

An Outward Focus Congregational Vitality
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by Mike Ferguson

Vital Congregations webinar stresses the importance of reaching out, even during a pandemic



LOUISVILLE — Before COVID-19 forced him to work from home, the Rev. Dr. Alonzo Johnson, was walking in downtown Louisville one day when he came across a man holding a “I’m homeless and I’m hungry” sign. Johnson made eye contact and asked how the man was doing. The man clutched Johnson’s arms and told him, with tears streaming down his face, “Thank you for recognizing that I am a human being.” That, Johnson said during a Wednesday webinar on the Seven Marks of Vital Congregations, “is the power of outward incarnational focus,” one of the seven marks. Johnson defined the outward focus this way: “We aren’t limiting the scope of what we can do as God’s disciples.”

He told this story of his previous ministry, when he was a pastor serving a Philadelphia church. His manse was next door to the church, and one day he noticed about 12 youth littering the grounds. “I was that old man who came out and yelled, ‘Don’t you have somewhere to go?’” Johnson said, adding this invitation to the dubious litterers: “Why not come to Vacation Bible School? We have food.” “They came, all 25 of them,” Johnson said, “and when they came there were concerns and worries about having these kids in the building.” An outward incarnational focus “is about understanding we live in a world where people are hurting,” Johnson said. “COVID-19 is showing us a hurt that is compounded by a double pandemic” of racism and poverty, he said.

As Johnson talks, the importance of relationships is a common denominator, he said. “They all said in their own way that relationships matter. It’s relationships that help us survive,” the groups told Johnson. “A key component of outward incarnational focus is making relationships, which is powerful and something God calls us to do.”

The groups are also clear that resources matter. Johnson invited churches to inventory their non-monetary resources, including the power and reach of online worship services. “I probably go to eight (online) services every Sunday, showing that God works even in the midst of this pandemic,” Johnson said. “In this time of scarcity, what do we have to do God’s work? We have us. We have teachers and lawyers in our congregations. Many of our churches are near schools. Have we gone there to ask, ‘How can we be helpful?’” “And we have prayer,” he said, which the Book of Order says is at the heart of worship. “It’s how we help each other do this work,” Johnson said.

As Vital Congregations guests said, “The outward incarnational focus is most important now,” another said, “because we are usually waiting for people to come to us in the church building. We have to go out to them now.” “Because people feel so alone when they can’t be together,” said another. “It can feel like we are also alone in our struggles and pain. A listening ear can feel like a welcome balm.”

An outward focus “affirms that God is with us even if we can’t make it into the church building on Sunday,” said another. “By focusing on outward incarnational ministry, we are prophesying that even in this time, God is with us and we have everything we need to survive if we look outside ourselves to our place within the body of Christ.” At the close of the hour-long webinar, participants were invited to share their prayer concerns online. After Johnson offered up a prayer, participants wrapped it up by praying the Lord’s Prayer together — virtually.

