



# ***Fostering Vibrant Faith***

## ***in our homes, congregations and communities***

**A year-three venture (2014-2017) of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod,  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

At the 2014 Synod Assembly voting members approved a plan for sharing the Vibrant Faith Frame with the synod's 238 congregations and nearly 95,000 church members. Now your congregation is invited to step forward and decide how you might wish to participate in this exciting adventure, in partnership with the staff of Vibrant Faith Ministries (VFM). This brochure is designed to give you the information you need to make a thoughtful, faithful decision.

**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 our 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. Learn more about Vibrant Faith Ministries at <http://www.vibrantfaith.org/about-us/>

**WHAT IS THE "VIBRANT FAITH FRAME?"** The Vibrant Faith Frame isn't a "program" as such. It's a compelling vision for how to pass on the best gift imaginable: a life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ. A shorthand way of summarizing the Vibrant Faith Frame involves the numbers 5-4-3:

***FIVE PRINCIPLES*** for living and passing on faith:

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 KEYS*** for practicing faith:

- Caring Conversations
- Devotions
- Service
- Rituals and Traditions

***THREE CHARACTERISTICS*** for Christians:

- Authentic
- Available
- Affirming

## **HOW CAN CONGREGATIONS PARTICIPATE?**

This venture will be kicked off in a series of nine Vibrant Faith Training Events, involving all ten conferences of our synod (though for the purposes of this project only, Conferences 5 and 6 will “count” as one conference). All congregations will be invited to send their pastors, other church staff and lay leaders to these crucial training events starting in autumn of 2014 and concluding in the autumn of 2015.

Congregations will participate in these training events in three different categories of involvement:

### ***IMMERSED CONGREGATIONS***

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. Note: 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.

### ***INVOLVED CONGREGATIONS***

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 on-site visits with Vibrant Faith staff over the next two years. Note: the bi-monthly coaching visits will involve 1-2 staff from each of the three of a conference’s *Involved* congregations being coached together. These staff, in turn, coach the leaders of the congregation’s Vibrant Faith team.

### ***INQUIRING CONGREGATIONS***

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.

## **WHY SHOULD CONGREGATIONS PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?**

The Vibrant Faith Frame is all about inviting congregations to reconceive the ways that they, in the power of the Holy Spirit, form Christian faith in all the baptized. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians in North America assumed that all that children and young people needed was to be brought to church buildings for experiences like Sunday School, Vacation Bible School and confirmation instruction. Faithful parents and other caring adults often assumed it was sufficient if they simply dropped off their kids to get a dose of Christian faith and life for an hour or so each week.

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.

By pursuing this project in partnership with Vibrant Faith Ministries, our synod is seeking to change the culture of congregational life in northwestern Minnesota by lifting up the role of homes and other circles of care in planting and nurturing faith in all our children. Our synod is inviting at least one-half of its 238 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.

To read some inspiring stories of transformation in congregations that have already embraced the Vibrant Faith Frame go to <http://www.vibrantfaith.org/transformation-stories/>

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

Anything worth doing requires investment by participants.

First, 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.

Second, 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 ways of bringing the Vibrant Faith Frame into the life of each congregation.

Third, 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. Note: ***Immersed*** and ***Involved*** congregations will be able to make their contributions in up to five payments, spread out over up to 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.

Note: To help keep costs to congregations manageable, the Northwestern Minnesota Synod itself is also investing funds in this multi-year project. Participating congregations will bear roughly 60% of the total actual cost of the project—with the synod seeking to raise the other 40% of the total actual project costs.

## **FOSTERING VIBRANT FAITH in the Northwestern Minnesota Synod**

*Seven questions you may be wondering about....*

1. *Our congregation is part of a multi-point parish. May our whole parish participate as a “congregation” in this project?*

**Answer:** Yes, 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.

2. *This project intrigues us, but some wonder about all the focus on the traditional nuclear family. What’s with that?*

**Answer:** If you read the description of this project—and all the materials on the VibrantFaith.org website 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! (Did you know that Martin and Katie Luther sometimes had as many as 25 persons living in their “household” in Wittenberg, Germany!)

3. *Why does Vibrant Faith Ministries emphasize coaching and on-site visits so much?*

**Answer:** 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 truly take the Vibrant Faith Frame home, adapt it to the local context and allow it to change how a congregation “does business.” Old habits die hard (e.g. “*just drop off the kids at church for an hour each week*”), and leaders thrive when they build accountability structures into their lives. 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.

4. *We feel good about our congregation’s Christian education and youth ministries. Why should we downplay or stop doing those good ministries in order to embrace the Vibrant Faith model?*

**Answer:** 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 Frame may well change *how* a congregation does faith formation (a traditional Sunday School may morph into an inter-generational Sunday School, for example)—but we don’t start with the

assumption that everything old must disappear in order to consider the new ideas that the Vibrant Faith model will introduce.

5. ***Our congregation is interested in being an Immersed or Involved congregation, but we're currently without a called pastor. Can we do this during an interim time? Or, what if our pastor takes a new call in another congregation during the next two years?***

**Answer:** Diving into the Vibrant Faith Frame 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; the VFF can bring focus to that. Congregations "in interim" often worry about "treading water" or growing stagnant; embracing the VFF is an antidote to that. Congregations embracing the VFF during an interim time will want to make sure that (a) their interim pastor is "on board" with this and (b) continuation in the VFF will be an expectation of the next pastor who is called.

6. ***This project appeals to us, but our congregation hardly has any children or youth on its membership rolls. Why should we consider participating?***

**Answer:** 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 21 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?"

7. ***We're ready to go as an Immersed (or Involved) congregation. How do you suggest we find the money to make our contribution to the project? How will our congregation be billed for participating?***

**Answer:** 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.