

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
 Brunswick, Maine
 Mutual Study of Ministry
 July 2016

In the Spring of 2016, the Vestry of St. Paul's conducted a Mutual Study of Ministry. The Rev. Canon Michael Ambler, Canon to the Ordinary for the Diocese of Maine, facilitated. The process consisted of an initial meeting between the Rector, the Vestry, and the Facilitator, at which the Vestry identified several questions it wished to pose to representative members of the congregation. Vestry members then interviewed two or three members of the congregation each, and sent notes of their interviews to the Facilitator. The following report summarizes the results of the process. It is broken down as follows.

Part A represents Canon Ambler's impressions and overview of the interview summaries. What stood out? What picture of the congregation and its ministry emerged?

Part B consists of conclusions and recommendations for next steps, which will be the subject of a meeting between the Rector and Vestry and Canon Ambler in July, 2016.

Part A: Impressions and Overview

Goal 1: Bring in new families and young people; develop Family ministries, music, spiritual growth for parents, young adults and singles

The interviews, viewed as a group, suggested that this goal was very important to the congregation of St. Paul's (one respondent noted that it had been identified as a key ambition in the 2012 Parish Profile). The responses suggested that the steps the congregation has taken to achieve this goal are being successful and are well appreciated. One representative comment observed that St. Paul's is the best it's been in twenty years, in part because of the presence of young people.

In particular, there is a strong base of enthusiasm for the 9:30 service. One respondent who identified herself as a mother of young children appreciated the "laid back" feeling of the service.

Within the context of this general enthusiasm, there was a subset of responses that was concerned about limited interplay between the 9:30 service and other aspect of life at St. Paul's. One respondent who was identified as a high school student noted that the 9:30 service draws families, but that they tend not to stay afterwards for Sunday School—could that be, the respondent wondered, because there is no parallel offering for parents? At least one other response noted the same phenomenon, and suggested that it might be helpful if there were more picnics or other fun activities to help incorporate 9:30 service participants.

Several other responses made similar suggestions, for events like picnics, retreats, and other parish-wide gatherings apart from Sunday services. This same idea surfaced in several responses to Goal 3 (unity among different parts of the congregation).

In addition to the 9:30 service, the personal qualities of the Rector were identified by a number of responses as being particularly responsible for the growth in family and youth ministry. “Carolyn is a boost,” observed one, a sentiment shared in different words by several other responses.

There were several notes of caution raised, though in each case by only one or two respondents. One worried that Sunday could start to feel too busy, and not enough like a Sabbath (my words). One older respondent said that he couldn’t find his way around the First Sunday service, and no longer came; this service was addressed more in responses to Goal 3, below. Another older respondent said that older people needed written materials to be able to follow the liturgy, and to take home afterwards (I wasn’t entirely clear whether that had to do with the First Sunday service or was a general observation). One wondered whether the weekly schedule of four distinct services was too much. And one was concerned that J2A graduates didn’t continue in church.

And there were a handful of general suggestions. A couple of people suggested using music as a way to attract people. One wished for parents’ nights out, with non-parents providing child care. One expressed appreciation for the Thursday service and the community that gathers there, and wished for more use of lay eucharistic ministers.

Goal 2: Develop St. Paul’s role in the larger community and nourish outreach

This goal was also viewed as important by respondents, though it did not attract quite as much response as Goal 1. The Gathering Place was singled out by several responses as a “fantastic” (in the words of one response) ministry, and the Rev. Carroll’s work as exemplary. One of these responses noted that St. Paul’s outreach was Biblically rooted, “bringing Jesus to the world.” One response which praised the Gathering Place also expressed a worry that the congregation might be getting stretched too thin.

Other ministries that received accolades included Gourmet Meals, and the Window Dresser project.

One person who expressed happiness with St. Paul’s outreach also expressed surprise that people at St. John’s seemed unaware of St. Paul’s or its beliefs. A couple of responses suggested increasing work with young people, such as by offering a homework club; another suggested finding ways of serving Bowdoin students. Yet another suggested using music as a form of outreach, such as by offering a mothers-and-babies music program.

Goal 3: Create opportunities for members of all four congregations (including Thursday’s Eucharist) to relate with each other as a community of Christ

There were a large number of comments in favor of the First Sunday service, which was viewed as a helpful way of bringing the different Sunday congregations together. The high school student referred to above noted specifically that the “Festival” character of First Sundays gave

them a special place. One respondent noted that there was a trade-off between convenience and unity, and the balance seemed about right.

Not all respondents shared the enthusiasm for First Sundays. A couple noted that it is more successful at unifying the 8 and 10:30 congregations, and the 9:30 group is missing. That same observation was echoed by a parent who regularly attends the 9:30 service but does not come on First Sundays because it is not so family-friendly, and is too early. Others expressed skepticism generally about First Sundays.

Several responses echoed a theme first raised in response to Goal 1: that there be more parish-wide activities apart from Sunday services. Suggestions included retreats, picnics and other social activities, some of which used to be more common (such as Advent dinners and a fall retreat).

Goal 4: Minister with empathy and care to individual parishioners in need

Pastoral care can be the “third rail” of parish life—because errors or omissions can resonate so personally—and it was wonderful to see how pleased the respondents were to the quality of pastoral care at St. Paul’s. The Rector in particular, as well as the deacons and the Vestry, were identified as very attentive (one person noted a fear that Rector could be subject to burn-out, and wondered if St. Paul’s needed a curate). Several respondents reflected on personal experience of being well cared for.

There were several suggestions for how pastoral care could be extended further. They included a transportation ministry, to help older parishioners get to services and parish events; an end-of-life study, perhaps using Gawande’s *Being Mortal* as a text; a group for those struggling with depression; and a wish by a couple of respondents for a singles’ group.

Finally there were a couple of respondents who did not view proactive pastoral care as particularly important—they said, in slightly different ways, that they knew help was available if it was needed.

Other Comments, Suggestions and Observations

There were a number of comments that did not seem to fit specifically within any of the four Goals, but nonetheless are important to take note of.

Some had to do with education. One wished for a class on Islam, and particularly for help understanding the Sunni/Shia divide, as a way of helping to reduce fear by offering knowledge. Another was unsure of how education programs were chosen. The high schooler mentioned above thought programs should be smaller and fewer, such as discussion groups where ad hoc participation (rather than a commitment at the outset) would be ok.

Others had to do with the character of the congregation. One suggested coaching leaders of ministries on how to be inclusive and avoid clubbiness; another urged congregational self-awareness of how welcoming the congregation was to newcomers.

Other specific suggestions included easier music, a St. Francis Day Blessing of the Animals outside of the church and advertised through the Humane Society, and a chapel space.

Part B: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the Mutual Study of Ministry is to allow parish leaders to conduct a “structured check-in:” to ask representative members of the congregation to reflect on key aspects of congregational life. This is not a statistical survey; while there are times that I note a larger or smaller number of responses, this is more a listening exercise than a counting one. In particular, the fact that each Vestry member inevitably posed questions in different ways, that each parishioner answered in their own terms, that the Vestry interviewers recorded answers in different styles, all means that what we have here is a series of anecdote, not a scientific poll.

There is a great deal to hear from this listening exercise. Members of the parish seemed to give serious thought to the questions being posed, and have some important reflections to offer.

Before we get to those reflections, though, there are some things that are important from their absence. No matter what the questions, people usually find a way to say what’s on their minds, and particularly to raise unhappiness or dissatisfaction. That didn’t happen here: there were no sad or sour notes anywhere in these responses. There were plenty of suggestions, but the overall tenor of the responses was happy, engaged, and enthusiastic. Even those which expressed reservations about one thing or another—such as the First Sunday service—tended to do so from a position of supporting the underlying purposes being advanced.

It’s also important to note that clergy, and especially rectors, can serve as focal points for congregational energy and mood. The Diocese of Maine is blessed with good priests; but even so, it’s rare to read the responses to an MSM and not see a single word of criticism or anger directed toward the Rector. This was that rare MSM, and the leadership and congregation of St. Paul’s should be very aware of what an extraordinary thing that is—and what it says both about the Rector, and about the tenor of life in the congregation overall.

As the leadership thinks about goals, several things stand out from the responses.

First, there is enormous support for the work the congregation has done and continues to do to attract and serve families and children. There are some specific “side effects” of that work that are not universally popular, such as the First Sunday services, but even these are generally viewed with good humor.

Second, there are a number of questions about whether First Sundays as they are now celebrated are quite achieving their purpose. It seems that those who usually come to the 9:30 service are generally absent from the First Sunday services, and that First Sunday attendance is generally

lower than on other Sundays (that impression would be easy to verify or disprove). If that is the case, then it's possible that First Sundays have not yet achieved their unifying purpose... and in that case, it might be appropriate to ask whether there might be other ways, including adjustments to First Sundays, to come closer.

Third, there is a significant cluster of responses that wish for more parish-wide activities outside of Sunday morning services—most especially parish picnics in the summer and dinners in general, and also parish retreats. The desire here seems more for fellowship and company than for programming. Might there be a space at St. Paul's for a Ministry of Fun?

Fourth, the outreach and social ministries at St. Paul's are generally viewed as both important and appropriate. There is great support for what is being done; there is practically no mandate for doing more or differently. The Vestry might want to spend a little time with that, and ask itself—does this satisfaction mean that we're doing enough, or that we're asking of ourselves too little? This survey does not offer any help answering that question, but the question itself seems apt.

St. Paul's Mutual Study of Ministry
Addendum for Vestry: synopsis of raw responses

Goal 1: New People/Families/Young People

- Likes 9:30 +++++++
- Carolyn a boost ++
- Use musical programs to attract people +
- As mother of young children loves 9:30—laid back—would like more outdoor services or services in Great Hall b/c family friendly—can't attend evening programs
- Carolyn great at bringing young families—key goal of 2012 profile +
- Concern that 9:30 service participants not integrating into larger parish, even Life Together or Sunday School—maybe solve with more picnics, shared activities +
- Happy with St. Paul's—best in 20 years—especially great is presence of young people
- Not involved with youth; children are grown; supports youth ministry
- HS Student—notes that 9:30 draws families but they don't stay after for Sunday School... is it because there's no parallel opportunity for adults then?
- HS Student—HS groups get to know adults through 8 am coffee service; could Middle Schoolers have same opportunity?
- HS Student points out that there's a group of HS students of various denominations who meet Wednesday at Little Dog to discuss issues of faith
- Invite all to volunteer; be blunt
- Is four weekly Eucharists too much?
- Sunday worship important time to step out of everyday life
- Retreat would be helpful +
- Be good to have fun picnics offsite +++
- Sunday risks being too busy—fee like workday rather than Sabbath (my words)
- Likes music and new Music Director +
- Does not like 9 am service; can't find his way around it, no longer comes
- Likes the Thursday service; avoids the "big" services; wishes lay communion givers still used. Values the Thursday community
- Older people need written materials
- Supports 9 am services; values traditional liturgy at 10:30 (communion with those far away using same liturgy)
- Would enjoy parents' night out with childcare +
- Concern about J2A grads not continuing in church

Goal 2: Larger Community/Outreach

- Likes what's going on +
- Maybe expand work with young people and families +
- Chick Carroll's work with Gathering Place "fantastic"; St. Paul's outreach Biblically rooted, "bringing Jesus to the world"
- Happy with outreach; surprised people at St. John know nothing of St. Paul's ministry or beliefs
- HS Student—direct invitations to help would be good

- Outreach important +
- Window Dresser ministry is good; ditto Gourmet Meals. St Paul's can seem upscale—barrier to entry? Non-church activities hosted at St Paul's engage community.
- Applauds Gathering Place, but worried we're stretched too thin +
- Outreach important but respondent unable to do much +
- Helps financially; aware of Gathering Place
- Music as outreach: "Moms and Babies" music classes
- Should find way to serve students from Bowdoin
- Downtown church with clear mission

Goal 3: Relation among all four congregations

- 9 am Life Together service is helpful +++++
- Skeptical about Life Together service +
- Music as unifier; maybe hymn sings?
- As parent of young children likes idea of unity but skips Life Together b/c in church so not as family friendly, plus too early +
- Life Together brings 8/10:30 together and is great; 9:30 missing. +
- suggest picnics, retreats that whole parish can share +
- Would like more shared activities but not more Festival Sundays
- Appreciates demise of old cliques (military/Bowdoin/other)
- "Programmed" for early service but might try Thursday morning after retirement
- Balance of unity with convenience/options seems about right
- HS student: likes combined services 1st Sundays: chance to get to know people; treating as "Festival" gives these services a special place
- Music at 9:30 seems unconnected to Music Director; who is Randy?
- Misses the Weds night dinners—important fellowship. Seems like less social activity +
- Miss the fall retreat
- Misses the Advent dinners

Goal 4: Pastoral Care

- Idea: lay sermons on St. Paul's ministries to update parish
- Attention to end-of-life issues; use Being Mortal
- Carolyn very attentive. +
- Vestry very attentive
- Lots of older parishioners might attend if were transportation help available to services and other events
- Clergy pastoral care is good +
- Grateful for pastoral response to death of mother
- HS Student—Rector personally connected to each person/family

- Carolyn great; needs to beware of burnout. Need for curate?
- Not important to respondent; more concerned not to intrude
- Visits important; need not be only clergy—lay visits as well
- Would like singles group +
- Would like group for people struggling with depression
- Home visits for newcomers important-have lost potential new members b/c were hoping for visits that never materialized
- Communion for shut-ins important

Other

- Would like class on Islam, including Sunni/Shia divide: knowledge to help address fear
- Not much contact with other parishioners but everyone seems happy
- HS Student—suggests programs be smaller and fewer; discussion groups where ad hoc attendance is ok
- Music is too demanding
- Way education programs chosen is a mystery
- Suggestion: survey members to see what gifts they want to share
- Fellowship is most important
- Should check to see if we're being welcoming
- Could coach ministry leaders on inclusion, avoid clubbiness
- Would like St. Francis Day blessing of Animals—outdoors, in afternoon, publicized through Humane Society etc.
- Need a chapel space
- Parishioner reflected on prior experience of Cathedral Counseling in Chicago—no specific suggestion, but it was what first attracted her to the Church