**Congregational Vitality Pathway**

**Service of Consecration**

The Service of Consecration (SOC) is a significant experience on the congregational vitality pathway. It marks the halfway point in the journey. This worship service is an invitation to re-dedicate ourselves and the church to Jesus, to whom all glory belongs.

During the SOC, the Holy Spirit continues to break up the soil and soften our hearts so that we are more receptive to what God wants to do in and through us. We are reminded that this is Christ’s church, not our church. We are mindful that the church does not have a mission; the mission has a church (D. Bloesh). We recognize that vitality is a journey, not a destination.

We acknowledge that God is moving us into a territory that we have never been before: New ways of thinking, new ways of mission, new ways of discipleship, new ways of relating, new discoveries and new obstacles to overcome. We fix our eyes on Jesus who is leading his church forward. In this new land, there are still battles to be fought, but we experience a new confidence as we move forward. The SOC re-purposes us for a new season of life and ministry. We have hope!

God has worked this way in the past. Just before the children of Israel crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the leaders tell the people, *“When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards between you and the ark…”* (Joshua 3:3-4)

The Ark of the Covenant is symbolic of God’s presence. They are to focus on his presence, not on their problems. God himself is going before the people, leading them into the fulfillment of his promise. The people are instructed to move out of their positions, which is a lesson in leaving the status quo behind. This sends a clear and unmistakable signal that a significant transition is taking place, a new day is about to dawn.

After forty years of wandering in the desert, after an entire generation of people has passed, a new future is unfolding before them. The primary issue is obedience and trust in the Living God, even though all the details are not yet mapped out.

Imagine the sense of anticipation the children of Israel experience as they consecrate themselves to the Lord the night before the crossing. What are the amazing things God will do if we put him at the helm? Our hearts belong to him. We are not turning back. We are moving forward, following God into the future. We let go of all that binds us and we open ourselves to everything that God has planned for us.

The people are readying themselves. They can no longer think as slaves. They must think as a unified people who are free, free to worship and follow the Living God. This preparation goes deeper than perfecting fighting skills or techniques; it is a matter of identity and heart.

Just hours before the great migration into the Promised Land, Joshua tells the people*,* ***"Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you****." (Joshua 3:5)* To consecrate means to set apart for God’s sacred use, to dedicate. In other words, we say “YES” to God and to whatever he wants to do. In confessing the sins of the past and the old life, we say “NO” to what has historically held us back as a church. We can no longer think and do things the way we have always done them. What got us here will not get us there. It is time to leave Egypt and the desert behind us. It is time to enter into the Promised Land. It is time for God to take Egypt out of our hearts. The call for consecration is one last opportunity to prepare for a new future.

The people do not have a detailed plan as of yet. Their instructions are simply to follow the LORD and to consecrate themselves. The SOC is about the heart, not a plan. It is a way of saying, “God, you drive; we give the helm over to you. This goes beyond what we can accomplish in our own human strength. We say ‘YES’ to everything that you have purposed in your heart to do. We confess our ‘NO’ regarding missed opportunities in the past; times when we preferred to go back to Egypt rather than to trust in you. We are no longer going back; we are moving forward into all that God has for us. Our dreams are bigger than our memories.”

The timing of the SOC is significant. For Israel, their SOC is on the night before they cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Much of the future is still unknown. Their instructions are to simply follow the presence of the LORD and to cross over into a whole new life.

The Jordan River is the demarcation line in the congregational vitality pathway. Now that we have experienced Veritas and EPIC…now that we have a vitality team and a relational covenant, now that a new language and culture is emerging…we are willing to keep moving forward on the pathway. We are willing to trust and follow God into the next part of the journey.

We let go of the old ways of doing things around here and we are open and receptive to whatever God wants to do. We are not turning back to Egypt; we are moving forward. We are learning to think like a healthy missional church and we want to continue in this process, so that the Gospel will burn more brightly and warmly. We want nothing less than revival and we know that every great movement of God is preceded by repentance. We cry out for anointing and healing. We fix our eyes and our hearts on Jesus. We proclaim Jesus as LORD over our hearts and over all creation.

Ideally, the SOC triggers PULSE. PULSE is an assessment that tests for the ten healthy missional markers. PULSE is an assessment, not a survey. A survey only measures people’s opinions. An assessment provides diagnostic interpretation and recommendations. The SOC ends with an invitation to take PULSE. The window for PULSE is two to three weeks, whatever works best for the congregation.

The SOC prepares the heart of the congregation for PULSE. PULSE is too potent without contrition of heart. Without the proper heart attitude, people could use PULSE as ammunition for their pet peeve causes. PULSE could do more harm than good if the people are not fully prepared in their hearts toward God. The culture needs to be receptive to all that God wants to say and do.   The church needs to learn the skill of having crucial, civil, compassionate and Christ-honoring conversations about the things that really matter. Connecting the SOC to PULSE sends an unmistakable message regarding this assessment: This is a deeply spiritual exercise, not some “business” gimmick. The SOC and PULSE go hand in hand.

The SOC also serves as a gatekeeper. Only those churches who have walked the pathway and are willing to keep moving forward, can take PULSE. We don't want churches to approach PULSE like it is "willy nilly" and without the SOC, this has more potential to happen.  With the right heart in place, the church will take PULSE more seriously. We do not want churches rushing into PULSE like churches rushed into other surveys or assessments. There is a pathway to walk, a language to develop, a culture to shape, a heart to soften, conversations to be had, ears to hear, sins to confess...all that and more is cultivated by walking the pathway before PULSE.

Here is a letter I wrote to one church regarding their Service of Consecration:

*As you gather today for your Service of Consecration, I commend you for faithfully walking the congregational vitality pathway. This is an important step you are taking today on your journey of becoming a healthy missional church. It represents one more opportunity to give yourselves completely to God and to his vision for the church. “Have thine own way Lord, have thine own way,” as the old hymn goes.*

*Every great movement of God is preceded by a time of brokenness, confession and consecration. To consecrate means “to set apart for God’s sacred use.” We are crying out for revival!*

*I invite you to come into God’s presence and pray, “Today, Father, you are inviting us into a deeper intimacy with you. Your loving arms are open wide. Help us Lord to come to you with a broken and contrite heart. We confess our sins, both individually and congregationally. By faith, we receive your forgiveness and cleansing through the person and work of Jesus. We surrender ourselves to you. We yield our will to your will. May your desires come to fruition in our lives, in our church and in our community. Help us to see this church the way you see this church. Break our hearts with the things that break your heart. May we experience the joy of obedience and the power of your healing touch. Help us to be unified as a church as we move forward into this next part of the pathway. May your Holy Spirit anoint us anew and afresh. We say “yes” to everything that is in your heart.” We say “no” to the old ways of doing things and the status quo of the present. In Jesus name, we dedicate ourselves and this church for your mission in the world.”*

*As God meets you during this holy and sacred moment, my hope is that “consecration” becomes a normal and natural part of your daily walk with Christ. Healthy missional churches say, “Jesus you are the head of this church. You drive. We will follow your Spirit wherever the Spirit leads. Transition us into your future”*

**NOTES:**

1. The larger the church, the more appropriate it is to have the SOC with just the leaders. In smaller churches, more people are “in the know” and will wholeheartedly participate in a Sunday morning SOC.
2. If a Sunday morning service is used for the SOC, be aware that there may be first time visitors. Take time to explain what you are doing. Invite them to participate in this part of our spiritual journey.
3. Be creative.
4. Refer to the sample templates and discern how best to craft your SOC in a way that honors God.
5. John Kotter writes that “preparing for the change is just as important as leading the change.” How can you prepare the congregation for the SOC?
6. Please contact the PULSE General Director **three to four months** before the SOC. This will help your church get in the queue for PULSE. Request the PULSE information packet.
7. Before churches can take PULSE, they must complete a verification form (indicating that they have indeed walked the pathway up to this point) and a dashboard (providing key statistical and biographical information about the church).
8. PULSE provides valuable assessment information and “game changing” recommendations for the church. This feedback flows into the creation and implementation of a strategic ministry plan.