



## Vitality Ministry Council

# **“Sharing Vitality” Grants Program** Grantee Progress Reports

June 2026 – Annual Meeting & Conference

# Introductory Statement from Vitality Ministry Council

Last year the Vitality Ministry Council launched a new opportunity to foster vital ministries within NACCC churches and communities, and to encourage collaboration across the NA when ministry might sometimes feel stuck or isolated. We had an amazing first cohort with a remarkable breadth of ministry ideas they used the grant to kick start, or to expand where they saw God leading into new opportunities. The same has proved to be true this year, with ideas that can inspire creativity in lots of contexts, and relatability to help churches feel like they could do something like one of these, too.

We are able to fund up to 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, and to anticipate sharing your experiences with others. This report is one of the main opportunities for this, along with a breakout session featuring grantees at Annual Meeting, and other features, and reports in NA newsletters and other communication.

It's been very exciting to see this program continue building momentum into a second year with a compelling new cohort of ministries. There are some projects with similarities to ideas from last year, but each with their own unique contextual applications. There are also completely new ideas beyond last year's we hope will also find colleagues and inspire new efforts. We're excited that this shows the potential in the grant to spark both inspiration and collaboration people realize they have connections. 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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# Congregational Church of the Chimes

## Sherman Oaks, CA – Kristina Jasiukonis

The Church Community Garden Project at Church of the Chimes was created with the goal of fostering community connection, intergenerational fellowship, sustainability, and wellness through a shared outdoor gathering space. The ultimate vision of the project is to create a welcoming and spiritually enriching environment where church members, youth, families, and neighbors can work alongside one another while growing food, building relationships, and caring for God's creation.

At this stage of the project, several raised garden beds have already been completed, and volunteers have assisted with planning, construction, and preparing the space for future planting. The project has already generated excitement within both the congregation and surrounding community, with individuals offering donations, ideas, and volunteer support.

Over the remainder of the year, we hope to continue expanding the garden beds, begin larger-scale planting efforts, establish ongoing volunteer gardening days, and create opportunities for educational and intergenerational programming connected to the garden. We hope the garden will continue evolving into a place of belonging, stewardship, fellowship, and service for the wider community.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” — Hebrews 10:24

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

The “why” behind this project came from a desire to create a ministry that extended beyond the walls of the church and into the daily lives of people within our community. We recognized that many people today are searching for belonging, purpose, connection, and opportunities to engage with others in meaningful ways. The garden became a vision for creating a shared space where people of all ages could gather, work together, and build relationships through hands-on service and stewardship.

This project also reflected our faith values surrounding care for creation and care for one another. Gardening naturally brings people together while encouraging patience, responsibility, nourishment, and growth — both physically and spiritually. We felt called to create a space where ministry could happen through conversation, teamwork, and shared experiences just as much as through formal programs.

The garden also provides an opportunity for younger generations to become involved in leadership, service, and environmental stewardship while learning alongside older generations within the church community.

“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” — Matthew 18:20

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 primary metrics we are using are not simply numerical, but relational and community-focused. While volunteer participation, garden expansion, and attendance are important indicators, we believe true vitality is reflected in the strength of relationships, sense of belonging, and increased engagement within the church and surrounding community.

Some of the signs of vitality we hope to see include:

- Increased participation from people of different generations
- New relationships forming among church members and neighbors
- Greater volunteer involvement and community ownership
- Opportunities for youth leadership and service
- People feeling welcomed, valued, and connected
- The church becoming more visible and engaged within the local community

We also hope to see the garden become a place where informal ministry naturally occurs — where conversations, mentorship, encouragement, and fellowship happen organically through shared work and time together. For our particular context, vitality means creating meaningful connection and fostering a spirit of collaboration, hospitality, stewardship, and shared purpose.

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up.” — 1 Thessalonians 5:11

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?

One of the most meaningful aspects of the garden project is its accessibility to people of many different ages, backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. Gardening offers opportunities for participation in a variety of ways, whether through building, planting, watering, organizing, donating materials, or simply spending time in the space.

The project creates a different type of entry point into church life for people who may not initially connect through traditional programs or worship services. The garden allows people to engage through shared work, creativity, conversation, and care for creation.

As the project has developed, our understanding of belonging has also evolved. Initially, we viewed belonging primarily as participation in the physical project itself. Over time, we realized belonging is often created through the relationships and shared experiences that emerge naturally while working together. Some of the most meaningful moments have come not from completing tasks, but from conversations, collaboration, encouragement, and seeing people take ownership of the vision together.

The project has reminded us that belonging is less about programs and more about creating spaces where people feel welcomed, valued, and connected to something larger than themselves.

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.” — Romans 15:7

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?

One adjustment we made during the course of this project involved a donated children’s playhouse that we had originally hoped to incorporate into the garden space. The vision behind the playhouse was to create an imaginative, nature-centered area where toddlers and young children could interact with the garden in creative ways, such as making “mud pies,” “leaf stew,” and engaging in sensory outdoor play connected to the natural environment.

We felt especially blessed that neighbors in the community wanted to generously donate their gently used playhouse to support the vision of the garden. Their kindness reflected the growing sense of community ownership and enthusiasm surrounding the project. Even before the garden is fully completed, this gesture reminded us that the project is already encouraging people beyond the church walls to contribute, participate, and invest in creating a welcoming space for children, families, and the broader community.

However, after further discussion and review, the church trustees determined that the playhouse created too great of a liability and safety risk for the garden area. While this was initially disappointing, it became an important reminder that vitality projects require flexibility, discernment, and patience. Not every good idea is necessarily the right fit for a particular space or season.

At the same time, this experience sparked new conversations about how we can intentionally make the garden welcoming and engaging for younger children and their families. Rather than focusing on a playhouse prop, we have begun considering portable props and interactive elements such as parent led gardening activities, child-friendly planting days, sensory stations with field guide books, and creative outdoor learning opportunities.

This adjustment reinforced the importance of balancing vision with practicality while continuing to move the project forward thoughtfully. We are learning that building momentum does not always mean moving quickly; sometimes it means adapting plans and allowing ideas to evolve naturally while remaining rooted in meeting the needs of each age group that will spend time in the Church Garden.

"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven."  
— Ecclesiastes 3:1

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

One of the most unexpected lessons from this project has been realizing how deeply people are longing for connection, purpose, and opportunities to contribute meaningfully to something larger than themselves. Even small acts — such as donating materials, helping build a garden bed, or simply offering encouragement — have created momentum and strengthened relationships within the community.

We have also learned that ministry often happens in ordinary moments. Some of the most meaningful parts of this project have not necessarily been the physical construction itself, but the conversations, teamwork, laughter, and relationships formed along the way.

This project has reminded us that leadership involves listening, adaptability, patience, and stewardship. It has also reinforced the importance of creating spaces where people of all ages and abilities feel welcomed, needed, and empowered to participate.

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” — Ephesians 4:2

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 would encourage other churches to begin with a clear sense of purpose while remaining flexible and open to how the project may evolve over time. It is important not to become discouraged by obstacles or delays, as meaningful community-building often develops gradually through relationships and consistency.

We would also encourage churches to prioritize people over perfection. Some of the greatest signs of vitality come not from polished outcomes, but from authentic participation, collaboration, and shared ownership within the community.

Starting small, listening carefully to the needs and gifts of the community, and creating opportunities for many different people to contribute can help build lasting momentum. We have learned that even simple ideas can become meaningful ministries when rooted in hospitality, stewardship, faith, and genuine care for others.

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” — Galatians 6:9

# First Congregational Church of Emporia

## KS – Cheryl Doty

The Baby Closet of Emporia, Kansas is a completely free resource serving families of young children in the counties of Lyon, Chase, Morris, Osage, Wabaunsee, Coffey and Greenwood. We offer a monthly shopping experience where each family may receive diapers for each child 5 years & under (as needed), wipes, and other items such as clothing, baby gear & equipment, toys, books, Bibles, shoes, blankets and essentials (hygiene and cleaning items) as inventory allows. Inventory is dependent upon donations brought in from the community. Diapers, wipes, essential items and Bibles are purchased monthly or as needed.



We are grateful for the support we have received from several local club organizations, several area churches, individual families, local retailers. Through past grants we have been able to purchase safety gates, essential items (hygiene and cleaning), and specific-sized clothing that was not being donated, in addition to a grant to purchase a washer/dryer here at our facility. We are a member of the Emporia Community Foundation, in which grants are available, and the Baby Closet has been selected to participate in the 2026 Match Day fundraising opportunity. We are grateful to First Congregational Church, who hosts and supports the Baby Closet. We are grateful to our communities, as they have embraced the concept of the Baby Closet and support it by bringing in their gently used items to recycle for other families.

The Baby Closet came to be when the women of the church were determined to provide a relevant ministry for our community. Almost a year of research and discussion centered around the mission of helping young families. Costs were rising causing young families to struggle. Emporia suffered several large company move-outs or closures. There was a definite need to help. Partnerships were formed with donors and supporters. Opportunities were found to get the word out about the Baby Closet resource. A group of about 15-20 people regularly volunteer their time weekly to help behind the scenes (sorting donations that come in, washing and hanging clothing, etc.), or to assist clients when the closet is open.

Our mission is to ensure children under the age of 5 years have the basic necessities so they may begin life positively. As you can imagine, diapers, wipes and essentials are our biggest expense, and prices continue to rise. We applied for the Vitality Grant to allow us to continue this mission. Our project includes purchase of \$1000 for essential items, \$1,000 for Bibles (Spanish and English), and because this is our 5th year responding to our communities, \$500 for a birthday party in August. Emporia has several beautiful parks, the one we've reserved has a playground and splash pad as well as a shelter house and grill. We'll invite the public to show our appreciation with an afternoon of food, fun, and fellowship.

Thank you NACCC, for this gift and the opportunities it brings to continue our mission of helping and supporting young families!

# First Congregational Church of Saugatuck

MI – Rev. Sarah Terlouw

The First Congregational Church of Saugatuck has purchased a set of Mevo (Logitech) cameras to enhance our online worship experience. By adding in several new camera angles it is our hope to provide a more engaging worship experience for our livestream worship community.

The cameras are now in use, we installed them following Easter worship on April 5th. The cameras seem to be flexible in their use, fairly user friendly and high quality! We are still navigating some “bugs” to the system (which are mostly just building issues). We got slowed down in our learning curve recently by a “surge” that came to the building during a storm which knocked out our modem and mesh wi-fi systems. We failed to have a live streamed service at all for two weeks in May! Frustrating... We hope to be back up and running with replaced equipment as of June 7th.

I will be following up with our regular online worshippers in July to get their perspective of if this camera investment has been helpful for their worship experience.

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

Our online worshippers were feeling distant and excluded. And in a time where online communities are growing in their validity and capacity, addressing this “distance” seemed achievable.

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?

Our metrics will be both qualitative and quantitative. We will be surveying our online worshippers later in the summer. They will have an opportunity to voice their experience and offer continued suggestions for adaptations. We stream to both YouTube and Facebook, which give viewership data. YouTube's data is a little more accurate. So we will see if online worship participation increases. Also, we feel that if people begin to comment on the worship videos, that also would be a metric for success.

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, while addressing access, is truly about belonging. Helping worshippers feel a part of and connected to something important. Belonging within a worshipping body, and belonging within a community that "sees" them and acknowledges their presence.

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 some technical challenges with the worship space. The cameras are trying to communicate over large distances, and we have had to step up our broadband capacities. We are introducing brand new technology to a building that it is it's 166th year of ministry. We continue to keep our knees bent and work through those challenges.

I'm also looking to adjust how the congregation begins it's worship service to accommodate for our online viewers... once we get all the kinks worked out. I'll begin asking them to comment and engage. And I hope to be able to pull a portion of the service out for a social media "trailer" to expand mid-week engagement.

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

The vision is great... but don't get ahead of yourself.

There have been practical challenges to navigate, and we haven't hit our stride yet.

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?

Nope, all is well! And we are feeling encouraged :)

# First Congregational Church of Wayne

MI – Mary Ann Ellis

Pilgrim Pals is a ministry at First Congregational Church of Wayne for adults with developmental disabilities, The goal of the grant is to provide social and learning experiences that would provide a meaningful social outlet and to integrate them more fully into the life of the congregation.

Since obtaining the grant we have had three projects:

**1. Blankets and sleeping mats for the homeless** – The Pals folded and cut plastic grocery bags into strips. Only one Pal is able to master the crocheting of the mats so most of those are being made by a couple of ladies in our church. This project culminated in a ham luncheon and fleece blanket tying party after church. Approximately 40 people attended. Although this was initially a grant project, Pals ended up making money due to the generous donations of the congregation to buy the fleece and a free will donation at the luncheon.

**2. Garden Party** – The church pulled out old shrubs to replace our garden area with a beautiful perennial garden that beautifies our church which sits in the town square. Pals made and served lunch after the planting was done. Some of our men did physical work in the garden and set up our patio overlooking the garden. The ladies helped prepare the lunch which included items we had made the night before. The gardeners enjoyed a picnic lunch on the patio overlooking the beautiful new garden which now attracts butterflies and hummingbirds daily to downtown Wayne.

**3. Pilgrim Praise Chorus and Music Therapy** – Several Pals joined the choir in spite of limited musical ability but with much music in their hearts. We hired a music therapist for four sessions. The goal was to increase both their confidence and ability. The Pals report that they loved the music class and want to resume in the fall. Our Music Director attended some sessions to gain insights and techniques to use with the chorus. At a recent potluck, she did a composing exercise to the tunes of “Happy Birthday” and “Amazing Grace”. She ended with singing the compositions including those of four of our Pals. Our music therapist then incorporated them into our session three weeks later. The therapist has submitted a detailed report of lessons and progress which is available upon request. On June 17th the Pilgrim Praise Chorus and the regular choir sang “He’s Got the Whole World”. At the front of the sanctuary, each Pal

was paired with a choir member. Each pair sang a verse and all joined in with the refrain. They sang confidently and kept the beat.

**4. Next Steps** – We have a fishing trip and picnic planned to a nearby trout farm which began as a request from a couple of our older men who have fond memories of fishing with their fathers. We are buying musical instruments of our own. We plan to continue Music Therapy classes in the fall. We are hoping to plan a joint event with the ARC which is a group which provides advocacy and activities for clients with developmental disabilities. We are asking the FCC Budget Committee to propose a line item for continued activities in 2027.

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

While attending the 2025 NACCC Annual Conference and hearing reports, I began to see an avenue to increase our presence in the church and community. Pals had definitely grown in the church but were still not fully integrated into the life of the church. What we are seeing and hope to continue to see is full inclusion into the church and the community it serves. We hope to see an increase in their confidence and abilities and for church members to get to know them as individuals with distinct personalities and abilities. We hope to see not only their growth and inclusion in church events but continued participation of members in their activities. We also hope to gain a few new members.

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?

I see increased participation by the Pilgrim Pals. One man is now an usher and says God has blessed him to be able to be an usher. An additional Pal has joined the chorus. Several members including a teenage couple have attended their movie and craft nights. The most beautiful things I see are conversations at all activities. I don't have to be a "mother hen" watching them at all times because they have made new friends. Yesterday, two members joined on a visitation to a church member in a nursing home

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 original plans have been altered slightly as we have found some reluctance from other groups to join us for group activities. This may be that we are a church group but we will continue to work on those ideas. As their new activities are successful, we hope to come up with ideas for new activities

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?

I have learned to let them fly. Once they knew about the grant, they have wanted me to read them the grant application and all of my reports. They even asked to write a Thank You note. *(Included below)*

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

The increased confidence in their interactions has more than met our expectations. They express their needs and I do not need to monitor everything. They attend events without me. I organize with their input, drive, shop etc. and then sit back and watch it happen.

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?

As a Special Education Program Specialist for almost 50 years, I have had lots of grant experience. Initially I thought that I should have more specific guidelines but that thought came from "government" experience. The thing I have learned is that vitality is not an exact measurable entity but more of a human experience that is not so readily measurable.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide inclusion and acceptance for these wonderful men and women.

Dear NACCC,

We appreciate the grant very much. We enjoyed the good music.

We hope we are safe on our fishing trip. We will have fun fishing.

The Garden Party was great! We worked hard and the food was great. We made baked beans, hot dogs and chocolate éclair dessert.

We made mats and blankets for the homeless.

We plan on more music therapy in the fall. We are buying our own instruments.

Love,  
The Pilgrim Pals.

# Onondaga Community Church

MI – Sue King & Donna French

Our project is “Pack a Backpack”, our first year was 2017. Our goal was to help local families with providing school supplies and a backpack. That year we were able to support 78 children across 3 school districts. Last year (2025) we supported 192 children across 13 school districts. We feel this is an outreach that God wants us to support and be a part of the community.

Preparation for the event is as follows: We purchase supplies and backpacks when they are on sale throughout the year. Our congregation supports the project with it being a mission of the month. We also do an annual garage sale at the church the 3rd weekend of July to raise money for this project. We accept donations for the garage sale from the congregation and community. The two days of the sale nothing is priced, we accept free will donations for all items. Then we create flyers and drop them off the last week of school hang them in local establishments, also put it on local Facebook pages. Then we reach out to 13 different schools in the area to get school supply lists for each grade. Next, we inventory our supplies and make more purchases to ensure we have a sufficient amount of what is on the lists that are provided to us.

Finally, the week before the event (1st Saturday of August) we start laying all of the backpacks and supplies out on different tables in our multi-purpose room. Then on Saturday morning we have all of our volunteers show up a half an hour early to get their instructions on what their duties are. We have two people registering the children, Last year we had 15 volunteers that were designated as shoppers. These congregation members are paired up with a child and provided the school supply list for school and grade for that specific child. The first take them to the backpack table so the child can pick out the backpack that they want. Then they take them around the room to the different tables getting the supplies that the teacher wants them to have.

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

I feel this is the right vitality effort for me because I grew up in a poor family and know how it feels to not have what you need to go to be successful at school.

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 that we are hoping to see is that in our community that the children in need have the school supplies, a backpack and this year with the grant we will provide each child with a \$25 gift card for shoe carnival to help their parents purchase them a pair of shoes.

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?

We had to manage the flow of children into the shopping area so it was controlled chaos. We added the garage sale three years ago to help support the project. We also added a rule that the children have to be present to get the supplies and a backpack.

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?

This is our 10th year and are excited to add the \$25 gift cards to Shoe Carnival to expand this project.

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

The most important thing we have learned is the amount of need that there is in our community. Also, the joy that we all get giving back to the community.

# Plymouth Congregational Church

Wichita, KS – Katie Robu

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 Dull Creative Society was started by Katie Robu in October of 2025. The idea came from Katie suggesting that her Grandma Jeanne should teach a sewing class to young people and quickly grew into a group of anywhere between 10 and 45 coming together once a month to learn a new craft or skill. The Dull Creatives Society has now hosted 9 meetups ranging from arts and crafts like crocheting, weaving, photography and sewing, to life skills like first aid, gardening, and changing a tire. We currently have lessons planned out from now until January 2027.

As faith and community leaders, we tend to speak a lot about “community” and “third spaces” (the spaces we spend time in between home and work) but we often expect these spaces to just exist without us having to do anything other than show up when it's convenient. In reality, these spaces are not born out of convenience. They don't just appear when you need them. They are sometimes difficult, often complicated, and incredibly beautiful if you put the work in to uphold them, and that's what we at The Dull Creatives Society are trying to do. We want to encourage our fellow community members to put in the work. The be present, to be villagers. We aim to remind people that their neighbors can and should be trusted and cared for. That no matter what you have going on in your life, you have a community that is open and affirming, that will be there, rain or shine.

Something we wanted to set as a hard rule was that the Dull Creatives stops for nothing because life stops for nothing. Thriving communities cannot exist if their presence in people's lives is spotty and unreliable. Every third Wednesday of the month We. Are. Here. Whether one person shows up or one hundred, we will be here. Gathering, creating, learning, and thriving. We encourage our members to do the same. To show up even when it's hard and you don't want to.

Currently, the money we have received from the sharing vitality grant has been used to continue offering this space and these classes for free by being able to provide the supplies needed for each meet-up. Craft supplies are often not

cheap and we did not want finances to discourage anyone from joining the group. At first, Karen and Katie were purchasing supplies with money out of their own pockets. This is obviously not sustainable so we set up a donation fund as well as applying for The Sharing Vitality Grant. With this grant, we were able to get some classes on our calendar that we otherwise would not have been able to afford.

Loneliness is an epidemic in this country. According to the American Psychological Association's Latest Stress in America Survey - "More than six in 10 U.S. adults reported feeling this way, while half or more adults said they felt isolated (54%), left out (50%) or lacking companionship (50%) often or some of the time." More than half of American's are experiencing loneliness, and it's only going to get worse with the current direction we're going when it comes to social media, ai, and contactless forms of commerce.

In a world of convenience driven purchasing, fast fashion, social media, contactless ordering, and AI, we believe that skills and arts like sewing, weaving, knitting, letter writing, etc. are more important than ever. The more convenient life gets, the lonelier people seem to become, and the more they yearn for a sense of community. The Dull Creatives Society is dedicated to bettering ourselves and our community through the inconvenience of doing it yourself.

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

We chose to apply for the sharing vitality grant because being located at Plymouth Congregational Church, we, are directly working with members of the Congregational Church in everything we do. The Sharing Vitality Grant also matched our goals and needs to a tee.

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?

For us, vitality is defined by creating a consistent space for any and all members of our community to find home. Our goal was to create a space where people of all ages could engage in being both educator and the educated. Everyone has something they're knowledgeable of, and by sharing some of that knowledge with others, we're able to build stronger communities. So far, we feel as if this goal is being reached by the amount of participants we've had in our meetups.

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?

Belonging is intergenerational, interracial, and accepting of all genders and sexualities. Belonging can be found in environments that promote discussion, encourage growth, and cultivate educational prosperity. Our idea of belonging has been rooted in these core beliefs since day one and will most likely stay that way.

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?

Originally the idea for the Dull Creatives was a simple craft group that quickly evolved into a full on skill share community. While crafting and fun is still at the forefront of what we are doing, we have also included numerous other life skill classes that would not have crossed our minds in the beginning.

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

The most important thing I have learned in this process is that to have a village, you need villagers. Getting people involved can be hard. But if you're consistent in your beliefs and ability to show up, your village will grow. I talk a lot about community and villages, but to actively work toward cultivating these concepts is a whole other beast. It can be discouraging at times when people don't show up, but it's important for you as a community leader to never stop showing up.

# Skowhegan Federated Church

ME – Deb Tanner

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 Sweet Dreams Project, in its eleventh year, provides Christmas packages for children from newborn through sixteen years of age. Last Christmas we put together 875 bags for children in our community. We expect to do at least that for Christmas 2026. Each bag contains 5-6 gifts. All bags contain a pair of pjs and a book. Toys, games, stuffed animals, pillowcases, hats, mittens, coats, crafts, blankets, quilts and/or toiletries may also be included. In January we started purchasing gifts for the 2026 Christmas season. We will continue to purchase pjs, books and everything else mentioned right through December. Many church members and community members have donated as well. A high school in our area had a "Fill the Gym Night" for Sweet Dreams. They raised over \$4500 for the cause! What a surprise! What a boost! People have brought in Christmas stockings, homemade quilts and pillowcases, coats, toys, games, books and pjs! The community support continues to amaze us.

We will send out our google form for sign ups in early October and will start packing Christmas gift bags by October 15th with an end date for 2026 of December 15th. December 15th will be our distribution day where families come to the church and pick up their packages.

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

I was raised in a Christian home where community service was important. My parents were active church members and members of the grange. They instilled community spirit into their children. I love helping others and this grassroots project seemed worthwhile to me. I am a teacher and I see the need on a daily basis. Some children in my class have no electricity and no running water. They shower at school and we wash their clothes for them. Poverty is overwhelming.

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 able to see the success of our efforts, in person, when a parent, grandmother or other type of guardian picks up their package(s) and shares how relieved they are to have these items. For some, they go as far to say that without this program, they would not have a Christmas. We are making a difference in the lives of families in our area. Money is tight for many families and with the current economic and political challenges we are seeing greater need each year. I am fearful that 2026 will be our toughest Christmas yet for people in central Maine and beyond.

Our church community and the community beyond supports this program! In March we were recognized by The Skowhegan Chamber of Commerce for our work in the community. We received the "Kirby Hight Community Impact Award". I hope more people learned about our outstanding program through that recognition.

Our program was also recognized by the State Legislature at the State House in Augusta in March.

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 will be our 11th year making Christmas for children in our community. We have many, many repeat families who rely on us. Families are appreciative of our efforts. People love to be a part of this program. They shop, they knit, they sew. They are always looking for ways to help us. We have a 90 year old church lady who is sewing 90 pillowcases for Christmas 2026. She belongs!

There is a group of ladies at the church who call themselves, "Sweet Seams". They sew pillowcases for the bags. They have a sense of belonging. People "belong" to the program by giving in many different ways. A week doesn't go by that someone doesn't donate something to Sweet Dreams. I find packages on my doorstep or packages at the church. Often I do not even know who they are from. It makes them "feel good" to "belong" to our program.

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 always adjusting and making our project better than the year before. We sit back and thoughtfully critique our plan and make adjustments as necessary.

Having parents fill out a google form with name, age, gender and size of pjs is so much easier than having all these families call the church and give the information to the already busy secretary. With the help of my techy daughter, we made the change three or four years ago.

We also have a little thrift shop that we have open on the day of our distribution where we put items that are used or items we do not want to put in our bags. Just about everything is \$1.

Two years ago we started making up Christmas stockings. The first year we made about 10. They were \$5 each and sold out in ten minutes. On distribution day this year, I arrived at the church at 6 am to set up and prepare for the day and there was a woman in her car waiting. She wanted stockings before we ran out. We made up twenty in 2025. They sold out in an hour. This year, we are planning to make up 40 stockings.

Last year we added a pillowcase to each bag.

We are always looking for ways to make things nicer for the children.

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

The need for such a program grows greater and greater every year. Even people who we think can afford gifts for their children are often struggling. Many grandparents use our program to be able to give presents to their grandchildren at Christmas.

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 need lots of energy, drive and community support. We could not do this without community support. You have to get yourself out there through Facebook posts etc. Social media is key these days!

This is the first time we have ever applied for a grant. The first time we have ever received money like this to boost our program.

We are now looking for other grants, but we have been blessed with the willingness of others to give of themselves for our cause. People love the program. This will be year 11. We have given away thousands of books, pjs, toys etc.

We would be happy to give guidance to another church who might want to start their own Sweet Dreams Project.

## 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 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 a mid-year progress report and final report as outlined by the VMC that may include 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 panel discussion at Annual Meeting that will discuss what other churches can learn from your experience for their own ministry context, and how you see the project sustaining. There may also be opportunities to present in webinars or similar forums.
- 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, 2026.** The Council may dialogue about refining the proposal for final approval, with award decisions being announced in December 2026.

# NACCC Vitality Ministry Council Opportunity for 2026-27

## 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 2027, 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 [lwright@naccc.org](mailto:lwright@naccc.org) by November 1, 2026.**

### “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, 2026.
- Awardees will receive notice of award in December 2026 to receive funding and begin projects in January 2027.
- 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.