

# Session One: Overview

## What is “congregational vitality”?

*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ — Matthew 25:34–46*



The quote from Matthew 25 is from the foundational parable of the Matthew 25 program. Those who meet the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked and the imprisoned are the ones welcomed by the king, who then recognizes them as his sheep.

Jesus’ call to care for the needy in specific ways is built into Western culture as the hallmark of how his followers are to act. “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” quoted so often in literature and everyday conversation, is usually applied to an individual’s kind deed. However, the “you” throughout the Scripture passage actually is plural. The feeding, welcoming, clothing and visiting were seen as collective acts. For Christians, this means the church, those “called out” (as the New Testament Greek word *ecclesia* means) to do Christ’s will.

The article “Building Congregational Vitality” begins with the question “What is congregational vitality?” with the answer being:

You might think that the vitality of a congregation or worshiping community is based on the number of members, the scope of programs, the size of financial gifts or some other statistics. Not so — at least not entirely. Rather, a community’s vitality is primarily its spiritual strength and its capacity for purposeful mission.

Congregational vitality is evident in a worshiping community when its structural systems, finances and discipleship practices are aligned in such a way that the community is actively engaged in the mission of God in their local community and the world, and they are powerfully focused on growing as disciples in the way of Jesus Christ. Faith comes alive when we boldly engage God’s mission and share the hope we have in Christ.

The church, because of its many failings, all too often is pictured in a bad light in film, and this goes back many decades to such films as the 1941 Oscar-winning “How Green Was My Valley.” A close-knit Welsh family of coal miners attend an independent congregation. Although led by a compassionate minister, it is the elders who hold power in the church, and they use it by publicly shaming and banning a young “fallen woman.” Our heroine, appalled at the cruel treatment of the young woman, walks out of the church in disgust. There have been so many such films that whenever scriptwriters want to display hypocrisy or self-righteousness, they make the character a clergyman or ultra-pious church member, as in “Elmer Gantry.” But that is far from the case in the five films examined here.



### “All Saints”

*Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 48 minutes.*

A dying Episcopal church about to close discovers a new mission and life when a group of Southeast Asian refugees start attending and ask for help. In this sequence that we might title “Errand Boy or Pastor?” we see how the members react to the newly appointed minister and how one member in particular challenges the mission his bishop has laid upon him.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

1. Compared to a Baptist pastor, how is an Episcopal priest constrained by church law? What about Presbyterian clergy?
2. Why do you think the bishop emphasized obedience so much? Because Michael was a new priest, or because of something in his past?
3. What do we see that supports the bishop’s decision to shut down the church? The officials of virtually every denomination must make decisions about whether or not to close a church. Among Baptists it is members of the congregation who have this authority; in the Episcopal Church, as we see in the film, it is the bishop and advisers; and in the Presbyterian Church, the presbytery. What do you think should be the criteria — size of the congregation; the economic resources of the congregation; other?
4. How do the members of the church feel about the new pastor? And Forrest?
5. What do you think should be the role(s) of a pastor? How do Michael’s orders conflict with these?

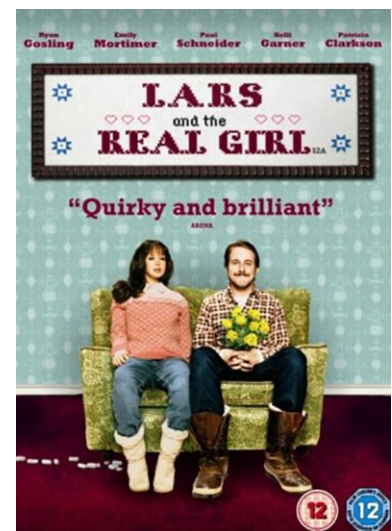
### “Lars and the Real Girl”

*Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour and 46 minutes.*

When a delusional young man fixates on a life-size anatomically correct female doll, his worried brother and sister-in-law take him to their doctor. She recommends that they cater to his fantasy that Bianca, as he names the doll, is a real person. Lars says that Bianca is visiting him after the two had met at a church conference. The doctor thinks Lars will work through his issues with support from his loved ones. Served by a pastor who emphasizes love in his sermons, the congregation goes along with Lars and his family. The church provides the perfect support system for the man, from his bringing Bianca in a wheelchair to worship, through their dating period and into the grieving period when Lars says she is stricken with a fatal disease.

#### For Reflection/Discussion

1. What do you think of Dr. Margo’s advice to Karin and Gus when they bring Lars to her? This conversation can be seen on the website of IMDB by clicking [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0805564/quotes/?ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_qu](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0805564/quotes/?ref_=tt_trv_qu) and scrolling down to the set that begins with “Have there been any changes in the family in the last year or so?”
2. How does Margo’s suggestion require others to focus upon him rather than themselves?
3. What is the reaction around town? Typical?
4. In the church circle, how is Mrs. Gruner crucial? How is she a channel of grace?
5. What do you think of Pastor Bock’s question? How does he practice what he preaches?



## “Encanto”

*Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 42 minutes.*

A Colombian family that has fled from urban violence has found refuge in a valley in the mountains, though at the sacrifice of the husband, Pedro Madrigal. His wife, Alma, with the help of a magic candle, has raised their three babies and their children in the valley that has become an “encanto,” a place of harm and joy. Each of the children and grandchildren when they were 5 years old received a miraculous gift used to benefit both the family and the village.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does Mirabel answer the children’s question about what gift she has received? Why does she not answer directly? How is this evasion pretty common?
2. List the names of the family members and their gifts. How helpful is it that she describes them more than once? See the list in the review if the group needs help. Which gift interests you the most?
3. What does Abuela Alma say is the way they should use their gifts? How is this important in keeping the gifted person grounded, preventing them from being vain or selfish?
4. In what ways do we see that the house itself is gift? How does Mirabel receive help as she prepares for the celebration?



## “The Long Walk Home”

*Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour and 35 minutes.*

This story of the groundbreaking Montgomery Bus Boycott does not focus upon its leader, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — nor even Rosa Parks, the woman whose refusal to give up her seat on a bus led to her arrest and the boycott. Instead, it deals with an ordinary African American family, the Cotters, and a white family, the Thompsons. Odessa Cotter works as the Thompsons’ cook and maid. Our clip is one of four that is set in the church that the Cotters attend, where, during the boycott, meetings are held several nights a week. It follows a sequence in which Theodore Cotter, in his early teens, protects his slightly older sister, Selma, from being raped by three white bullies after she foolishly gets on a bus so she can visit her boyfriend. The bus driver, upset over the commotion, kicks both Selma and the white bullies off his bus. Theodore has followed the bus route in a taxi, and he sees his sister in a park, surrounded by the menacing white teenagers. Accepting the Rev. Dr. King’s teaching of nonviolence, Theodore unclenches his fist when attacked by the bullies, taking a beating rather than fighting back. Back home that night, Odessa scolds her daughter, then the family goes to church. Theodore’s battered face attracts considerable attention.

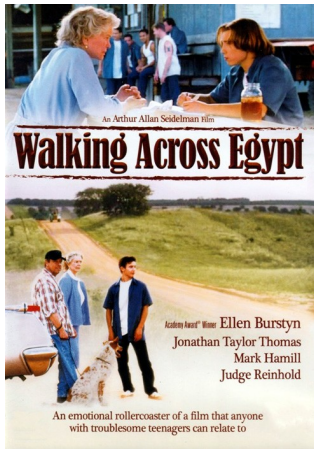
### For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does Theodore’s face look as his family takes their seats? What is the reaction of some members of the congregation?
2. As the leader speaks, what kind of support for the boycotters do we hear is being offered?
3. Besides glancing at Theodore’s face, what is the congregation engaged in? How is music important in the church, especially the Black church?



4. How does the Cotter family appear at the beginning of the scene? From their changing expressions, what effect does the music seem to be having on the Cotters?
5. How is music one of the great gifts the church has for us when we are down in the dumps or under great pressure? What lively song are the Cotters and company singing? What hymn or song do you especially like or turn to when in need?





## “Walking Across Egypt”

*Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour and 40 minutes.*

Mattie Rigsby, an active leader in her small-town church, feeds a stray dog, but refuses to adopt it because she claims she is too old. When the dogcatcher comes and she learns from him that his nephew is incarcerated at the local juvenile detention camp, she turns down his suggestion that she visit the boy. Again, her excuse is she's too old to become involved. That Sunday she is in church where the pastor reads the negative portion of the Parable of the Sheep and Goats. As the camera slowly zooms in upon her face, we can see by her changing expression her inner turmoil, leading to the conviction that she is one of the goats.

### For Reflection/Discussion

1. How does Mattie's facial expression change as the pastor reads the passage? Note how the camera moves in from its distance shot with her among the other worshipers to a medium shot and then a close-up. What effect does this have on the viewer?
2. What is apparently going on within Mattie? How does her past conduct compare with what Jesus demands? What do you think of the filmmaker deciding to use the negative rather than the positive part of the passage?
3. What is she impelled to do, and why?
4. What do you think of the boy's response to her act? What does this suggest about what we might expect from similar acts? Should we do good only when rewarded with gratitude, or simply because it is the right thing to do or because Jesus wants us to do so?
5. How does this scene disabuse us of false, sentimental views of the poor? And why is this important?

### In Conclusion

In the article distributed to participants, the author describes the seven marks of congregational vitality:

1. A commitment to forming disciples over every member's lifetime. This leads first to personal transformation, as people put on the heart of Christ, and then to social transformation, as people joyfully go forth into the community and tackle the issues facing today's culture.
2. Embracing the call to evangelism. We show forth the love of Christ by our actions and our lives even more than by our words. Our relationships are genuine and caring. People know we are Christians by our love.
3. An outward focus. Our church is not a place to escape from the world, but rather our gateway to our community where we may be the hands, feet, heart and mouth of Jesus Christ for people who are suffering or marginalized.
4. Empowering every member to discover their individual calling and the gifts God has given them so they can go forth and serve.
5. Spirit-inspired worship that challenges, teaches, transforms, convicts and energizes us so when we are sent out, we have experienced the wonder of God and are changed for the better from when we arrived.
6. Caring relationships modeled on God's love. We open our doors and hearts to all people, and we build relationships modeled on God's love, which leads to genuine reconciliation and peace.
7. Congregations with healthy systems. Our mission focuses are clear. There is fiscal responsibility and accountability. We have thoughtful decision-making structures. Our leaders and staff enjoy a sustainable balance of work/rest time.

