

Observations from the 2019 Program Reports
Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative (CLMPI)
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- 1. Congregations launch their projects.** The hubs' major focus in the Initiative's second year was to work with congregations to design a project focused on calling. Hub teams created application processes, selection criteria, assembled review committees, and hosted their first events. Most hubs began to make grants, which included creating a grant application and the processes to distribute the funds; several created an intentional discernment process to help congregations imagine their project.

Preliminary data shows that people are interested in exploring what calling means, though many people report not having a sense of calling. The strongest connection to calling is related to gifts and service, though it is not deep and animating. An important discovery is that when congregations explore calling, they discover that it is "a powerful tool for adaptive change" and can create a new congregational culture.

Congregational projects are focused on a variety of themes such as discernment, leadership development, Christian practices, intergenerational dynamics, life transitions, social justice, the arts, lay leadership, and church restructuring. And, congregations are working in all areas of ministry: worship; education and formation, social outreach, pastoral care, retreats, small groups, bible studies, and a few are working intentionally to integrate calling across these ministries. For several hubs, the congregation's calling has emerged as a key theme. Some project directors noted that congregations can struggle to address questions of meaning and purpose in a culture that finds the church increasingly meaningless.

- 2. Hubs are taking a variety of approaches to calling, meaning, and purpose.** Several hubs have developed their projects around a clear and focused approach to exploring the theological and biblical foundations of calling. It was noted how important it is to invite congregations to slow down and take time to explore the "definitional dilemmas" of calling—both its promises and its challenges. As one person noted, "vocation is not one size fits all" and is deeply contextual.

Some hubs, with organizational commitments to social change, are focused on helping congregations discern their call to justice. The focus of the congregational projects is to move beyond the walls of the church out into the community where members are discerning how best to serve their neighbor and their projects focus on a wide range of social programs (e.g., school meal program, partnering with community agencies; food scarcity; community arts; economic revitalization; creation care; refugees and immigrants; racial reconciliation; and childcare).

3. **Hubs also vary in the way they approach innovation.** Many hubs are engaging innovation and design thinking as an effective pedagogical tool; some have used other pedagogies less focused on innovation. For a few, innovation has emerged as the primary theme of their work with congregations and they have developed a cohesive method for engaging congregations in doing design work. Hubs are utilizing a variety of approaches to innovation and are teaching congregations these methods. The work is tailored to churches and offers a fresh approach to thinking strategically about their ministries. Many hubs report that congregations are excited to learn these new tools and are creating training and curricula that they can use with other churches and programs.
4. **Program strategies' strengths and drawbacks are emerging.** Most hubs are working with one cohort over four years, but several are working with two or three cohorts. Having a single cohort has the advantage of building relationships over time, to slow down and take time to learn, reflect, and design carefully. The drawback is that the hub team is not able to redesign and further test their approach, which is a strength of having multiple cohorts. These grantees are taking what they learned from the first group and redesigning for the second cohort both. One disadvantage of multiple cohorts is the shorter time congregations work on a project with the hub and keeping track of a cohort when a second or third begins.

Another strategy relates to distance. Most of the hubs selected congregations in their local or regional area, some are working nationally, and one has shifted from a national to a local focus for their second cohort. One of the advantages of the local approach is the opportunity for more face-to-face meetings and contact. Another strength is the impact on a local community and the chance to build a network of congregations working on common issues. Overall, whether local or at distance, the key to a hub's success is the quality of the relationships they build with a congregational team. Those working at a distance must rely more on online platforms to accomplish this goal. In addition, most hubs have an ecumenical reach, but a few are focused on their denomination.

5. **Coaching has emerged as a significant strategy for working with congregations.** Hubs use different terms to describe experts who work directly with the congregations, ranging from coaches, to catechists (a more theological focus), and mentors. The goal is similar though the meaning of the terms varies. Coaches allow the hub teams to have a hands-on approach with the churches over time through making site visits and helping with project design and proposal writing. Coaches bring expertise and spend concentrated time with a congregation that the hub team might not be able to accomplish. Identifying, training, and matching coaches can be a challenge and getting the right fit is paramount. Another downside may be how effective coaches are at mediating between the hub team and the congregation.

6. **Hubs are learning how to make grants to congregations.** In 2019, hubs that are making grants to congregations created a grant application, a review process, and put together budget guidelines. A few hubs slowed the process because congregations were not ready and able. Hubs did not always anticipate what congregations might ask for, even with budget guidelines, and many have had to say “no” and adjust their criteria (e.g., micro-grants to other organizations; art installations; tuition). Several are dispersing funds one year at a time, dividing the grant funds across three years, thus building in accountability. Some organizations have struggled to set up mechanisms to make grants to congregations.
7. **A few congregations stall out.** Each hub has experienced the surprise and disappointment when a congregation either did not complete a project design or has been awarded a grant but are not making progress. When congregations are not successful, leadership is the central issue, either due to transitions on the congregation’s team (e.g., pastor or a staff member resigns) or the pastor is not invested in the project in the same way as a staff member or lay leader on the team. Some have discovered that churches eagerly seek after the money regardless of whether they are interested in the focus of this program—calling—and one hub has learned to shift their focus to building relationships first before introducing the grant process. The declining strength of churches in some areas also weaken their capacity to be innovative and engage in this program.
8. **Hub teams need to be flexible.** Perhaps it should not be a surprise to discover that congregations do not work at the same pace. Some hubs have had to cancel or delay gatherings or schedule additional ones. Hubs did not anticipate this added work but have learned to take a “holy pause and pivot” when necessary. In addition, hubs had to create flexible, rolling deadlines for congregations to complete the grant application but also to allow time for more discernment and learning. One noted that most congregations have not worked on a multi-year project with such intentional planning or delved into a theological theme like calling. This program, then, is making many new demands on congregations.
9. **Resources are being produced and research has begun.** Some hubs bring experience and expertise in creating resources. In a short period of time they are producing curricula, videos, and online resources, and many have created websites. Congregations are also producing resources such as Advent and Lenten series; prayers and hymns for worship; podcasts; and curricula. Two hubs have produced Spanish-language resources. Hubs are also utilizing resources and speakers from other hubs, either for input on program materials or for a speaker at an event.

The university-based hubs have strong research components led by faculty and are involving colleagues in congregational studies and sociology. The research includes baseline survey of congregations including perspectives on calling, listening and story-gathering, and piloting curricula. They also have opportunities for graduate students to work on the project

and for their courses to intersect with the congregations. One challenge is that hubs face administrative turn-over when students move on from the school. Important research on calling and innovation is also underway by other hubs.

10. **Hubs are building relationships to other organizations.** Hubs that are positioned as their organization's church-outreach department are building relationships not only with congregations but with denominational leaders, dioceses, and non-profit organizations. These relationships and partnerships strengthen the organization, such as a university or seminary, in its overall community relations.

Questions for ongoing discussion and evaluation in 2020

1. What are we learning about how congregations' work on calling, meaning, and purpose through these various approaches? What kinds of projects seem to have the most impact?
2. What can we learn about various pedagogical strategies related to innovation? What kinds of approaches are most compelling to congregations and why?
3. How are hubs effectively using online tools such as webinars and Zoom? What does not seem to work well?
4. What are we learning about our strategies as they relate to the number of cohorts, regional and national programs, a denominational or ecumenical focus, and coaching? What is most effective in each of these strategies for congregations? For the hub?
5. How can hubs build accountability around the congregations' projects and the funding? Is "grant" the right language for organizations to use with congregations? What are the pros and cons of "grant" language? What other language might be more helpful?
6. How can we better work with congregations that are stalled, or their leadership is not engaged in the project?
7. How much flexibility is the right amount and how much is too much for the hub to manage?
8. How are hubs impacting their host organization? How connected is the hub team to the organization—is it a close fit or a distant relative and what difference does that make? How are hub teams constructed? Who makes up the hub team—people inside the organization or outside and what difference does this make?

Baseline Data - TOTALS

Participant Data	2019	Total to Date**
Number of congregations who are members of the innovation hub	261	332
Number of members of congregations and other individuals from congregations involved in the innovation hub's activities	107,960	109,603
Number of faculty (if any) involved in innovation hub activities	64	87
Number of host organization staff involved in innovation hub activities	76	92

Activities Data		
Number of innovation hub gatherings involving congregations	119	490
Number of grants made to congregations	89.4	129.4
Number of innovative ministries/activities implemented by congregations to support Christian calling	255	327
Number of events conducted by the overall project	157	205
Number of congregations represented in all events	642	755