

ST. ALBAN'S PARISH VITALITY ASSESSMENT

As part of preparing to call a new rector to succeed Geoffrey Hoare, the parish engaged in a self-examination under guidelines prescribed by the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. The vestry structured this review along the lines of seven “Vital Signs of Parish Health” delineated by the diocese.

In completing the review, the vestry focused both on strengths and areas of desired growth for each of the “Vital Signs”. We drew upon available statistical data and held fourteen focus groups (ten in person and four via Zoom). We invited parish-wide participation in these sessions through a series of announcements published in *This Week at St. Alban's*, reprinted in Sunday bulletins, and repeated orally during Sunday services that were conducted in person but also live-streamed. Nine of the sessions drew parishioners at large, while additional sessions were held for youth, choristers, newcomers who recently completed the Enquirer's Class, participants in our Spanish services and Vestry members. Approximately 110 persons took part in these discussions and another 15 parishioners responded to the written survey. The Vestry acknowledges with gratitude volunteers in the WeCare network who reached out to offer the survey opportunity to parishioners who would otherwise have been unable to participate.

The results of these inquiries are summarized below under several headings. Each heading corresponds to one of the “Vital Signs”. Strikingly evident throughout the exercise has been the love the participants feel for St. Alban's and the mutual commitment and affection that exist among so many of our parishioners. We are indeed a vital parish!

To describe our parish health we must first tell the story of who we are. St. Alban's was founded in 1854 as a free church – one that did not charge pew rent. Over the course of 100 years it founded several mission churches in the area. Our location on the close of the National Cathedral, next to one of the busiest intersections in the nation's capital, places us uniquely at the crossroads linking sacred and civic life. The narrative we share below is one that is told with a foreground of crucial local, national and global needs and a background of a new way of living that emerged from the pandemic. St. Alban's leadership and lay community together recognize a call to be challenged as a church, to grow inside and outside our walls as we continue to serve God and our neighbors through mission and outreach. Our budget commitment to Christian social ministries is unmatched by any in the diocese as is our significant endowed funding for formation. Our history, location, funding, and proximity to the convergence of national and global needs position us well as a parish trying to respond to the Spirit in a volatile world and an evolving Episcopal Church.

COMPELLING MISSION & VISION

“We welcome the faithful, the seeker, and the doubter for God’s embrace is wide and God’s good news is for all. Saint Alban’s mission is to nourish an inclusive, diverse Christian community, transforming lives by doing God’s work inside and outside our walls.”

Although promulgated long ago, these words still describe a present reality and shared aspirations for the future: Our parish community directs our energies inward through worship and Christian formation and outward through service and generosity, striving to live out the Gospel in relationship with others. St. Alban’s aspires to foster the love of God and our neighbors, helping those who come through our doors to seek and respond to the Spirit moving among us.

Challenging preaching and a distinguished musical culture mark our worship. We maintain strong formation programs for children, youth, and adults. We foster friendships within the parish through small discussion groups, and a network of volunteers offer support to congregants who are experiencing loss or ill health. Responding also to the needs of the broader world, we offer many avenues for service, such as hands-on work in feeding ministries, staffing a thrift shop now in its seventh decade, and participating in grant-making functions that support local charities as well as two schools overseas.

Considering the demographics of our region and recognizing that God shows no partiality, we have set a goal of becoming “one parish worshipping in two languages”. We currently hold a Spanish eucharist every Sunday and occasional bilingual services in addition to our three English language services and are seeking more ways to prosper our small Latino congregation and integrate our English-speaking and *hispanohablante* communities. We are in the early stages of what may prove to be a transformative evolution in the composition and customs of our parish.

Covid-19 has posed formidable challenges, but we have responded nimbly and effectively, to the point where our worship services are drawing attendance in person and via live-streaming that approximates pre-pandemic participation. Looking ahead, we hope to reinvigorate our mission, communicate it more effectively within our church and in surrounding diverse neighborhoods, increase the breadth and inclusivity of our community, and enhance the strategic coherence of our programs.

CLEAR PATH OF DISCIPLESHIP

As a parish, our commitment to “welcome the faithful, the seeker and the doubter” means that our “paths” are not one-size fits all. We provide a variety of means of deepening faith with on-ramps for both newcomers and longtime parishioners. We believe that asking hard questions and resisting easy answers is part of what it means to be faithful. We embrace the truths that come to us from science, the arts, and our daily experience, and seek to use that

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learning to help us grow in Christ. St. Alban's thrives from its Intellectual strength, and our members delve avidly into programs grappling with scripture, theology, and issues surrounding the place of religion and faith in the contemporary world.

Our path of Christian formation proceeds from an introductory Enquirer's class to a year-long Bible Study (The Path) and small discussion groups. These on-ramps are used both by newcomers and by others who want to refresh or reenergize their formation. St. Alban's Latino parishioners engage in Enquirer's classes and Bible Study in their native language. We nurture the spiritual lives of our youngest parishioners through Godly Play in Sunday school, led by a priest who is a national leader in this mode of Christian pedagogy. For youth we offer Rite 13, J2A, and Senior Youth formation classes. The pandemic has had a particularly negative impact on participation in programs for children and youth formation. Reenergizing these programs is a high priority as we move ahead.

Beyond the newcomer path, a variety of regular and timely offerings provide opportunities to deepen faith and reflect on modern challenges. These include Bible Study, Sunday Adult Forums, covenant groups such as Way of Life and Men's Spirituality, and Education for Ministry (EFM). We offer "Sacred Ground" dialogue circles providing space for transformational study and conversation about race.

Although some groups suspended meetings during the pandemic, others shifted meetings to the internet, and participating parishioners appreciated this means of staying involved in study and fellowship. St. Alban's presented via the internet a series of speakers on issues of racial justice and a seminar conducted both in-person and virtually with renowned Roman Catholic theologian James Alison responding to the challenge of "Choosing Judgment or Joy: Helping People of Faith Move from Anger to Love". In June we hosted a virtual three-part discussion series with certain Muslim, Jewish, and Christian speakers responding to the question: What is life on the ground in the Holy Land like for you personally and politically? These programs drew large numbers of parishioners as well as visitors from the surrounding community.

Despite the strength and richness of these offerings, there remain important opportunities for growth. Beyond reenergizing existing programs for children and youth, finding new avenues for engagement with Rising Generations will be critical for our future. We should also seek to improve access to offerings for parishioners who cannot commit to weekly or daytime offerings and for those who travel from the Virginia and Maryland suburbs. There is a palpable appetite for small group study and discussion, including support in discerning how to live a Christian life outside the walls of the church. The pandemic has taught us that employing multiple means of communication and providing opportunities online as well as in person are essential to ensuring that parishioners are aware of the on-ramps and can find a path that works for them.

St. Alban's enjoys notable advantages in the area of Christian formation: clergy with special talents for teaching the young, endowed funds earmarked for the study of

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contemporary theology and for spiritual growth, a tradition of vigorous youth programs and, not least, location on the Cathedral close in the nation's capital. We can realistically aspire to be a leading parish in the areas of Christian education and formation.

FAITHFUL FINANCIAL PRACTICES

The current financial condition of St. Alban's is sound following years of careful and conservative management. The endowment stands at over \$5 million and we maintain an appropriate amount of cash reserves. Over the last 5 years pledges and plate revenue have covered about 75% of the operating budget, with modest and sustainable draws from the endowment making up the rest. The budget for this year contemplates expenditures of \$2 million and inflows in the same amount. While maintaining annual giving, the parish recently completed a capital campaign and raised over \$2 million for much-needed HVAC upgrades.

The parish finances are managed by the rector, the director of finance, and the treasurer. A finance committee, chaired by the treasurer, provides oversight, holds regular meetings and communicates frequently with the vestry and parish. A conservative and balanced operating budget is constructed at the start of each year. The treasurer is a member of the executive committee, which meets weekly. The finance team ensures that the budget includes sufficient support for the key components of the parish mission. An outside audit firm examines and signs off on the parish accounts each year.

Our clergy teach the practice of generosity, along with worship and service, as a core spiritual practice. A key challenge is boosting the number of pledging units, which have been slowly declining over the last decade. Modest progress in reversing the trend was evident before the onset of the pandemic. Fortunately, the amount pledged by each unit has been increasing and pledge fulfillment is high so that the total pledge revenue has been stable.

INSPIRING & CAPABLE LEADERSHIP

St. Alban's has a strong clerical team and a committed group of lay leaders. Clergy work together in a healthy, collaborative and effective manner, aiding and learning from each other. Associate rectors place a high value on this team approach. The current rector has a clear vision for the parish and excellent management and communication skills. Our parishioners appreciate strong "people skills" as an essential characteristic of effective church leaders.

Many parishioners share in the work that makes St. Alban's run. About 14 percent of regular attendees have assumed positions in lay leadership and about 15 percent take part in faith-based formation. Most -- about 85 percent -- participate regularly in one or more parish ministries.

The current rector has placed emphasis on mentoring staff and on effective delegation. Assistant clergy and lay staff members undergo annual performance reviews. With the support

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of the parish, all clergy seek out programs, associations and experiences outside our walls for professional development and spiritual growth and are accorded periodic sabbaticals.

Programs for training lay leaders have been interrupted because of the pandemic and will need to restart. The most urgent priority is to enlist additional adult leaders for youth ministries to aid clergy in supporting this vulnerable cohort, made more so by the pandemic. Training is needed to instill in more parishioners the confidence and willingness to volunteer in these and other ministries. Another priority is to encourage a more diverse group of parishioners, including participants in the Spanish services, to assume lay leadership roles.

WELCOMING & CONNECTING MINISTRIES

Extending hospitality to newcomers and guests is a priority for the St. Alban's community. Newcomers and long-time parishioners alike stress that St. Alban's does, indeed, welcome "the faithful, the seeker, the doubter" and all who enter. The welcoming outreach of the current rector is a definite strength. Newcomers are added to the parish database upon confirming interest, currently at the rate of 2-3/month, many of whom are young adults from the neighborhood. We are particularly adept at welcoming children and their families through Children's Chapel and the Sunday School. This is an important aspect of community building as this population is expected to grow significantly within the neighborhood (1-mile radius) over the coming decade.

Our clergy have made a practice of contacting newcomers by telephone very promptly after their arrival, which has proven to be a very effective way of initiating relationships. Clergy and lay greeters connect newcomers to parishioners with similar interests and alert them to opportunities for Christian formation and lay ministries. These efforts, as well as popular social gatherings between services, parish picnics, and potluck dinners in parishioners' homes, have dwindled during the pandemic but are now reemerging. Areas identified for growth include outreach and welcoming activities to attract young adults from diverse backgrounds and development of new activities to sustain connection for young adults and families with children. Sustained connections could be enhanced with more lay volunteers and better communication about existing opportunities to participate in lay ministries and outreach.

Small affinity groups provide regular connection for adults with shared interests. Parish Life volunteers led by a Vestry member organize fellowship events throughout the year, a practice that is revitalizing. The WeCare network of 50 volunteers offers connection for those who are ill or homebound through phone calls, rides to church, and meals. Our trained Stephen Ministry volunteers provide confidential pastoral care to parishioners experiencing difficult life changes. While Spanish-speaking members of San Albano gather regularly after worship, we hope to initiate new gatherings to bring Spanish- and English-speaking members together.

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UPLIFTING & INVITING WORSHIP

Liturgical worship and music are central to St. Alban's and a source of enrichment and transformation at the heart of what we do. We believe that God is present to us when we celebrate Communion each Sunday with bread and wine, and so we gather at the altar and try to be present to God. Everyone is welcome to receive Communion; we believe it is how God feeds us so that we can grow in love. We have 4 services in the non-summer months: 8:00am (quiet, contemplative, Rite I), 9:00am (family friendly, Rite II), 11:15am English service (Rite I and Rite II, depending on the church seasons), and 11:15 Spanish service. Children's Chapel runs in parallel at 9:00am until children are integrated into the big church at the Peace. During the summer our 9:00am and 11:15am become one 10:00am service.

Our liturgy is welcoming, beautiful, and at times innovative while preserving core tradition. Our mode of worship is best described as "broad" -- somewhere in the middle between low church and high -- and we cultivate a sense of joy and a certain playfulness in our services. Members of all ages are involved as acolytes, eucharistic ministers, lay readers, ushers, and choir members as integral parts of our services. Our Altar Guild and Flower Guild of lay volunteers are essential to the preparation of the altar for worship. Exceptional music is one of our great traditions and a source of pride and inspiration. Central to our worship, the St Alban's music program includes a Children's choir and Senior choir, the latter of which includes professional as well as parishioner singers. There is appreciation for how our clergy bring different styles to preaching sermons that are characterized by depth and thoughtfulness and incorporate both hermeneutic and personal aspects.

The rapid and effective transition to virtual worship was made possible by the commitment and creativity of clergy and staff, as well as the dedication and adaptability of our parishioners. With the hiring of a communications director, we continue to live-stream our 9am service and our Spanish services, which has attracted new parishioners while maintaining connections to some former congregants who have moved away.

We are not complacent. The state of the world and the transitions in our lives demand faithful pursuit of our mission to nourish the life of the Spirit in an inclusive Christian community. An increase in ethnically diverse and young adult newcomers calls us to enrich our liturgy with inclusive language and to broaden our musical repertoire while retaining the traditions at our core. Many of our youth have expressed feeling disconnected from worship, in part because they have had few opportunities to participate during the pandemic. Enlisting their energies in worship is an important goal.

BLESSING OUR COMMUNITY

Parishioners value our many and varied commitments to local and global outreach as important experiences of doing God's work in the world, work that connects them with others from different backgrounds and builds community. Current local outreach activities include feeding ministries (Grate Patrol, Christ House, Harriet Tubman School backpack program, holiday dinners, lunch program for seniors in partnership with Iona Senior Services), health and wellness services in partnership with Iona and La Clinica Del Pueblo, and emergency responses such as clothing drives. Regular Mustard Seed collections contribute financial relief in response to local, national and global catastrophes. Our global outreach provides significant financial support to two schools, one in South Sudan and one in Jordan. We also provide space rent-free to Twelve Step groups.

St. Alban's Opportunity Shop channels clothing, housewares, and books donated by parishioners into the community. Before the pandemic restrictions, the Op Shop contributed over \$200,000/year to local feeding and housing organizations through a competitive grant program.

Despite the strength of these programs, there are significant opportunities for growth, including increasing outreach opportunities for children, expanding our witness in areas of racial/social justice, and identifying new opportunities consistent with our aspiration to be "one parish in two languages". Shortly before COVID restrictions closed our buildings, the vestry agreed that St. Alban's outward-facing work should be extended to our neighborhood, including schools on the Close and American University, and to people, of varied socio-economic groups who come to church buildings regularly for senior lunches, Twelve Step groups and the Op Shop.