

Further Up and Further In Forum

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is the collect that I used to begin each of the Gatherings that were held over the last year – there were just shy of twenty gatherings and in total right about 200 hundred people attended. Which is a good sample size for our parish, though obviously not everyone attended. Each gathering began with the question, “What do I need to know as your new Rector?” No conversation was the same. It was lovely – from that one question we took a multitude of conversational journeys. Reminds me of the scallop shell of Saint James, many lines all leading to one point. Many conversations leading to one point, a deep love of Jesus Christ as expressed and experienced in this particular place.

There were several themes that recurred throughout the conversations, and I will recount them now, because I do not want to assume that you have each read my article in Tower & Table which is our new quarterly journal. Before I dive in, it is

worth acknowledging that I am grateful to my assistant Claude for helping me wade through and distill the pages and pages of notes from each Gathering.

Major Themes

1. **Service Structure and Attendance:** This is the single most recurring topic.

Nearly every gathering raised the imbalance between the 9:00 service (heavily attended, 110–200 people) and the 11:15 service (smaller, 75–90). Multiple groups floated combining the two later Sunday morning services into one or moving to two morning services plus a Sunday evening / afternoon option.

2. **Youth and Family Ministry:** Nearly universal enthusiasm about visible growth in young families and Sunday School (39 kids at the 9am service, 140 on the rolls), paired with real anxiety about *retention infrastructure*: no dedicated youth minister, clergy turnover (“revolving door”) cited repeatedly as a cause of disengaged teens, a shrinking acolyte program, and a perception that music / choir programs skew toward girls, leaving fewer entry points for boys once their voices change. Competing Sunday commitments (youth sports) were also named as eating into participation.

3. **Music Program:** Consistently named a top strength — “world class,” a major draw, foundational to worship. A timely question is how would a combined service affect our Senior and Youth Choirs, this requires careful and thoughtful planning.

4. **Outreach: *Breadth vs. Depth*:** A recurring critique, phrased almost identically across multiple gatherings (“miles wide and a few inches deep,” “at a 3-foot level,” “not into the nitty-gritty”) — the parish supports many outreach efforts but few with real hands-on depth. Suggestions included a food pantry, more organized responses to poverty/homelessness, better promotion of existing ministries, an East Side collaborative among nearby Episcopal parishes, and a collective investment fund for less-resourced parishes.
5. **Formation and Going “*Deeper*”:** Several groups explicitly asked for stronger, more theologically substantive formation opportunities. There was a desire to engage with current events in formation and in sermons (without being overtly political).
6. **Pastoral Care and Belonging:** Multiple gatherings raised gaps in care for older/homebound members (loss of Stephen’s Ministry, missed visits), and a related “belonging” theme: newcomers and returning members sometimes feel they have to “be perfect,” young adults without kids feel the culture is too family-centric, and empty-nesters want more engagement options.
7. **Communication and Institutional Memory:** A steady undercurrent: decisions (program cuts, service changes) are made without adequately explaining the “why,” ministries aren’t well promoted internally, and there’s uneven awareness of what’s even happening.

8. **Political and Theological Diversity:** Several groups explicitly discussed how the parish should (or shouldn't) address social/political issues from the pulpit. The Rector's consistent position: the Gospel challenges both left and right, and his job is to keep a politically diverse congregation together rather than take sides — though a few parishioners want more explicit engagement with social issues.

Several recurring questions were also asked...

- *Should the 9am and 11:15 services be combined, or should a Sunday evening service be added?*
- *What should happen to the acolyte program, and can it be rebuilt?*
- *Is the endowment being used wisely — could it fund a youth minister or more imaginative programming?*
- *Does our work around racial reconciliation and racial healing hold up through the lens of our Baptismal Covenant and the Social Gospel?*
- *How does St. Paul's engage with the world and modern politics?*
- *What is St. Paul's outreach actually accomplishing, and are efforts spread too thin?*
- *How does St. Paul's attract and retain young adults (30s–40s) and college-age members, especially those without children?*

There is some really good stuff in here. I will break and ask if you have thoughts or questions on anything that you have heard so far....

****Conversation****

My wife and I have been recently rewatching *The West Wing* and so I find myself turning to the question... “what’s next?” The first that I think we need to be honest about is our current size. In 1995 our membership was 2,500, in 2015 it was 1,507 people, last year it was 1,067. In 1995 our average Sunday attendance was 541, in 2015 it was 357, last year it was 263. Decline in numbers is not a new – however, there is no denying that our recent rate of clerical turnover has not helped. One of the things that I have heard repeatedly over the last year was a desire for stability. Will you be here as my kids grow up? Will you be here when I need someone to bury me? One of my questions to Mother Mo in the interview process and members of the Vestry asked this as well was, “will you plan on being here for a while?” As the Vestry and I moved through different hiring processes, our intention is to bring stability – we know that this has been extraordinarily hard.

Back to our size, we are smaller than we have been. I do not want to belabor the point, but if we do not react to our changing situation we will continue to grow smaller. And I do not have any interest in watching that happen. Throughout my ministry I have worked with the Vestries and Parishes that I have served to find paths to growth – and we have been successful. And one of the key aspects of that success is a commitment to be open in our conversations about our hopes and our struggles – and to lay everything on the table. For us as Episcopalians, as Anglicans,

there are core truths that we cannot surrender. Baptism and Eucharist are at the center of how we understand what it means to be Church. Music should be a priority. Being a community of inclusion and welcome matters. Formation for youth and adults must be solid and grounding for lives lived in a turbulent world. As Archbishop William Temple noted, “the church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of the world, rather than the benefit of her members”, in other words – we must be deeply committed to loving and serving our neighbors, actively engaged in the concerns of our community and the world.

So “what’s next?” and where do we go from here? To quote dear C.S. Lewis, “Come further up, come further in” – we are crying out to go *further up, and further in*. Thank you to our Formation Committee for the reminder of this beautiful image from the *Last Battle*. To quote from the book,

“It was the Unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling. He stamped his right fore-hoof on the ground and neighed, and then he cried: “I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Bree-heehee! Come further up, come further in!” He shook his mane and sprang forward into a great gallop — a Unicorn’s gallop, which, in our world, would have carried him out of sight in a few moments. But now a most strange thing

happened. Everyone else began to run, and they found, to their astonishment, that they could keep up with him: not only the Dogs and the humans but even fat little Puzzle and short-legged Poggin the Dwarf. The air flew in their faces as if they were driving fast in a car without a windscreen. The country flew past as if they were seeing it from the windows of an express train. Faster and faster they raced, but no one got hot or tired or out of breath”¹

In this scene the chronicles of Narnia are drawing to a close, the old Narnia is passing away, and the new Narnia is being revealed. We, Saint Paul’s, have an opportunity to go further up and further in. I am inviting us to enter a period of intentional discernment – a period of going further up and further in.

In our work in the community, it is my intention to work with the Vestry and members of the parish to commit to a signature mission project that meets identified needs in the community and energy and desire here in the parish. The aforementioned Formation Committee has created a series of forums for this fall that will take us deeper into our faith. Pastoral Care and Community are focuses of the search for a new priest – we need our priests to do the things priests should be doing, which means more active financial oversight of the parish by the Vestry and Finance Committee and our clergy spending more time with you. Our clergy are not executives; they are priests, pastors, preachers, and teachers. In December I will lead

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*,

an Advent quiet day here at the church and will do the same again in Lent. One of the things that I have asked Mo to work on during her first year is the revitalization of our acolyte program. I am a firm believer in multi-generational acolyte corps – with ages ranging from 5 to 85. Old and young serving in the liturgy together. Joyously repeating the words of the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said to me let us go into the house of the Lord.”

So that we can have some time for conversation I want to turn to what I suspect will be the biggest point of conversation. Between now and December, I am inviting us into an intentional period of discussion and discernment around the flow of our Sunday worship schedule. One of the realities of having a large worship space is that when attendance is slim, it can feel cold, unwelcoming, cavernous, and well, empty. At times it appears on our livestream that we are a dying congregation – and that just is not true. This morning we celebrated five baptisms – and it was incredible. Last week there was a combined attendance of two hundred and sixty-one at 9am and 11:15am. Which was great, but when spread out, the numbers were well below half of what we can hold.

The conversation I am inviting us into this fall is about the possibility of combining the 9am and 11:15 liturgies. As I have said in conversations with the staff and vestry, I am urging us to consider consolidating in order to grow, not just in numbers, but in many other ways as well. When we are able to have more people

consistently in the nave at once, the mood changes, the vibe changes. We are better when we are together and our current size allows us to comfortably come together in a “principal” liturgy – for lack of a better phrase. Yet, there are questions that we need to answer together:

- What are the right times? 8am and 10am. 8am and 10:30am. 7:45am and 10:15am.
- How do we support continued health and growth of our Choirs? Do we keep everything on the same trajectory, or do we experiment with altering schedules or ensembles?
- How do we do formation? Will we continue with a standalone formation hour, or will we consider a formation program that overlaps with the first part of the liturgy? Do we add formation opportunities during the week?
- Do we bring back the parish breakfast in some form, in order to create more opportunities for fellowship?
- Do we consider adding another liturgy, perhaps a different style of liturgy, at a different time on Sundays?
- How do we balance an exuberant, youthful church with those who may have difficulty hearing in a reverberant space?

These are just some of the many questions we need to ask ourselves as we consider these possibilities. Change can be scary. The last thing I want to do is add more stress to our system, but I believe that to remain static is to commit to a continued course of decline. There is health and strength and growth—and we have the opportunity change from a position of strength, rather than weakness. In the burial liturgy there is a beautiful phrase, “for to thy faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended.” For followers of Jesus, cycles of growth and death and change and rebirth are all natural – we are in a moment of change. I know that if have the courage to meet the challenge of this moment and we do it together, we will grow and thrive and flourish – the Spirit is alive and moving at Saint Paul’s; the question before us is will we follow where she is calling us?

****Conversation****

This coming week you will receive an email with an initial set of dates for opportunities to pray and speak about this more. It is my intention to hold these conversations with as many people as possible. There will be opportunities for Kirsten and I to meet with our young families, as well as time for Kevin, Kelsey, and I to meet with members of and parents of all of our choirs. If you just want to sit down with me and chat, we will find a time. The staff will continue to have conversations and explore possible models – the Vestry will be deeply engaged in this process. While, I do feel strongly enough to invite us into this period of

discernment, it is discernment—the outcome is not pre-determined. However, this is a set period of discernment, too often discernment is used as an excuse for inaction, you will get an update from me and the Vestry in December. So, there is so much good happening here, but God is calling us further up and further in. I am grateful to be with you on this journey, to be companions on the Way. I love Jesus, I love the Church, and I love Saint Paul's – 180 years ago 46 families started something new, and I cannot wait to see what the Spirit will do next with this place.

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.