



# in perspective

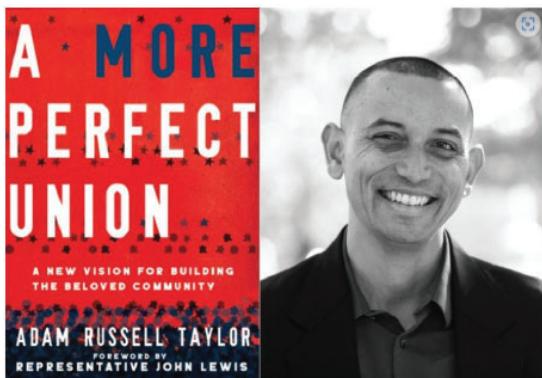
An in-depth look at a community issue important to St. John's

FEBRUARY 2024

## Who is St. John's and What Is Our Role in Becoming Beloved Community?

The vision of the Beloved Community is an old story, but it's also a new narrative with the potential to inspire and unite Americans across generational, geographic, racial, and religious divides. The Martin Luther King Jr. Center summarizes the basic idea of the Beloved Community as one in which people of different backgrounds recognize that our individual well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of others - including those we consider "the other." It is a society based on justice, equal opportunity, empathy, and love. Building on this foundation, I believe the Beloved Community requires constructing a society in which neither punishment nor privilege is tied to race, ethnicity, gender, identity or sexual orientation and where our diversity as a community and nation is celebrated and embraced as a source of strength rather than weakness. The Beloved Community taps into and is based upon religious values and mandates, such as the Golden Rule, and the biblical concept of shalom, as well as civic values, tied to the founding ideals of our nation and documents, such as the UN Declaration of Human rights.

This moral vision is broad enough to include disaffected white, working-class Americans, who feel left behind and have been swayed by a politics of fear and grievance, instead of politics of justice



and inclusion. The Beloved Community has arms wide and strong enough for all of America, including those known as Dreamers and others in immigrant communities, those from religious traditions considered outside the mainstream, and those who have been left out and left behind - from Midwestern towns and rural farms to Indigenous reservations and blighted cities or suburbs-red, blue, and everything in between.

... [t]he Beloved Community is built on a foundation that generates empathy and galvanizes a greater commitment to justice. It will involve communicating, a compelling, moral vision, and a persuasive,

practical case for why the multiracial democracy that we are increasingly becoming can generate greater belonging, shared thriving, and a common purpose for all Americans.

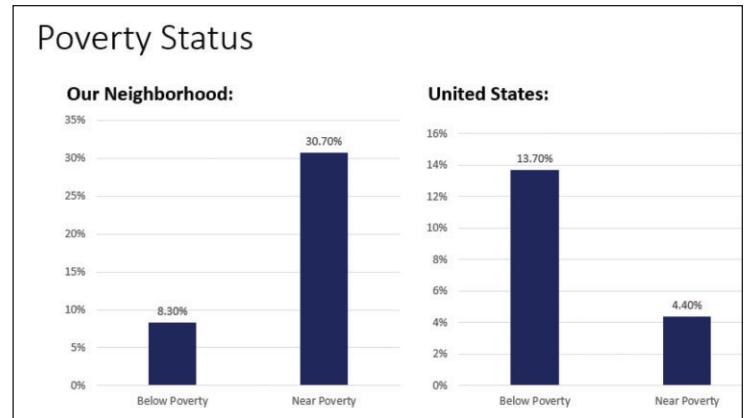
...Building the Beloved Community is never a simple task. If it were, we would not be in the national conflict and crisis we are in now. But I have the audacity to believe that, despite the founders' flaws and prejudices, they understood something deeply profound when they fashioned America's ideals and set us on a path of constant driving to achieve a more perfect union. Yes, the American project is worth redeeming and fighting for. And the imperative, to build the Beloved Community requires the involvement of all of us.

—Excerpts from *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community* by Adam Russell Taylor

## A Snapshot of St. John's and Our Immediate Community

In an adult forum last fall, St. John's parishioner Rev. John Talbird gave us a virtual tour of the neighborhood within a one-mile radius of St. John's and provided some astonishing (and some not so astonishing) statistics:

- We are largely white (75 percent), but have other neighbors.
- A little more than half are married, but there are many others.
- We have diverse family structures.
- We are well educated (with 86 percent having at least a bachelor's degree).
- More than half (53 percent) live in single family homes; 40 percent live in buildings with ten or more units. These homes are 60 percent owner-occupied and 40 percent renter-occupied. More than half (52 percent) cost between \$1,500 and \$2,499 per month to rent; 22 percent cost \$2,500 per month to rent and more. Only 17 percent cost between \$1,000 and \$1,499 to rent and only 9 percent cost less than \$1,000 per month.
- While we are a wealthy community (with 59 percent earning \$125,000 or more), not all share in this wealth—8.3 percent of us live below the Federal poverty line and 31 percent of us live near poverty. When the cost of living in this area is factored in, this number increases dramatically.



*These statistics were compiled by The Episcopal Church "Explore Your Neighborhood" Tool, available here; underlying data provided by the Association of Religion Data Archives and available here.*

As parishioners, based on the survey conducted in 2022, we are:

- We are 89 percent white.
- We are 74 percent married or partnered.
- There is some diversity in our family structures.
- More than 90 percent of us have at least a bachelor's degree, and almost 70 percent of us have graduate degrees.

## How Do We Use Our Many Blessings?

As chronicled in other places, including *Crossroads* and the *Do Justice News*, St. John's is very active. Hundreds of parishioners are working in the community and the impact of these ministries has been amazing. Over the last year alone:

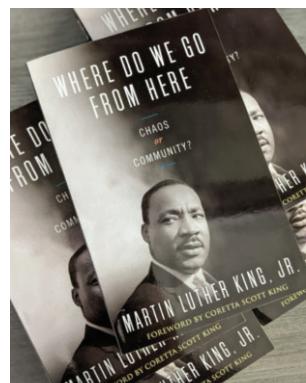
- We donated approximately 50 boxes of books to prisoners in more than 600 US prisons.
- We issued 17 calls for action through Action Alerts on topics ranging from calls to support legislation on gun safety, the Afghan Adjustment Act, prison reform legislation and Marriage Equality to requests for parishioner support of newly arrived migrants and refugees. We also continued to develop and nurture our relationships with those who govern our county, state and country and to lend our voices to the marginalized.
- We collected 150 bags of clothing and shoes, as well as 130 coats and numerous hats, scarfs and gloves.
- We sponsored the performance of 10 Seconds, a powerful new play about systemic racism, followed by a panel discussion.
- We cleaned up trash from the Anacostia Watershed.

- We furnished living spaces for families who recently arrived from the southern border.
- We advocated and held community forums on gun violence prevention.
- We advocated for peace and greater understanding in the Holy Land, where we also, among other things, funded the annual salary of a nurse at St. Luke's Hospital in the West Bank and provided other funding to the Al Ahli hospital in Gaza.
- We belong to the Faith Community Advisory Group of Montgomery County and partner regularly with neighboring Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, and other faith communities, and a variety of Christian denominations, in conducting food security, refugee, gun violence prevention and other justice and advocacy work.
- We provided meals to the Interfaith Works Women's Shelter and Shepherd's Table.
- We provided more than 37,000 pounds of food each month to more than 5000 individuals in more than 1500 households through Nourishing Bethesda.
- We ran a volunteer thrift store that raises substantial funds for local needs.
- We make direct donations of over \$25,000 to a diverse group of humanitarian organizations such as A Wider Circle, American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, Bethesda Cares, Bethesda Help, the Betty Ann Krahne Center, Episcopal Relief and Development, Housing Up, Interfaith Works, Lutheran Social Services, Outreach Haiti, Rozana: Health Diplomacy, Samaritan Ministry of Greater Washington and Seabury Resources for the Aging.
- We drafted a parish-wide statement, A Faith-Driven Response to the Legacy of Slavery and Racism, to guide our continuing work to fight racism and co-sponsored the Diocesan resolution on reparations, which called for the establishment of a committee to further identify historical wrongs and craft specific solutions towards reparations for those harms. We sponsored the Scotland Juneteenth Heritage Festival Interfaith and Social Action Pavilions and were deeply involved in shaping the festival's history components.
- We partnered with Chevy Chase United Methodist Church to welcome a family of five from Afghanistan.
- We partnered with the Westmoreland UCC Church to co-sponsor a family of six from Afghanistan.
- We work with an interfaith coalition of Montgomery County faith communities to encourage the County to establish greater public private partnership to welcome and resettle newcomers.
- We started the St. John's Pride Alliance, host a table annually at the Montgomery County Pride in the Plaza Festival, and are a key member of the MoCo interfaith LGBTQIA+ Organizing Group.
- We raised a total of \$36,000 for humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

Our website proclaims, "Everything we do at St. John's is done through the lens of building community—helping people to connect to people. Whether we worship, learn, grow, or serve, everything is meant to help us grow into a deeper community with God and with one another. We believe that building community is at the center of what it means to be a church." Our parish has worked with intention to give full expression to this commitment, advocating to our local, state and national government and addressing critical social justice issues in our community including food security, gun violence prevention, support for immigrants and refugees and racial justice and equity.

Like many, our parish witnessed the stark disparity and inequity laid bare in our community by the pandemic. We watched the growing wave of social protest and demand for justice



following the deaths of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and too many others. These events propelled our congregation to look more deeply into our actions regarding race, justice and equity. What does God want us to do in this moment? What does Beloved Community really look like?

We harkened back to a powerful sermon series given by our rector, the Rev. Dr. Sari Ateek, on the Pillars of Biblical Justice over several Sundays in 2018. These pillars include well-being, or shalom, for all; no one is innocent; no one is beyond redemption; uncompromising focus on the marginalized; peace is not possible without justice; and, all are called to do justice. We began an in-depth exploration of these pillars in an online

forum series in the fall of 2020. Together we started exploring in earnest what shalom for all looks like, what obstacles prevent well-being and how we might be part of the problem. This conversation, and the change that comes with it, is what Dr. King was seeking in his call for Beloved Community.



Since then we have been actively involved in The Episcopal Church's program Becoming Beloved Community, a set of interrelated commitments to grow a community of reconcilers, justice-makers and healers. This process includes taking stock and telling the truth, proclaiming the dream, repairing the breach and engaging the community.

The role of the church in the 21st century is changing quickly, especially after the pandemic and with the current state of the national discourse and its divisiveness and anger. The church has an opportunity to step up, refocus conversation, heal breaches and reassure America that we can get through this difficult period in our history. Our message of faith and action is restorative, healthy and needed. Our engagement in our community to address inequities is our most potent means of showing others the path of Jesus and our faith.

Moreover, churches that do not innovate and respond to the changing demographics and attitudes about organized religion will face an existential challenge over the next 25 years, with membership and funding shrinking to the point where many parishes will no longer be sustainable. Hundreds of Episcopal churches have already recently closed nationwide.

Our ministries at St. John's provide a viable answer to continue to attract new members, remain vital and contribute deeply. These ministries and our increased presence in our community offer our parishioners a choice among many different ways to volunteer and be God's hands and feet in the community, strengthening their faith and discipleship. These ministries also deeply engage non-parishioners and draw them into the fold. Volunteer service enables them to translate the desire to give back into action. In this space, doing significant work, whether writing letters or serving food, many volunteers become more open to joining St. John's.

Friends, we are growing. Repeatedly, new members say that they come to St. John's because of the service opportunities and the inspiration and fulfillment they experience serving their neighbors, working in community with others similarly inspired. Anecdotally, dozens of new members have come to St. John's via this pathway.

## An Invitation

As we celebrate our 150th Anniversary dedicated to Acknowledging Our Past and Embracing Our Future, we continue to focus on the community we serve, both internally and externally. A major effort has been the creation of Finding Common Ground, a series of Town Halls on important community issues, including food security, supporting our LGBTQIA+ community and becoming a more perfect union. This is a continuing conversation.



What more should we be doing with our many blessings? How can we expand the community of caring we have created to positively benefit many more lives? Please join the conversation.