about the parish and will not be able to point to any event or communication which indicated that community members were welcome there. Many wasting churches tend to try to be self-reliant, doing everything themselves rather than reaching out to other social-service organizations or churches. Unstable congregations count what comes in – members and dollars. Stable congregations count what goes out – number of people fed, clothed, visited, reached, loved or served. When the congregation is focused on what goes out – the community knows who you are. When the congregation is focused on what comes in, only the congregation knows what it does in a community.

_Therapeutic antidote:_ To reverse this contribution to congregational wasting energetic clergy and lay leadership will need to inspire the congregation to shift its focus to the community locally, regionally and internationally. Moving from wasting to vital or lean status is very hard to accomplish but is the only viable option.
**Summary:**

Determining the starting point of a congregation comes from the collection of the data of self-perception. The collected answers of 30 congregants has indicated, based on the answers given by those congregants, that **Epiphany Episcopal Church in Newport, New Hampshire** could partially be in a state of “wasting.” In some dioceses, the term used is “decay” but I find that wording to ring false. “Decay” leads to death whereas “wasting” has a choice between death and the kind of hard and sometimes painful therapy which strengthens and restores.

What we know of the physical body is that if a person chooses to reverse the wasting of muscles, the resulting physical therapy is inconvenient, painful and hard work. However, a choice must be made and even if no choice is made – that too is a choice.

The determination of this study indicates that the parish is in a state of wasting but that simply means that through some hard work and some hard choices, the parish can move into vitality in the future. The fact that there was an astoundingly high rate of involvement in the study indicates that investment is also high which is the first and most vital step to recovery if recovery is chosen.

Any wasting church can rebuild by paying attention to identity, purpose, focus, discernment of God’s vision and core values. By setting one or two compelling goals and working to achieve them, any wasting community can move into stability and growth.

Wasting in a congregation is as much a state of mind as it is a state of being. When congregations age and social morays change and numbers begin to decrease, despair can set in and the effect is spiraling.

The hope of the gospel is that God reaches to grab the wrists of our souls – figuratively and literally, and pulls us to new life if we choose to be pulled. This study is only as good as its use to move the congregation out and up and into a new series of choices which will lead to its gentle and peaceful death or to its painful but powerful therapy and new life. Churches, organizations, ministries, programs and people all do die from time to time and that is not necessarily a failure. But with a human body as with a parish, we do everything we can to bring it to new life if life is chosen.

**Appendices:**

Excel spreadsheet of survey responses and calculations

Quadrilateral Point Graph
### Growth Plot Point Calculation

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Total C + D 189

Growth Plot Point (30.56)

### Stability Plot Point Calculation

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Total A + B (927)

Total C + D 304

Stability Plot Point (23.07)
## 2009 Vitality Study

**St. Mark’s Church, Ashland**

**Blanks** = no response or more than one response to the question.

### Respondents

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### Growth Plot Point


### Stability Plot Point


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**(30.56)**

**(23.07)**

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2009 Vitality Study - XXXXXX, XXXXXX, New Hampshire