

ST. JAMES PARISH FARMINGTON, CT

REPORT OF THE *RENEWALWORKS* TEAM

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FORWARD

"...they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer...all the believers were together and had everything in common...and gave to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Acts 2:42-47

In 2016, St. James' vestry began some conversations around "where do we go from here"? We were in a good position as a parish: stable, growing younger, and no serious challenges (or so we perceived) within the parish community. We talked for many months about whether it would be good to hire a professional consultant to help us explore where we might adjust, grow, and expend energy in the coming years.

We also invited Bart Geissinger, Executive Director of Camp Washington, and a member of Trinity Episcopal Church in Newtown, CT, to speak to the vestry about Trinity's recent process with a professional consultant. We ultimately concluded that we were not ready for specific strategic planning or visioning, and needed something smaller in scale to focus our life together a little differently.

In the fall of 2017, three parishioners and I attended a day-long *RenewalWorks* workshop in New Canaan, CT with *RenewalWorks* Executive Director, Fr, Jay Sidebotham. We all really liked the focus on spiritual vitality and spiritual growth, rather than a focus primarily on marketing and numerical growth.

After further conversation, the vestry decided that the *RenewalWorks* program might be what we were most drawn to: a good, intentional look, without a lot of pressure, at the spiritual life and vibrancy of St. James and its members.

And so we began the *RenewalWorks* process in February 2018, with parishioners responding to a Spiritual Life Inventory. What follows is a brief description of the process, the data results, our observations, and opportunities for the future.

George Roberts, Rector

THE OBJECTIVE

- To provide a snapshot of St. James' spiritual vitality and health. To this end, parishioners participated in the Spiritual Life Inventory.
- To evaluate the data and identify opportunities to effectively support the spiritual growth of individuals and the parish as a whole.

THE PROCESS

- Over the course of four sessions, we used several conceptual models, which gave us ways to visualize and talk about the process of spiritual growth.
- We considered the results of the Spiritual Life Inventory and demographic data about the Farmington area.
- We considered the data in comparison to other Episcopal congregations.
- Based on *RenewalWorks* research with over 3,000 Episcopal congregations, we looked at the "catalysts" that seem to move spiritual growth forward, and at the "Best Practice Principles" or hallmarks of spiritually vibrant congregations.

DATA RESULTS

Based on an average Sunday attendance of 80, St. James received 64 responses to the Spiritual Life Inventory, an 80% response rate.

Demographics

Of those responding, the following said they were:

- 73% over age 50
- 25% age 30-49,
- 2% age 19-29.

Overall parish age demographic

- 43% over age 50
- 26% age 30-49
- 11% age 19-29
- 20% age 18 and under

Farmington age demographic

- 32% over age 50
- 28% age 30-49
- 18% 19-29
- 21% age 18 and under

Length of time attending St. James:

- 10 years or longer: 52%
- 6-10 years: 19%
- 1-5 years: 27%
- Less than 1 year: 2%

Diversity

- 97% White and Non-Hispanic
- 2% Black or African-American
- 1% Other

Responses to questions relating to Christian Beliefs, Practices, and Faith in action.

Regarding beliefs, we were strongest in belief in the gift of Grace, the Eucharist, and interfaith conversations. However, we were significantly below the Episcopal norm in the role of scripture in one's life, and regarding the Baptismal Covenant as a guide for spiritual growth.

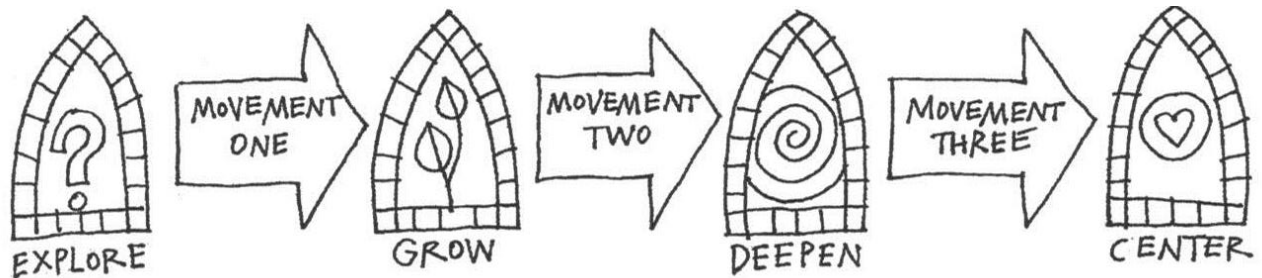
Regarding practices, we were strongest in praying for others, praying to seek guidance, and using solitude as a way to center our lives. However, we were significantly below the Episcopal norm in reading and reflecting on scripture, reading the Book of Common Prayer, and prayer to confess sins.

Regarding faith in action, we were strongest in regular attendance at Sunday worship and serving those in need on our own, and exceeded the Episcopal norm in having meaningful spiritual conversations, serving at church, and serving people in need through the church.

Model #1-The Spiritual Life Continuum

(A way to think about the data and spiritual growth)

The four stages on the spiritual continuum are:



Exploring a Life with God (about 18% of Episcopalians surveyed, 22% of St. James respondents)

In this first stage, people are taking their first steps in an intentional spiritual journey, exploring basic beliefs and practices in the Episcopal tradition. They believe in God but may not be sure who Jesus is for them. Their faith is probably not yet a significant part of their life.

Growing a Life with God (about 54% of Episcopalians surveyed, 58% of St. James respondents)

The people in this group are more committed to their Christian faith, but still have a lot of questions. (No surprise there – Episcopalians love questions). They believe in Jesus and are working on what it means to follow him. Their faith is closely linked to their church community.

Deepening in Life with God (about 23% of Episcopalians surveyed, 20% of St. James respondents)

This group is more dedicated to personal spiritual practices outside of the church (reading the Bible at home, taking time in prayer and solitude). They feel close to God and depend on God's power and presence in their lives.

Life with God in the Center (about 5% of Episcopalians surveyed, 0% of St. James respondents)

For people in this fourth stage, faith is at the center of life and guides everything they do. They may talk about giving their life to Christ or becoming his disciple.

Percentages as of May 2016 data

OUR OBSERVATIONS ON THE DATA

Based on the inventory responders:

- 73% are over the age of 50, compared to 32% of the community
- 67% of the Farmington community at large is under the age of 49.
- Our older parishioners present an opportunity (rich connections to St. James, but also risk (moving away or passing on).
- We have more young families with children now. How do we help root the parents and deepen their relationship to God, so they stay engaged with God and with St. James after the children leave home?
- How do we connect with the community in loving service?
- How do we connect to millennials, to help them develop a growing relationship with God?
- The greatest opportunity area for the parish to help its people grow spiritually seems to be in the "Exploring" and "Growing" stages. (80% of responders!)

What are the catalysts to help people move from one stage to another?

CATALYSTS TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Based on *RenewalWorks* research, several catalysts have been identified that move us forward in our spiritual journeys:

Exploring to Growing: Movement one

1. Growth in understanding core Christian beliefs (the Trinity, Grace, Eucharist, a relational God).
2. Growth in understanding and practice of prayer.

Growing to Deepening: Movement two

1. Spiritual disciplines: reading and reflecting on scripture, regular time alone with God.
2. Growing an attitude surrendering your life to God's control; being reflective.
3. Having spiritual relationships (people with whom one can share one's spiritual journey).

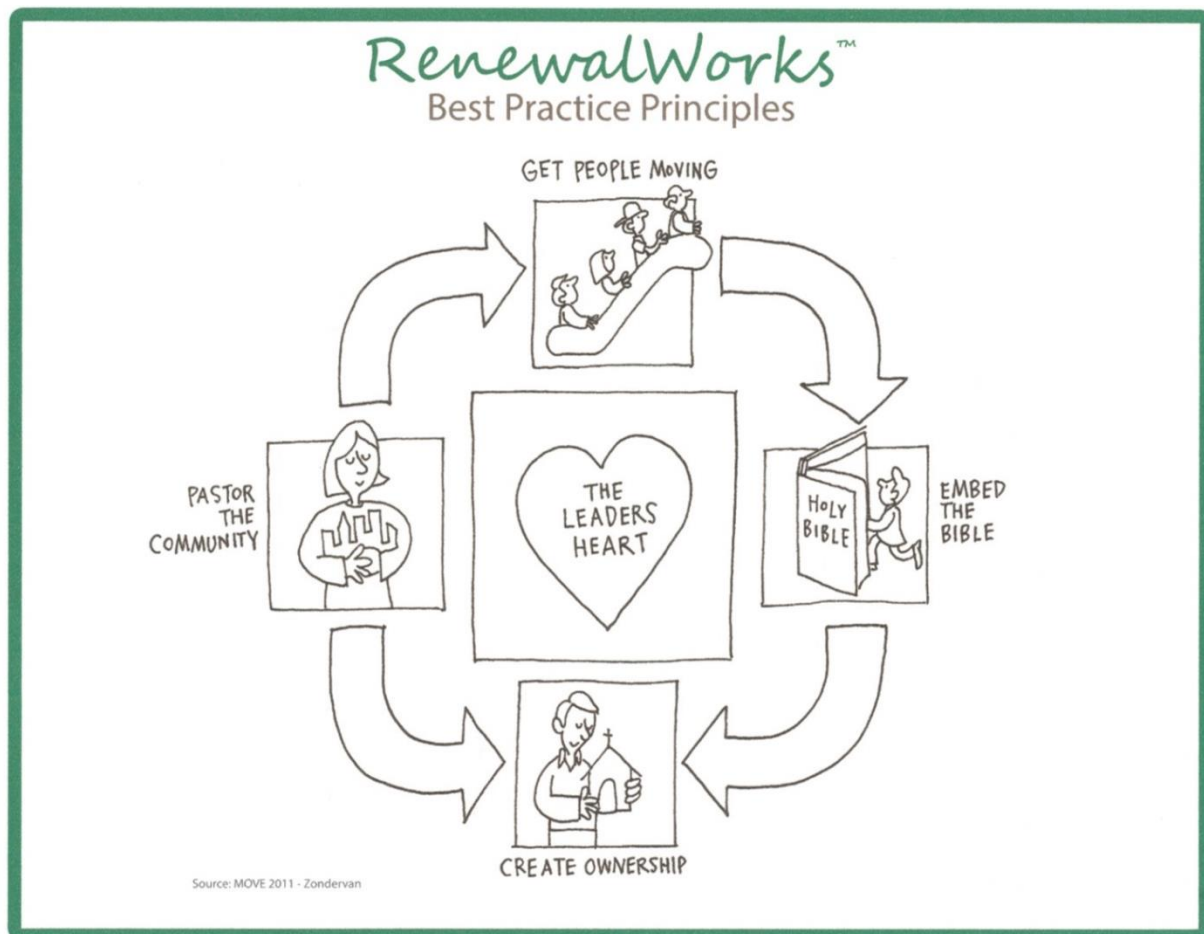
Deepening to God in the center: Movement three

1. The fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, etc.) are inward catalysts for an ability to find peace in difficult times, forgive those who hurt you, and express Christ-like qualities in relationships with others.
2. Behaviors that put faith into action are outward catalysts to growth (serving others on your own or through the church, serving in parish ministry, initiating meaningful spiritual conversations with those outside of one's faith community.)

***Our data shows that the people of St James Parish would profit most from a parish focus on core Christian beliefs, prayer, and reading and reflecting on scripture.**

THE BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUALLY VIBRANT CONGREGATIONS

1. **Embed the Bible:** The number one most transformative practice in congregations. Provide sound doctrine rooted in scripture, engage us in new and interesting ways, help us to develop a prayer life and a spiritual practice, help us understand the Bible in greater depth.
2. **Create Ownership:** Provide opportunities to help people have a sense of belonging, and to grow spiritually through relationships with others.
3. **Pastor the Community:** Promote a strong serving culture that is widely recognized by the local community. Provide training in how to integrate faith with service to those in need. Provide opportunities to serve those in need.
4. **Get people moving:** Provide a clear pathway that helps guide personal spiritual growth. Encourage personal responsibility for spiritual growth. Prioritize spiritual growth over "membership" and "activity". Church leaders are actively engaged in helping people get started on their spiritual growth.
5. **The Heart of the Leader:** (primarily the Rector, but also lay leaders.) At the heart of it all, the critical element, what makes it all go. Provide effective oversight. Help people develop a relationship with Jesus Christ. Challenge people to grow. Empower people to serve in leadership roles.



OVERALL PRIORITIES

Our data shows that of the five Best Practice Principles, St. James' clearest areas of opportunity are *Embed the Bible* and *Pastor the Community*. The *RenewalWorks* Team, given the findings of the Spiritual Life Inventory and our work with those results, advances the following priorities for consideration by the St. James Parish Vestry and the congregation at large moving forward.

You may read the recommendations of the *RenewalWorks* Team, in terms of pathways forward in our growth of spiritual vitality, and wonder, “Why the Bible?” “Why prayer?”

Foremost, the Bible is the foundation of our faith, the story of God’s walk with God’s people. The Bible continues to have startling relevance to our lives in every way. Scripture contains the teachings of Jesus which are down to earth, relevant to our modern lives and world, and helpful in moving us closer to God. The audience of the Bible, when it was first written, were people like you and me. Jesus spoke His truth to people struggling with paying the bills, making family life work, and loving people that were different from them. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches” and ties the fruits of our lives to how we are nourished by His teachings (word) and Spirit (continuing life) among us. But Scripture not only shows us the way to the God who desires only to be with us and for us to be with Him. *God’s word in scripture tells us how we can use the strength of being connected to “the true vine,” gives us the strength, courage, and purpose to move out into the world and minister to God’s people.*

Second, it would be easy, we know, to feel as though neither the Spiritual Life Inventory nor the recommendations of the *RenewalWorks* Team acknowledges the work that we already do. St. James Parish is a parish full of wonderful servant-givers who share their time, talents, and treasure. We do work at the Friendship Service Center, in the Dominican Republic, help whenever asked, and are engaged in many different types of ministry. In fact, the Spiritual Life Inventory clearly states that faith in action is something St. James does tremendously well. So, becoming more connected with Scripture is not something we need do because we have lost our way. On the contrary, reading and reflecting on Scripture more fully and deeply will only enhance what we are already doing. *But, with a clearer focus on becoming more steeped in the foundations of our faith, we will become more spiritually alive disciples of Jesus, more capable than ever to go out into all the world and serve Jesus in our fellow humans.*

OVERALL PRIORITIES (continued)

1. Develop opportunities for connection to Scripture and each other in a variety of settings
2. Teach and explore core Christian beliefs and practices (a relational God, the Trinity, Grace, Eucharist, etc.)
3. Support growth in the understanding and practice of prayer
4. Continue and enhance current service to the community and beyond, while discerning the creation of new pastoral pathways
5. Foster the growth of leaders in the congregation

IDEAS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Prayer and the Bible

- Encourage the practice of opening any church-related gathering/meeting with at least a brief reading from scripture with reflection, and prayer before or following. It need not be lengthy and would depend on the context or meeting.
- Encourage the use of Centering Prayer App on our phones and computers
- Encourage all St. James members to discover new ways of praying and to make new or current practices a regular part of their daily lives

Embed the Bible

- Bible in all pews
- Bibles in Church School
- Every parishioner has a Bible at home
- Showcase different types of Bibles for parishioners to choose from (eg., large print, illustrated, annotated, Bible app, KJV, NRSV, etc.)
- Buy Bibles at book sales to keep at church and/or give away
- Spend time in Church School w/Book of Common Prayer, noting that the Bible is in there
- Use *Forward Day by Day* as an option to engage with the Bible (eg.. Lent Madness, the Good Book Club)
- Identify other Apps that may connect us to the Bible

- Create a 10–minute *Connect with the Bible* time between 10:00 & 10:10 (just before service begins) for parents & other parishioners
- Find intergenerational ways to connect with Scripture (make it fun, game-show format?)
- Keep initiatives as informal as possible
- Publish "Title" or other introduction to the lessons in e–flash and encourage everyone to read the lessons before Sunday services
- Offer a Bible study before choir practice (choir and some others not free to attend programs between 8 and 10:15 services)
- Find ways to plant seeds of commitment/interest in reading Scripture
- Fr. George need not lead all initiatives; share the work of conveying we are all on a spiritual journey
- Look for other concepts that engage us with the Bible (eg., game night with *Apples to Apples*-Bible version). If it's fun, it's more likely to succeed

Pastor the community

- *Beer & the Bible / Theology on Tap* – Host discussions, based on either the Bible or another spiritual growth concept, at a local casual eatery (eg., Tap Rock, Wood N Tap), perhaps once a month
- *School of Prayer* would be developed by the Pastor and lay people to be given in a workshop format once or twice a year. The workshops would be open to all, but would provide training for those interested in becoming involved in the prayer team ministry.
- Discover ways to foster relationships with community organizations such as Noah Wallace Elementary School, the Farmington Fire and Police Departments, etc.