SPIRITUAL PRACTICES, DISCIPLESHIP, & CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH

The Episcopal Diocese of the Great Lakes | 2026

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1 WHAT

what did we ask?
what did we hear?

in brief

In spring 2026, your diocesan staff engaged deeply with questions about how different spiritual practices may contribute to discipleship and the health of our congregations. These wonderings arose from the opportunity to apply for a grant, and although ultimately we discerned that a grant of that type was something we should hold off on until it could be guided by our first bishop diocesan, we knew we still felt called to pursue these questions.

Our call as your diocesan staff is to support and empower people and congregations in local ministries through our work and presence. As we came upon the midpoint of the year when we traditionally start planning our work and goals for the upcoming program year (September - August), we knew that we wanted to incorporate your voices about what's working, what's not, and where you see hope and energy to guide our planning.

So, we paused to listen. Through a diocesan-wide survey and seven focus group conversations, we asked: What actually forms disciples of Jesus in our congregations? What draws people in? What keeps them? What are healthy, growing congregations doing differently?

This first section of the report describes what we heard, with as little interpretation as possible. The second and third sections ("So what?" and "Now What?") that follow take up what we believe this data means and what we might do about it.

A few findings surfaced repeatedly across both the survey and the conversations. **A culture of welcome and belonging is the single most important factor in people's decisions to join and stay,** more important than programming, convenience, or even invitation. People across every generation and background describe being driven to stay by the same things: **worship done with care, a community which knows them, an early and genuine invitation to participate, and the depth of the Episcopal tradition itself.** Most respondents say their congregations are places of beautiful worship and generosity, safe places for questions and doubts. However, far fewer respondents reported that their congregations have energy and forward momentum or challenge them to grow spiritually rather than simply attend. Finally, the people who found their way to us most recently, including many who arrived carrying wounds from other church experiences, tell us they came not simply to escape something but to find something: Jesus, encountered through an ancient, honest, and inclusive way of being church.

about this research

what we asked & why

Our diocese is young and in transition. Although we have inherited practices of Episcopal life in Michigan dating back more than 200 years, we were formed in October 2024 and are preparing to elect our first bishop diocesan at the annual convention in October 2026. In this in-between season, the diocese has been guided by an **organizing principle:**

We are called to embody the love of Jesus Christ with grace, hope, and joy.

We live out this calling by collaborating creatively to:

- nurture deep and lifelong spiritual growth,
- build up vibrant and inclusive worshiping communities,
- respond compassionately to the needs of our neighbors, and
- honor and care for creation.

Rooted in that principle, and in a shared desire to ground our work in what is actually happening in our congregations rather than in assumptions and our personal projections, we embarked on this research project.

Before we opened the research process to feedback, we defined three key terms and identified three core research questions.

key terms

disciple

Someone whose faith in the God of the Bible and the divine revelation in and through Jesus is not compartmentalized, but the ultimate driver of their whole life. A person committed to a Christian community and to their own spiritual growth and disciplines.

growth

Growing disciples and increasing discipleship practices.

Note here the broader definition beyond Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) and plate/pledge metrics. In this framing, ASA and financial growth are fruits of congregational growth and health, rather than identified goals.

healthy congregation

A congregation that is both actively forming current and new disciples and has a sense of vitality and momentum in its mission and ministry.

core research questions

1

What spiritual practices and parish postures are most strongly associated with discipleship and congregational vitality in our diocese?

2

What draws people to and keeps people in Episcopal churches in our diocese (and how does this vary by background and generation)?

3

What are healthy congregations doing differently (and what have they let go of/relaxed in) from which other congregations can learn?

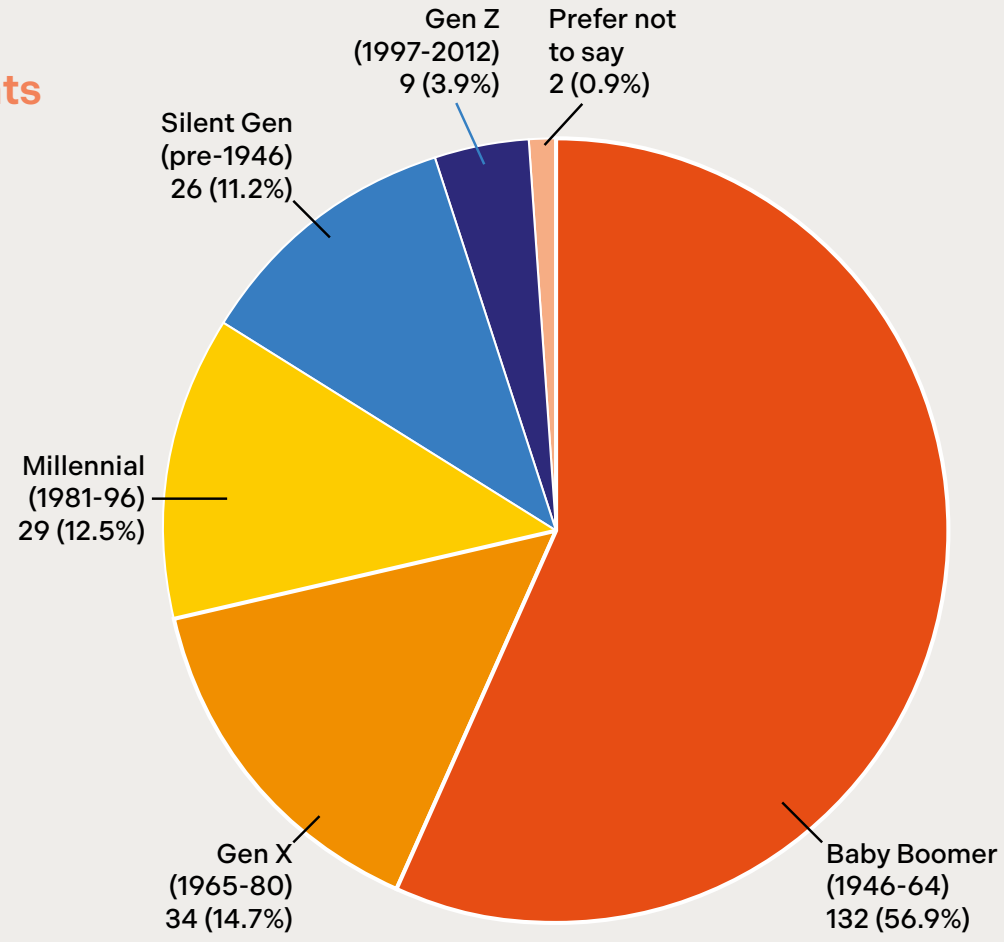
how we listened: the survey

An online survey ran in spring 2026 and received 232 responses representing at least 71 of the 98 worshiping congregations of the diocese. It asked about the spiritual practices that shape respondents' lives, seventeen factors that might influence a decision to join or stay in a congregation, twelve statements describing parish culture and health, and open questions about what supports respondents' growth as disciples of Jesus.

fig. 1

survey respondents by generation

n = 232 respondents



how we listened: focus groups

Diocesan staff facilitated seven recorded conversations, each with a different category of participants. The seven distinct groups were:

- lay and clergy leaders of growing congregations,
- Millennials,
- members of Gen Z,
- people who grew up without a faith background,
- people who came to the Episcopal Church from evangelical traditions,
- people who came from the Roman Catholic Church, and
- active lay leaders who arrived in their congregations during or after COVID.

Each group was asked what brought them through the doors and what made them stay, which practices have formed them, how they would describe their parish's culture, and what they wish church leaders understood.

how to read this report

Every survey has a shape. The people who responded to this survey are, overwhelmingly, the already-committed: older, lay, deeply involved, and more likely to belong to larger congregations with full-time clergy. Subgroup comparisons (by generation, congregation size, clergy presence, and path into the congregation) are offered throughout, with cautions where groups are small. Please see Appendix 1 for detailed notes on the data limitations we encountered, cautions on how to use this data, how congregation size and clergy presence were categorized, and comparing the spiritual practice scales. Focus group participants were promised anonymity, and this report keeps that promise.

what the survey tells us

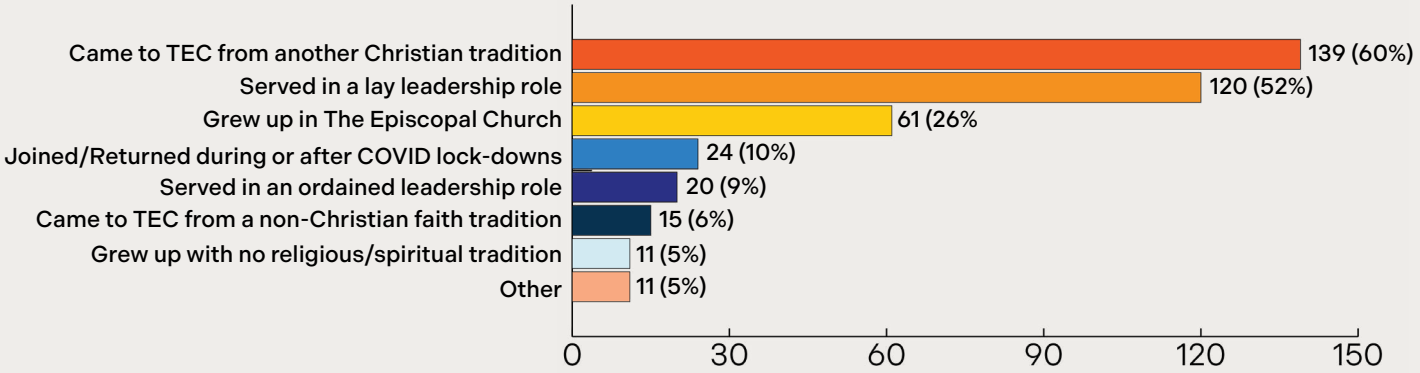
who answered & how they came to us

Of 232 respondents, 85% are lay people, 12.5% are priests, and 2% are deacons. A majority (57%) are Baby Boomers, and another 11% belong to the Silent Generation; Millennials and members of Generation Z together make up 16% of responses. Just over half (52%) have served in a lay leadership role such as vestry, warden, or altar guild.

fig. 2

"Which of the following describe your relationship to The Episcopal Church? Select all that apply."

n = 232 respondents with 401 total selections. Percentages are of respondents and sum to more than 100% because of the multi-select possibility in responding.



How people came to The Episcopal Church is itself a finding. Sixty percent of respondents came from another Christian tradition, while about a quarter (26%) grew up as Episcopalians. One in ten joined or returned during or after COVID lock-downs. Smaller numbers came from a non-Christian faith tradition (6%) or grew up with no religious or spiritual tradition (5%). Our pews, in other words, are full of people who chose this church as adults, a reality the focus groups explore in depth.

Asked which statement best describes their path into their congregation, 81.5% of respondents said they were drawn first to the parish as a worshiping community and then found a place in its ministries; 18.5% were drawn first to outward-facing ministries and found their way into worship from there. Both pathways matter, and as later comparisons show, the people who enter through them are looking for somewhat different things.

fig. 3

"Which statement best represents your path into your congregation?"

n = 232 respondents



Worship First
Drawn to the parish as a worshiping community first, then found a place in parish ministries.

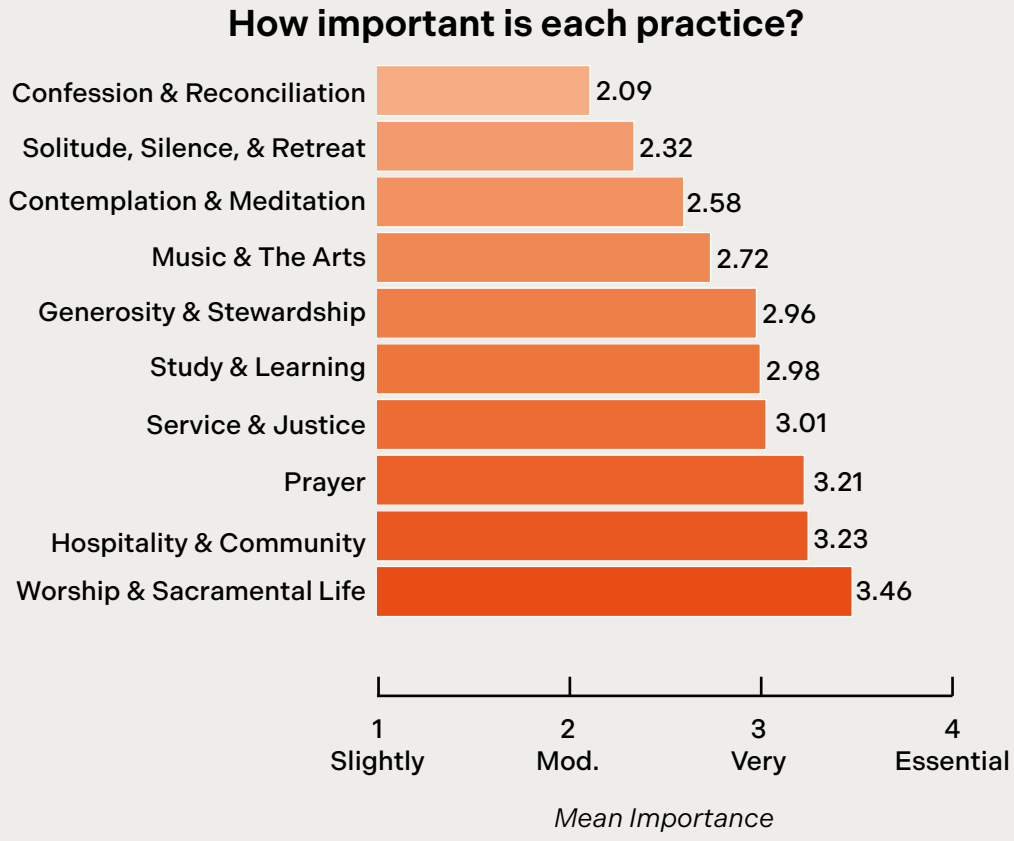
Outward-facing First
Drawn to outward-facing ministries first, then found their way into the worshiping community.

research question one: what spiritual practices shape our people?

Respondents rated ten spiritual practices twice: once for how important each practice is to their faith life, and once for how often they practice it. Ranked by stated importance, three practices stand at the top: "worship and sacramental life," "hospitality and community," and "prayer." Ranked by frequency, "prayer" is by far the most practiced, approaching weekly-to-daily for many, followed by "worship and sacramental life" and "hospitality and community." At the other end of both lists (rated least important, and practiced least often) sit "confession and reconciliation" and "solitude, silence, and retreat."

fig. 4 Stated Importance and Frequency of Spiritual Practices, Ranked Separately

n = 232 respondents



Comparing the two rankings shows where stated importance and practice diverge (see fig. 5, p. 14). "Prayer," "contemplation and meditation," and "music and the arts" are practiced somewhat more than their importance rankings would predict. Running the other way, "service and justice," "solitude, silence, and retreat," "worship and sacramental life," and "hospitality and community" are all ranked as more important, but are less frequently practiced. The chart below illustrates the set of gaps between what people say feeds them and what their weeks actually hold.

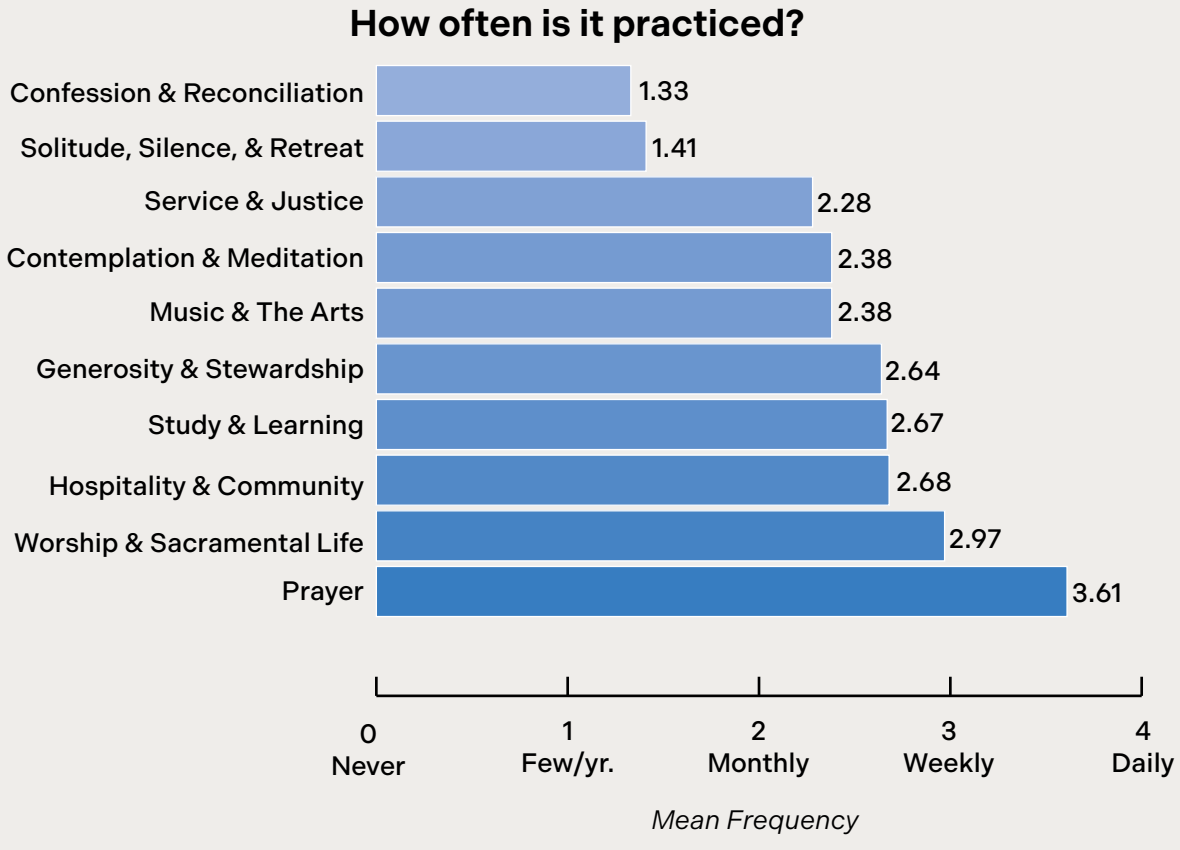
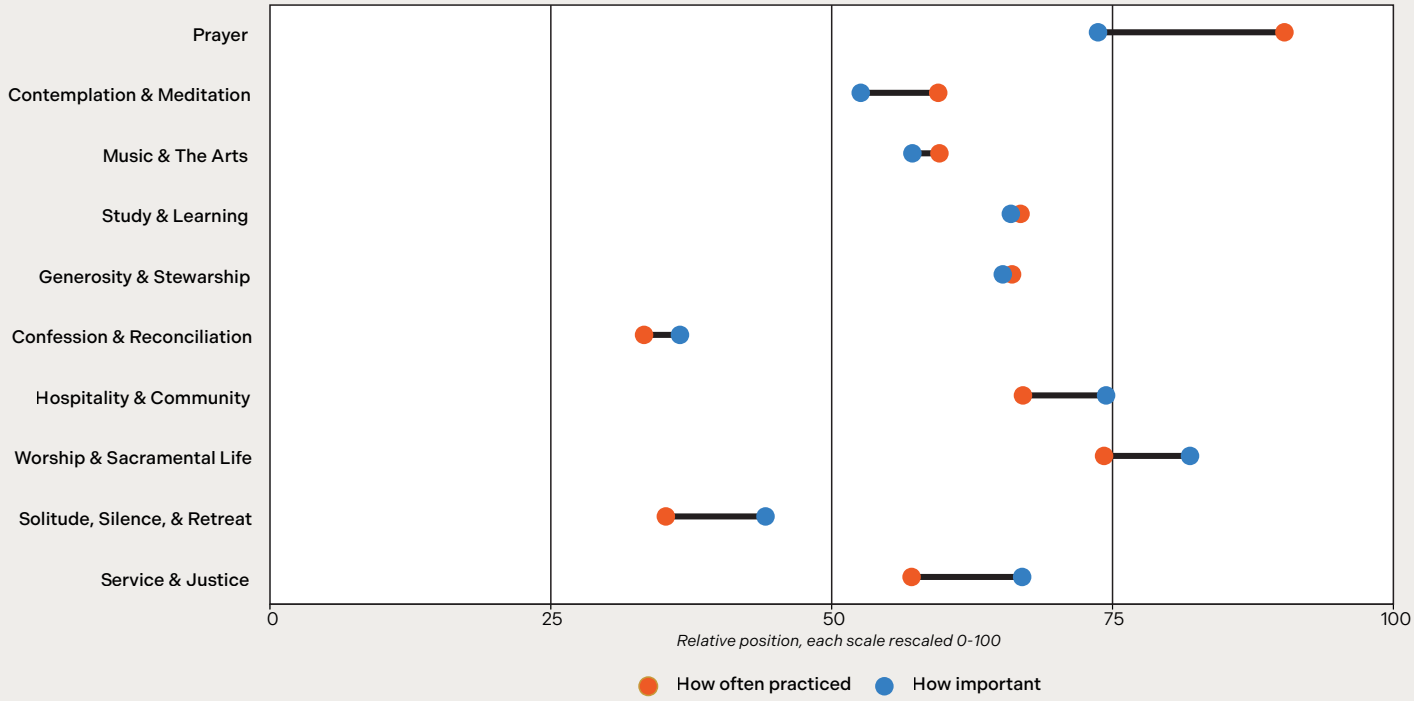


fig. 5

Divergence of Stated Importance and Frequency of Spiritual Practices

n = 232 respondents
Practices ordered top (practiced more than ranked) to bottom (ranked higher than practiced).
Directional comparison only.



An open question invited practices the survey missed. The answers form their own quiet portrait of the spiritual life in the diocese: time in nature and the garden; centering prayer and contemplative practice; spiritual direction and "soul friends;" the Daily Office, often with Forward Day by Day; small groups for study and mutual support; and service woven into daily life and work.

Several ordained respondents, answering a question about their own support, described a patchwork sustained largely by collegial friendship, spiritual direction, and personal discipline, with more than one noting that their supports are mostly self-assembled rather than offered to them directly from the diocese.

research question two: what draws people in and what keeps them?

Respondents rated seventeen factors for how important each factor was in their decision to join or stay in their congregation. The top of the list is clear: a culture of welcome and belonging is most important (mean 4.41 on a 5-point scale), followed by theological openness and intellectual honesty (4.22), the style or beauty of worship (4.18), the quality of preaching (4.01), and opportunities for spiritual growth and formation (3.96). The least influential factors for this pool of respondents were a friend or family member's invitation (2.28), children's and family programming (2.89), and small group life outside Sunday worship (2.94).

fig. 6

What draws and keeps people in their congregation

Mean rating. "How important in your decision to join or stay" (1-5 scale, n=232 respondents)

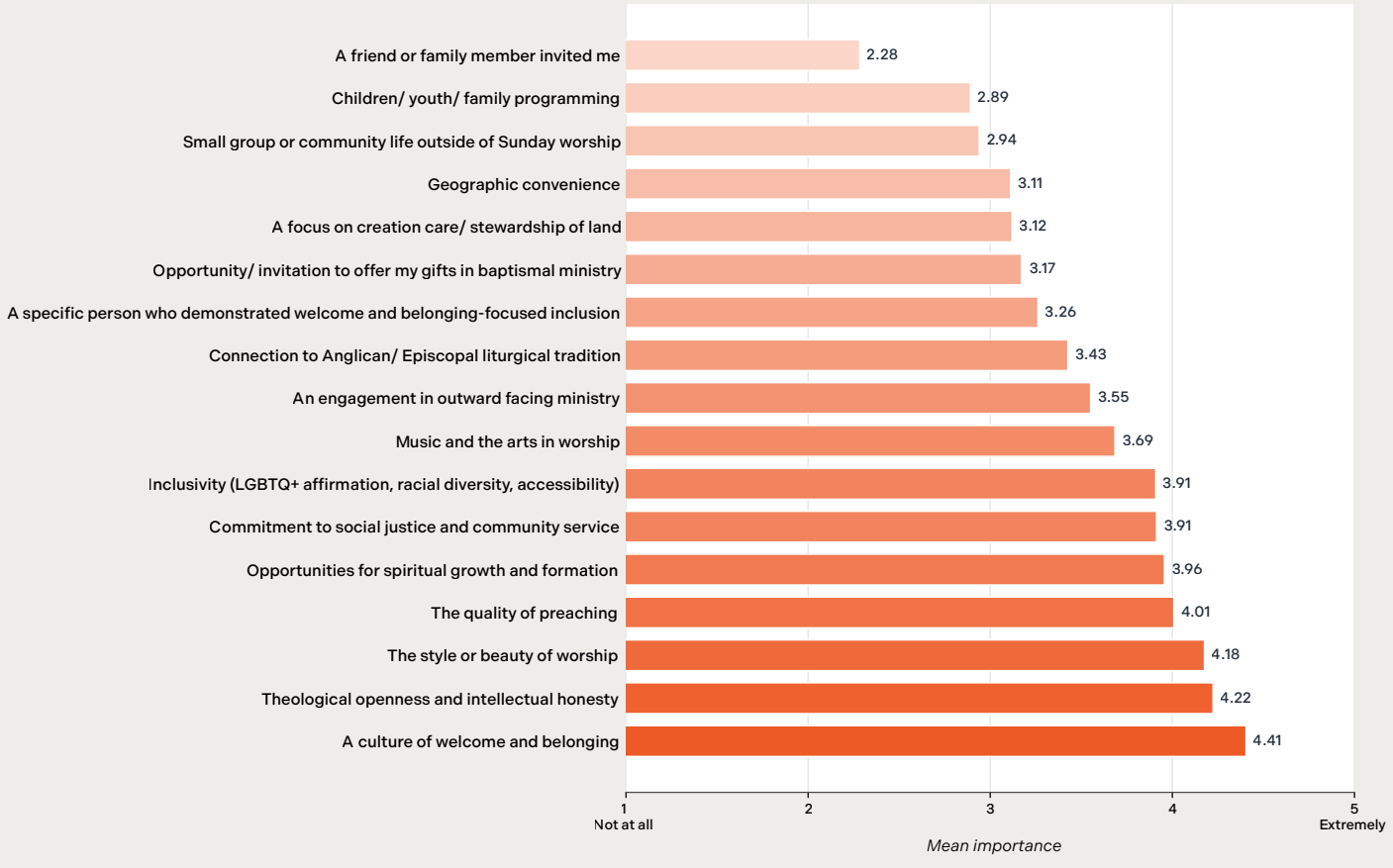
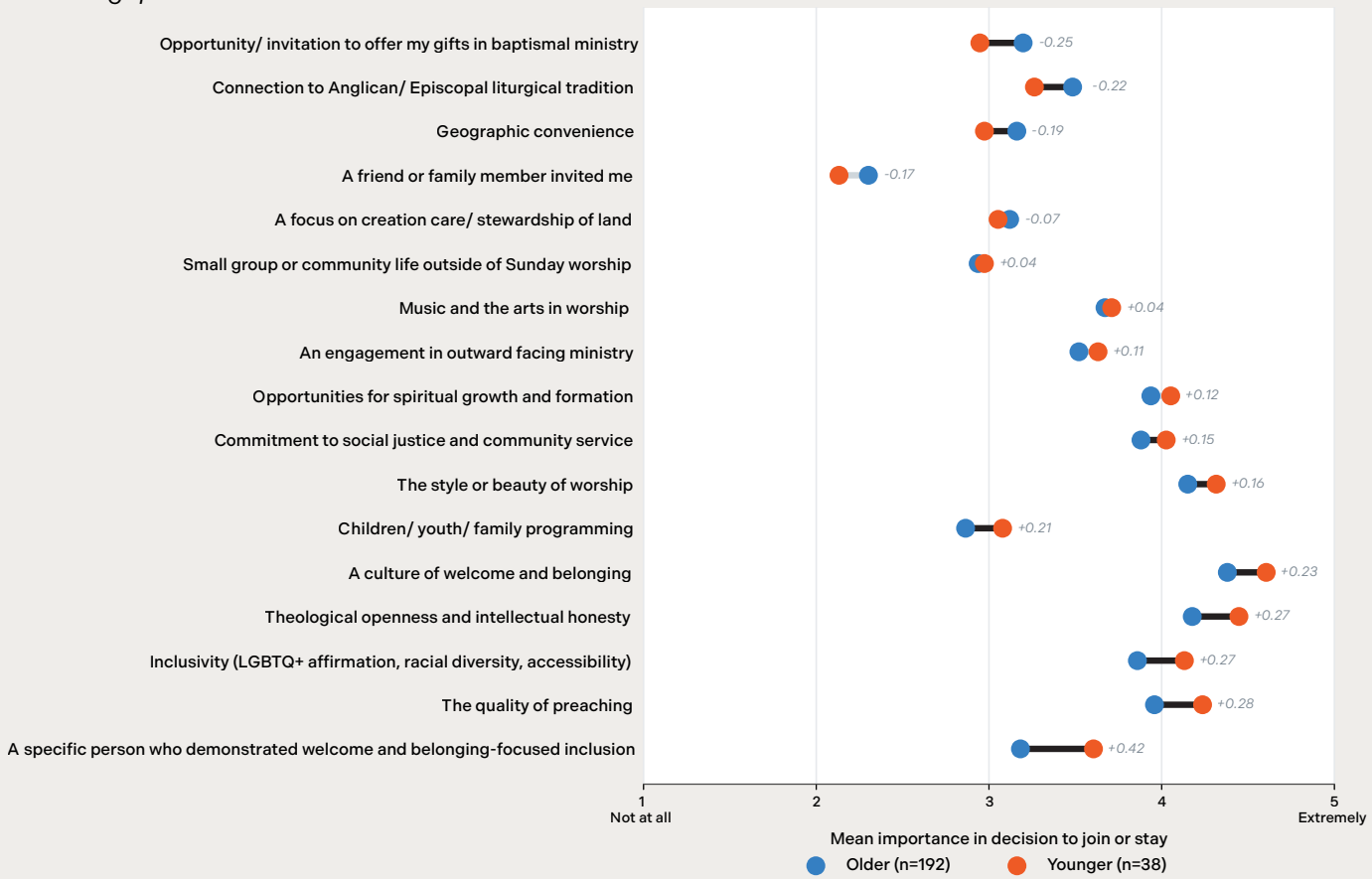


fig. 7 What drew them in: younger vs. older members

Younger = Millennial + Gen Z (n=38); Older = Silent Gen. + Baby Boomers + Gen X (n=192).
Younger group is significantly smaller than older group; therefore, read large gaps as a trend signals and small gaps with caution.



Generational comparison adds helpful insights. Younger respondents (Millennial and Gen Z, n=38) rated a specific person who demonstrated welcome and belonging-focused inclusion notably higher than older respondents did (+0.42), along with the quality of preaching (+0.28), inclusivity (+0.27), theological openness (+0.27), and a culture of welcome and belonging (+0.23).

Older respondents placed relatively more weight on the opportunity to offer their gifts in baptismal ministry, connection to the Anglican liturgical tradition, and geographic convenience.

Put simply, for the young adults and youth in our congregations, welcome is a person and actions more than an atmosphere.

A respondent's path into the congregation also points to what they value. Those who arrived through outward-facing ministries rated "commitment to social justice and community service," "a specific welcoming person," "small group life," and "inclusivity" higher. Those who arrived through worship rated "the style and beauty of worship," "music and the arts," and "connection to the Anglican liturgical tradition" higher. Comparisons by congregation size and clergy presence show broadly similar rankings across groups.

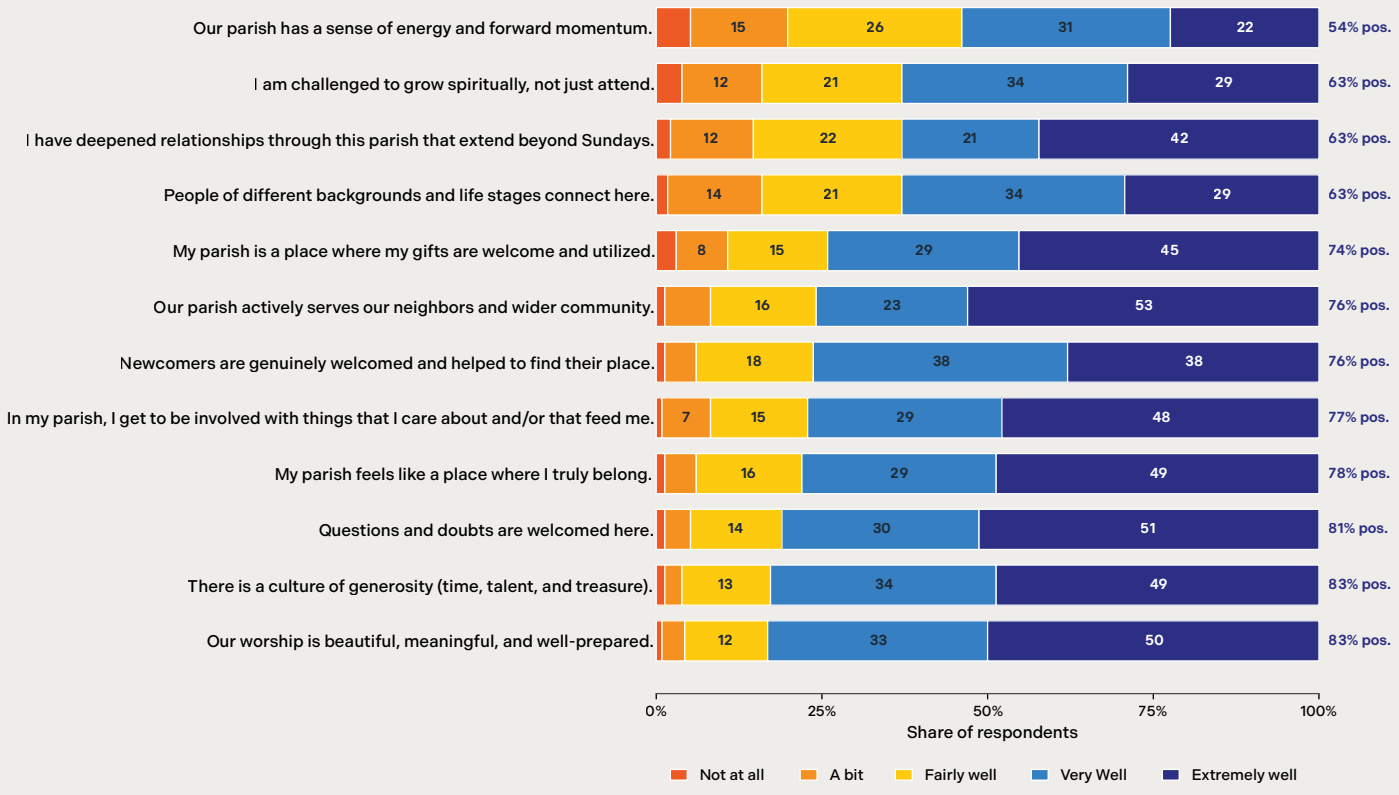
research question three: how do people describe their congregations today?

Twelve statements asked respondents how well certain characteristics describe their congregation. **Read as a whole, the answers describe congregations which are strong in worship and warmth, but less certain of their own momentum.** More than 80% of respondents said their parish's worship is beautiful, meaningful, and prepared well, and that a culture of generosity describes their parish very or extremely well; 81% said questions and doubts are welcomed. Roughly three-quarters affirmed that newcomers are genuinely welcomed, that their congregation serves its neighbors, that their gifts are welcome and utilized, and that their congregation is a place where they truly belong.

The lowest-rated statements are important to consider here because they help us as we move into parts two and three of this report ("So what?" and "Now what?"). **Just 54% of respondents said that "our parish has a sense of energy and forward momentum" describes their congregation very or extremely well — the lowest score of the twelve.** Rounding out the lowest-rated statements, only sixty-three percent of respondents said they are challenged to grow spiritually rather than just attend services, that they have deepened relationships extending beyond Sunday, and that people of different backgrounds and life stages connect in their parish.

fig. 8 How well do these statements describe your parish?

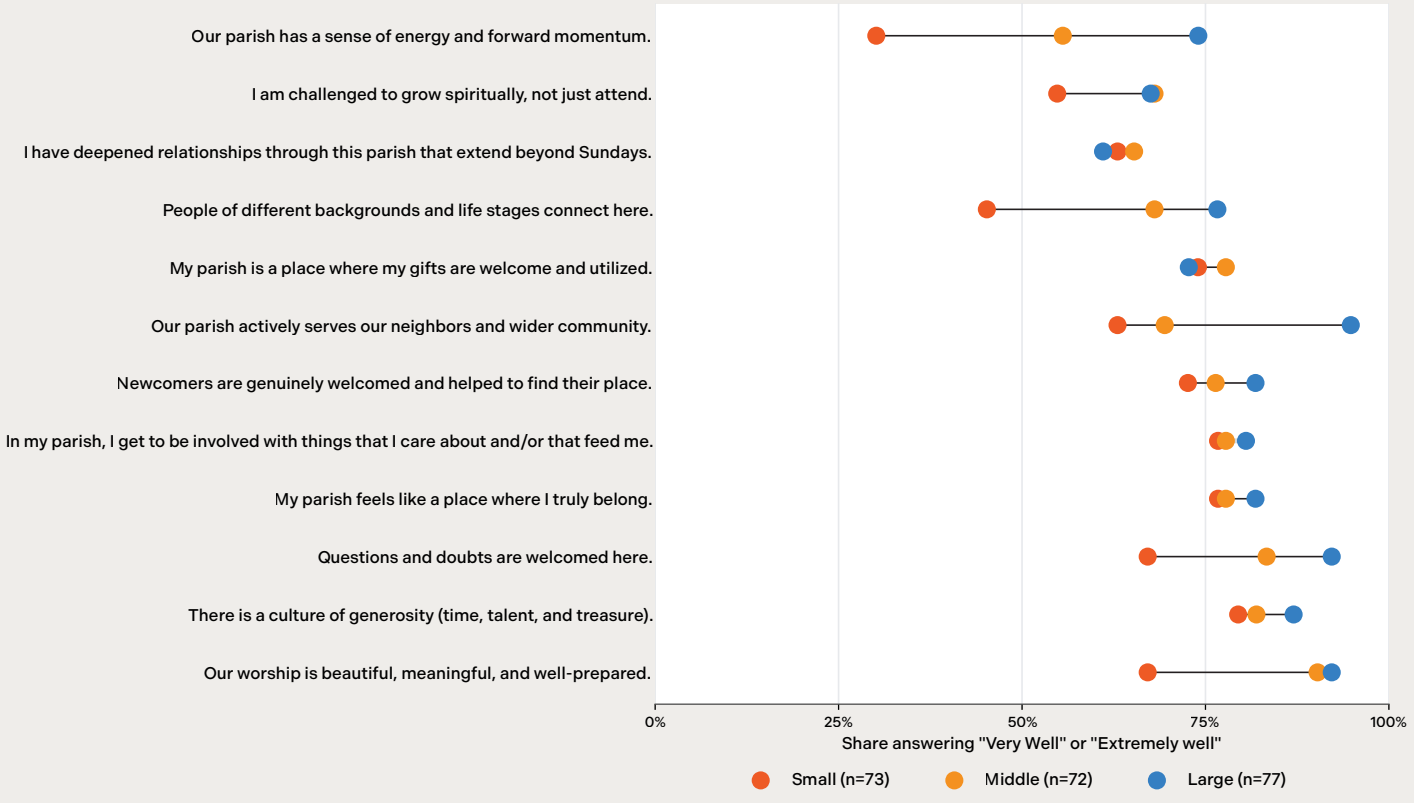
n = 232 respondents, ordered by portion answering "Very Well or Extremely Well"



These postures are not felt evenly across the diocese. **The sense of energy and forward momentum displays the widest gap of any statement by congregation size: respondents from large congregations affirm it at roughly three times the rate of respondents from small ones.** Younger respondents rated their parishes higher than older respondents on the beauty of worship, generosity, and welcome for questions and lower on "people of different backgrounds and life stages connect" and whether the parish has energy and momentum. Charts that offer full comparisons by generation, size, clergy presence, and path appear in Appendix 2.

fig. 9 Described parish health by parish size (ASA group)

Parish-health statements, ranked by overall share positive. Each point is the group's % rating the statement "Very Well" or "Extremely well."



what the focus groups tell us

Reading the seven conversations together, six themes emerged: Welcome, Belonging, Participation, Rootedness, Abundance, and Mission.

welcome

Across every group, welcome was described as something explicit, spoken, and repeated and not an atmosphere people are left to infer. Leaders of growing congregations described stating aloud, week after week, that all are welcome. Several described intentional and explicit structures for welcome, for example greeters at the door, a same-day personal text to anyone who signs the guest book, and members trained to walk a newcomer into coffee hour rather than simply pointing the way.

Just as consistently, participants warned that welcome can overshoot. Millennial participants described the difference between being greeted and being treated "like fresh meat." Gen Z participants described the alarm of a congregation converging on a young visitor. One participant described it as being welcomed as if "there's a youth, oh my gosh, we need to make them stay." Participants who arrived after COVID described the welcome that was effective and felt like welcome as being noticed and remembered across several visits without pressure to sign up for anything.

For people under 40, welcome begins online and is clearly and publicly displayed. Gen Z participants were unanimous that no one their age visits a church without first examining its website, live stream, and social media. One respondent described a congregation's digital presence as being as important as keeping its grounds clean, saying that making clear, basic information (what to wear, where to park, what the service will be like) available online lowers a real barrier. Visible public signals mattered in several stories: a Pride festival, a rainbow flag, a priest's t-shirt reading "This Priest Loves You" each appear in participants' accounts of the moment they first believed the church might be safe for them.

belonging

If welcome opens the door, belonging is the reason people stay. In nearly identical language across groups, we heard: everybody knows my name; it feels like family; it feels like home. One participant who came from an evangelical tradition contrasted a decade of serving communion in a church where people still asked if he was new, with his current congregation, where after three visits, people simply noticed him: "If you were not here, you would be missed … because you are a part of this community. And that's enough."

Belonging was repeatedly tied to being accepted without judgment. In several groups, participants who are transgender described the Episcopal Church as the first church and sometimes the first public place where they could be fully themselves. The one participant in the former-Roman Catholic conversation named non-judgment and an open table as the heart of why he stayed. Participants who didn't grow up within a faith tradition described a congregation that was "comfortable with the uncomfortable," a phrase the whole group affirmed.

Intergenerational friendship surfaced as a distinct form of belonging. A Gen Z participant described a standing Sunday brunch with two much older couples as one of the treasures of their life in their congregation. Another described the older members of their congregation as breaking every stereotype about older church folks. Intergenerational relationships as a theme also has another side: participants without a faith background and leaders who came (back) to The Episcopal Church after COVID lock-downs both described generational friction over control, communication, and change.

participation

The most oft-repeated story in all seven conversations is the invitation story: someone asked me to do something, and that changed everything. A deacon's simple request to serve as lector turned an occasional visitor into a regular. An acolyte director who kept handing a teenager new responsibilities made them feel, in their words, that they "actually understood the church a lot more when [they were] a part of making it happen." Lay preaching training, vestry invitations, choirs, and shared physical labor on aging buildings all appear as doorways into commitment.

Leaders of growing congregations described this as deliberate practice: newcomers are invited into real leadership quickly, not after a decade of proving themselves.

Participants also described a different side of inviting participation: visitors drafted onto committees and pressed for pledges before they were ready (named in the survey's open responses as a reason a family almost did not return), and congregations where everything must pass through clergy or a "magic programming machine," bottlenecking the energy of laypeople ready to lead.

In reflecting on their participation in congregations, some respondents expressed a desire to connect with other involved persons across the diocese. Lay leaders who came to their congregations after the COVID lock-downs, people who by definition said yes to an invitation to participate, asked pointedly how lay leaders across the diocese might find and connect with one another.

rootedness

Perhaps the most counterintuitive finding for longtime Episcopalians is that the tradition itself is a draw, and most powerfully so for the young and newcomers. Millennial and Gen Z participants described craving structure, ritual, and what they named as "that old-time religion": the Book of Common Prayer in the hand, the Daily Office, incense, the communion rail. One participant described new members who knew they belonged "when they held a physical BCP in their hand;" another asked simply for "an authentic screen-free experience for an hour every week."

A Gen Z participant described the liturgy as "an ancient practice ... that has almost just been waiting for us to come join." Another participant, when reflecting on what the Episcopal tradition has to offer young people, said that Episcopalians shouldn't be "bashful" about our faith tradition and what it has to offer, saying: "when I talk to people my generation – even people who would never think of setting foot in a church – they're looking for the sort of deeper meaning and inclusive community and grounding in ancient traditions, and beautiful music and all this... that our tradition offers, but no one's just bothered to tell them."

People who came from evangelical traditions described the prayer book as a relief: written prayers that free them from performative extemporaneous prayer, a lectionary that reads broadly across Scripture rather than a leader's chosen verses, and a liturgy with room for lament and the hard parts of life. They also described the tradition's depth as something they need help entering; asking for guides, explanations of the symbolism they encounter every week, and even a "buddy system" for navigating the prayer book. Several emphasized that they came to the Episcopal Church, not merely away from somewhere else, and that many arrive both theologically serious and wounded.

Notably, several growing congregations described going back to basics as a growth practice: simplifying the liturgy, teaching "Episcopal 101" repeatedly, and raising (not lowering) expectations for membership and baptism. More than one leader connected higher expectations directly to deeper commitment.

abundance

Abundance as a theme here, appropriately enough, could really be called "Abundance, Celebration, and a Spirit of Joy." Leaders of growing congregations described a deliberate posture of abundance, for example celebrating every baptism loudly and talking constantly about what is going well. One leader shared their belief that congregations that talk about decline experience more decline, while congregations that talk about growth grow.

Several leaders described this positive posture being linked to open and frank conversations about congregational finances: interim and settled clergy who talked about giving positively and plainly, capital campaigns framed around what the congregation loves, treasurers' reports posted publicly, and an audit committee that unexpectedly increased giving because people trusted where their money went. One congregation tripled its budget and moved a priest's salary from a capital campaign into ordinary income, an outcome the leader connected to the choice not to be shy about talking about money and emphasizing the importance of investing in the congregation.

Abundance also meant strategic investment: despite a tight budget, one congregation spent seven thousand dollars on quality live-stream cameras, and can now trace new members and one significant gift directly to people who watched services online for weeks before physically attending.

In some instances, abundance also meant subtraction. Leaders described canceling a beloved but dwindling midweek service to replace it with a discussion group that quintupled attendance; cutting an outreach list in half to focus on the half that remained after discovering none of it was what kept newcomers; and letting go of "we've always done it this way" in matters from liturgy to coffee hour. **Doing less, several respondents said, freed clergy for more pastoral care and let the congregation focus on doing a few things well instead of doing everything in a way that reduced effectiveness and burned out volunteers and leaders.**

mission

In every group, outward-facing ministry appeared both as a draw and as glue. Leaders named diaper banks, clothing closets, and breakfast ministries among the first things newcomers

mention; a weekly breakfast café serving hundreds of unhoused neighbors anchors more than one participant's account of why their faith holds. A Millennial participant described a small congregation that despite their size – twenty on a good Sunday – opens a durable medical equipment closet to its community twice a week, every week as "a quiet, practical love." Participants without a faith background emphasized the distinction between consistent presence and performative gestures; a table at a Pride festival once a year, without ongoing, intentional, and explicit welcome and inclusion for LGBTQ++ siblings, reads as the latter.

The younger groups pushed the theme further: the church must go where people already are. "Many of us aren't going to come," one Gen Z participant said plainly, not from lack of interest, but because walking through the red doors on a Sunday is not on their map. The church reached them at a Pride festival and then through a podcast in a different diocese, long before they joined a Sunday service.

Several participants described public witness (vigils, civic presence, speaking at community events) as both mission and the most honest advertisement the church has, while others voiced the tension between prophetic public voice and the intentional non-partisanship that some growing congregations credit for their breadth. Participants across several groups expressed some version of one person's conclusion after decades in another tradition: "you guys have got a really good thing here ... we should put up billboards." The question they handed back to us is why we as a church so rarely name our "good thing here."

SO WHAT 2

what does all of this mean?

Growth in numbers as well as growth in spiritual faith happens when God's Spirit intersects with people exercising their agency to respond to God's invitation. As congregational and diocesan leaders, our role is to create opportunities, employ intentional practices, and develop a culture that is more conducive to spiritual and numerical growth. God's Spirit works through our availability and offering.

> In the language of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

In our various roles as congregational and diocesan leaders – lay and ordained – we plant and we water and the rest is in God's hands.

From the six identified themes and the data we have gleaned from the survey responses and focus groups, we are able to hone in on three areas for developing practices and opportunities that support a culture of growth in numbers and vitality. These are:

1

Nurture a culture of authentic welcome and empowerment
Welcome, Participation, Belonging

2

Embody Episcopal identity with confidence and joy
Rootedness, Abundance/Celebration/Spirit of Joy

3

Witness to God's love in word and deed beyond church walls
Participation and Mission

Focus groups showed that congregational leaders, by applying time, attention, and resources (both money and human), can create the infrastructure and environment through which sustained growth – in discipleship, in congregational health, and in numbers – is made more possible. The lessons of the research matter here, because while some of these items seem intuitive and obvious, some run counter to the narrative we hear – and often repeat ourselves.

three focus areas

nurture a culture of authentic welcome and empowerment

Our ability to develop and deepen relationships with God and one another is at the core of our church experience. How people experience welcome and belonging shapes the arc of their connection to a congregation. Our welcome of others begins with our communication with one another, and with actions that extend outside our walls. It continues with how we personally welcome individuals into our congregation (whether online or physically present). And in an ongoing way, our welcome extends to how we incorporate new members into ministry and the fullness of the congregation's life.

Many comments in the survey and focus groups lifted up the importance of personal one-on-one individual welcome – being seen, greeted, and engaged as a visitor and newcomer without being overwhelmed. A healthy welcome is invitational but non-anxious, allowing individuals to feel supported but not rushed into making more of a commitment than they are ready for.

As leaders, it is important for us to check our assumptions and experiences. The data identified a divide based on generation and length of membership: older individuals and longer tenured members were more likely to rate their congregation as more welcoming than younger individuals and newer members.

embody episcopal identity with confidence and joy

One of the consistently reported qualities of vibrant growing congregations in this study and elsewhere is an endemic spirit of joy. This spirit of joy is not dependent on the size of a congregation or the depth of its financial resources. Rather, it is an attitude and orientation arising from the congregation's awareness of God's presence in their common life.

The data and comments made by participants in the research provides us with a strong counternarrative to a story we often tell ourselves. Individuals are not just leaving other denominations. They are intentionally coming to the Episcopal Church because of who we are:

- a liturgical, sacramental church,
- grounded in historical beliefs and practices,
- and a non-anxious space where individuals are able to ask questions and wrestle with their spiritual questions.

While it may be tempting to think we need to dramatically change our Sunday worship service and music to be more like large contemporary churches, what we heard is that there are people who are looking for something different, something we already offer. Therefore, leaning into our Episcopal traditions and making sure both new and long term members understand why we do what we do is a path for us to grow in numbers and vitality.

This does not mean that all of our current practices should be set in stone. Undoubtedly some changes or adaptations would be productive and helpful, but fundamentally, the traditional Episcopal experience is sound and desired. We can have confidence in this truth. Regardless of our size or financial resources, we can celebrate our accomplishments no matter how "small" they are in the world's eyes, and we can be joyful in the knowledge that we are both recipients of and vehicles for sharing God's grace and love in the world.

witness to God's love in word and deed beyond church walls

Growth and vitality is not just dependent on our presence and ministry outside our walls – it is the result of that outside presence and ministry.

Websites, live-streaming services, and presence on various social media platforms are essential to reaching those who are seeking a church home. In our current context, people of every generation frequently begin their discernment process online. They screen for – and screen out – faith communities based on what they encounter and discover of a church's digital presence. We have learned that it is common for people to watch/participate in online services before they will venture to walk through our front doors. Particularly when coming from a different tradition or no church background, online viewing offers an opportunity for familiarization and participation in something new (that is, Episcopal liturgical practices) in a safe space where they do not feel vulnerable by not knowing the local custom or practice. Absent these forms of online connection, individuals are most likely to assume the church is not active – and not worth investigating further.

Similarly, being engaged in hands-on outreach and other ministries in the broader community both serves as a means of embodying what we say we value, and offers individuals an opportunity to draw upon their gifts in ways that are impactful, connecting them to God in their daily lives. This is true for members and non-members alike. We discovered that there is a statistical group of people who find their way to the Episcopal Church by volunteering in outreach ministries. Sometimes, that activity eventually becomes an on-ramp to other parts of the congregation's life and eventual membership.

what does this mean for diocesan ministry leaders?

Leadership at the congregational and diocesan level will take different approaches to addressing these three areas of focus, as will congregations of different sizes and context.

In the Episcopal Church, the diocese – that is, everything within the border of the diocese; not merely the diocesan staff – is the primary mission unit. A diocese is the structure by which we pool and leverage our combined resources – human and financial – to strengthen our joint diocesan ministries and for the mutual support of individual congregations and other Episcopal entities affiliated with the diocese. This enables the church within a geographic region to function as a whole body with many members, where every member matters. As St Paul wrote, "The body does not consist of one member but of many.... The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:14-26).

As we move out of the process of juncture and begin this first chapter of ministry together as the Diocese of the Great Lakes, led by our first bishop diocesan, we are conscious of the sizes of our congregations and the ways in which our resources are limited. We are guided by a shared belief that communities in which we minister need the Episcopal Church.

Diocesan leaders (Bishop, diocesan staff, Diocesan Council, and other diocesan ministries) look at the three previously described areas of focus through a different lens than congregations do. We simultaneously seek to discern 1) what is uniquely or more effectively done in a coordinated and collaborative manner at the diocesan level, and 2) what are the primary ways we can support congregations in their local efforts. This leads us to ask more specific questions within these areas of focus, such as:

Nurture a culture of authentic welcome and empowerment

Welcome, Participation, Belonging

- How do we use diocesan communication channels to supplement congregational communications and help seekers explore the Episcopal church in their local community?
- How do we support congregations in resourcing and using tools for becoming a more welcoming congregation?

Embody Episcopal identity with confidence and joy

Rootedness, Abundance/Celebration/Spirit of Joy

- How do we amplify the stories of joy and celebration in the congregation – internally with the diocese, and externally to those who do not yet know who we are, what we believe, and what we do?
- How do we provide resources for congregations to teach about the Episcopal Church?
- How do we ensure congregations have access to priests, deacons, and the sacraments? And how do we reassure congregations that lack resident clergy or other material and personnel resources that Christ is still present and God's grace is working in and through them?

Witness to God's love in word and deed beyond church walls

Participation and Mission

- How do we use our diocesan social media channels as an evangelism tool?
- How do we share what's happening in our congregations and use that work to foster the imagination and transfer of experiential knowledge of best practices between congregations? How can we connect congregations desiring to start a particular ministry with those already engaged in that ministry?
- What ministry areas are more effective and sustainable when they happen at the mission region or diocesan level? How do we invite participation by new members in these initiatives?

NOW WHAT 3

what do we do with this information?

how congregations can use this document

Now you've had a chance to read through the results of this research project and learn about what's been working for other churches in their efforts to grow. So what comes next?

The purpose of this document is not to prescribe definitive steps that will work for every congregation as they try to grow and develop. Rather, now that the results have been presented, it is for you the reader to determine what lessons can be applied to your own congregation and community.

In the following pages, you will see several questions. The goal of these questions is to provide you with on-ramps to engage this content where it most intersects with your context. There is no expectation that any one person, body, or congregation would discuss all of them! You can begin anywhere, with any set of questions. If you are not sure where to begin, we encourage you to read the whole section and then start with the questions that are highlighted in the blue boxes. From there you can deepen your conversation with the related questions in that section of the body of the text.

In engaging this material, diocesan staff members are here to support you in any way that we can. Contact us if you would like us to facilitate a conversation in your congregation or in collaboration with other congregations. Contact us if you develop responses to the questions and are not sure of what next steps to take or how to find the appropriate resources to fulfill goals or a vision you develop out of your conversations.

a framework for discernment and action

This report does not arrive at a fixed program plan. Its goal is not to create a prescriptive rule for How To Grow. Instead, it arrives at a shared responsibility. The "What" section names what we heard. The "So What" section begins to interpret what these findings mean for our life together. The "Now What" section asks how diocesan leaders might move these insights into faithful, practical, and sustainable action, especially in this transitional season as the Diocese of the Great Lakes prepares to elect and welcome its first bishop diocesan. Because of that timing, the most faithful next step is not to prescribe a finished set of outcomes before the next chapter of episcopal leadership begins. Instead, we propose a process for discernment and action: a framework that helps diocesan staff, Diocesan Council, mission regions, congregations, and eventually our first bishop diocesan ask the right questions together, set priorities, and identify what is best done locally, regionally, and diocesan-wide.

To reiterate, our findings point us toward three areas of focus:

1. Nurture a culture of authentic welcome and empowerment
2. Embody Episcopal identity with confidence and joy
3. Witness to God's love in word and deed beyond church walls

Within each of these areas, the diocese has at least three kinds of work to discern:

- **Communication:** How do we tell our stories, make the church visible, help seekers find us, and amplify signs of life?
- **Resources and tools:** What practical supports can help congregations strengthen local ministry without every congregation starting from scratch?
- **Wider questions:** What issues require regional or diocesan coordination because they are bigger than any one congregation?

This framework does not assume that every congregation needs the same thing. Congregations differ by size, geography, clergy presence, history, capacity, financial resources, buildings and other physical resources, and local context. The work ahead is not to make every congregation look alike, but to help each congregation become more able to recognize and respond to God's invitation in its own place.

a guiding question

The central question for the next season is:

How can the Episcopal Diocese of the Great Lakes create conditions in which congregations and their leaders can more fully embody welcome, belonging, participation, rootedness, abundance, and mission?

This question matters because the survey and focus group data revealed both strengths and gaps. We heard that our congregations are places of meaningful worship, generosity, welcome, and theological openness. We also heard that many congregations are less certain of their energy, forward momentum, opportunities for spiritual growth and capacity to connect people across generations and life stages.

These two realities must be examined alongside one another. In creating encouraging conditions, we do not begin from a deficit. There is already grace, beauty, faithfulness, and real vitality among us. But we also cannot be content with congregations that are warm and faithful yet unsure how to move from attendance to discipleship, from welcome to incorporation, from activity to mission, or from survival to shared momentum.

The diocesan role is not to replace local ministry. It is to help create a more connected ecosystem in which local ministry can flourish.

reflection question

What is one strength you believe your congregation has? What is one gap you can identify? What specific types of support would help your local ministry to flourish?

nurture a culture of authentic welcome and empowerment

The research shows that welcome is not simply an attitude or atmosphere. It is communicated through words, practices, buildings, websites, worship, follow-up, leadership, and the ways people are invited into the life of the congregation. Welcome also has stages. A person may first encounter a congregation online, through a community event, through a livestream, through outreach ministry, or through a personal relationship. They may then visit worship, return several times, form relationships, ask questions, and eventually find a place to offer their gifts. The diocesan staff and programs can help congregations follow and foster the whole arc of a new person's involvement by providing resources.

reflection question

Think through how your congregation currently welcomes new people. Who notices a new face – the priest? The ushers/greeters? A designated welcome committee person? Is there a difference between how your congregation intends to welcome newcomers and how you welcome them in practice?

communication questions

- How can diocesan communication help seekers discover Episcopal congregations near them?
- How can diocesan platforms supplement, rather than replace, local congregational communication?
- How can we help our congregations and members communicate basic welcome clearly: where to park, what to expect, how children are included, how worship works, and what kind of community they are entering?
- How can we amplify stories of people finding belonging, healing, and spiritual home in our Episcopal communities?

resource & tools questions

- What simple tools would help congregations assess their own welcome practices?
- What training or templates would help greeters, ushers, clergy, lay leaders, and parish communicators welcome newcomers without overwhelming them?
- How can congregations develop a pathway from first visit to belonging to meaningful participation?
- What resources would help congregations welcome children, youth, young adults, LGBTQ++ people, people wounded by prior church experiences, and those with little or no background in Christian worship?

wider questions

- What on-ramps, other than Sunday morning worship, are available and accessible for non-members to participate in that might help them better experience the life of the congregation?
- What patterns are we seeing across congregations in terms of welcome, newcomer incorporation, and lay participation?
- Where are congregations trying to solve the same welcome or incorporation challenges alone?
- How might mission regions help congregations learn from one another's effective practices?
- How can diocesan leaders help congregations distinguish between genuine welcome and anxious recruitment?

possible first practice

Begin with a diocesan "welcome-to-participation" conversation or tool that helps congregations map the actual journey of a newcomer:

How do people find us? What do they experience first? Who notices them? How are they remembered? When are they invited? How do they learn the tradition? How do they become part of the community's life without being rushed or used?

reflection question

What are three changes or supports that would help your congregation improve your welcoming practices? This could be advice or guidance from the diocesan level, or something more material or concrete, like money to purchase new streaming equipment and increase online engagement or making an inaccessible building ADA-compliant.

1.

2.

3.

embody episcopal identity with confidence and joy

One of the strongest findings is that people are not asking us to become less Episcopal. Many are drawn to our tradition specifically by the depth of Episcopal worship, the Book of Common Prayer, sacramental life, music, preaching, beauty, theological openness, and space for questions.

Leaning in requires confidence, not rigidity. The data does not suggest that every practice should remain unchanged. It does suggest that our tradition is not the problem. The opportunity is to practice, teach, interpret, and celebrate the Episcopal way of being Christian with greater clarity and joy.

reflection question

What are the most and least Episcopal aspects of worship at your church? What do you think sets you apart from other churches in your community? (Not what makes you *special* – what makes you *different*.) What Episcopal traditions could you lean into, return to, or include in your worship for the first time? What aspects of worship are not spiritually feeding your congregation or attracting new visitors?

communication questions

- How can we tell stories of joyful worship, baptism, confirmation, formation, and spiritual growth?
- How can we help individuals and communities of faith speak publicly about the gifts of Episcopal tradition without sounding defensive, apologetic, or insider-focused?
- How can we share examples of congregations teaching the tradition well, especially to newcomers and younger adults?
- How can diocesan platforms normalize joy, abundance, and celebration as part of our shared culture?

resource & tools questions

- What resources can help congregations teach the Book of Common Prayer, Eucharist, baptism, the church year, Scripture, prayer, and Episcopal identity?
- What adaptable "Episcopal 101" tools could be shared across congregations?
- How might we support congregations in offering formation that is conversational, question-friendly, and connected to daily life?
- What resources would help congregations explain liturgy to people who did not grow up with it?
- How can we support clergy and lay leaders in creating formation opportunities that challenge people to grow spiritually rather than simply attend?

wider questions

- How do we ensure access to priests, deacons, sacramental life, and pastoral care across a geographically large diocese with uneven clergy presence?
- How do we support congregations without resident clergy in trusting that Christ is still present and God's grace is still working in and through them?
- What forms of formation are best offered locally, regionally, online, or diocesan-wide?
- How can diocesan resources help smaller congregations access theological depth and sacramental rootedness without asking them to imitate larger parishes?
- Is there a role for Mission Regions/Mission Region Councils to support congregations without resident clergy presence?

possible first practice

Work cooperatively across diocesan and local leadership to develop a shared formation pathway that congregations can adapt locally. This does not need to be a single curriculum. It could be a flexible set of modules or practices, the goal of which would be to help congregations teach the tradition joyfully and accessibly, while also inviting people into deeper discipleship and connection to: Episcopal worship, prayer, Scripture, sacraments, belonging, discernment, service, creation care, and public witness.

reflection question

What kind of formation, if any, is currently offered at your church? Do you feel it is effective in developing the spiritual life of your congregation, and in teaching participants the fundamentals of Episcopal faith and our history? If no formation is offered, describe what an ideal formation class would look like in your congregation. (Bonus question: What kind of formation is offered, or could be offered, for children and young people?)

witness to God's love in word and deed beyond church walls

The findings show that outward-facing ministry matters. Some people first encounter the church through service, public witness, community partnerships, Pride festivals, breakfast programs, food ministries, creation care, livestreams, podcasts, or social media. For others, outreach becomes the place where faith becomes tangible and participation becomes meaningful.

The church cannot assume that people will find us by walking through our red doors on Sunday morning. Many will not. The question is how we meet people where they are while remaining rooted in worship, formation, and Christian community.

reflection question

What kind of visible presence does your congregation have in your community? Think about the current reality of your congregation's activities. What gets you out of your church building and brings you into contact with people you may not otherwise meet?

communication questions

- How can diocesan social media become a tool for evangelism, not merely information-sharing?
- How can we tell stories of congregations serving their neighbors in ways that are concrete, consistent, and spiritually grounded?
- How can we help congregations share their community-facing ministries with people who may not yet be looking for Sunday worship?
- How can we share stories that foster imagination and transfer practical wisdom between congregations?

resource & tools questions

- What resources can help congregations discern which outward-facing ministries fit their gifts, context, and capacity?
- What tools would help congregations move from one-time outreach events to sustained community relationships?
- How can congregations invite newcomers and newer members into outreach without reducing them to volunteers for institutional need?
- What support do congregations need for evangelism that feels authentic, relational, and Episcopal?

wider questions

- Which ministries are more effective and sustainable at the mission-region or diocesan level than at the congregational level?
- Where could congregations collaborate regionally around shared community needs?
- What partnerships already exist that other congregations could learn from?
- How do we help congregations discern the difference between ministry that is performative and ministry that is grounded in long-term relationship?
- How do creation care, disaster preparedness, young-adult ministry, camps, community partnerships, and congregational development connect to this wider sense of mission?

possible first practice

Use mission regions as learning spaces where congregations can identify common community needs, share existing ministries, and discern where collaboration would make ministry more sustainable. This could include food ministries, creation care, disaster resilience, youth and young adult engagement, pastoral care networks, digital evangelism, and other ministries that may be stronger when held regionally.

reflection question

If you could change one thing about your church's online presence – either to add or subtract from its current state – what would that be?

final thoughts for congregations

There are many more questions and discussions that may arise as your congregation works through the data and possibilities presented in this document; the reflection questions given here are merely a place to begin the conversation. Every congregation in our diocese is a unique group of individuals with a unique place to inhabit in both their own community and the diocese as a whole – meaning no set of questions or recommendations will be applicable to all churches. And although it may be helpful to take inspiration from the practices of other congregations, remember that what helps one church find success may not automatically translate to another church!

final word

The listening process revealed that we are not asking for a different church. We are asking that we, as a diocese, more fully inhabit the gifts already entrusted to us: welcome, belonging, participation, rootedness, abundance, and mission.

The "Now What" is to practice those same gifts at all levels as together we create and shape our diocesan and congregational cultures.

Welcome matters. With God's help, we will build diocesan and congregational systems that are easier to enter.

Belonging matters. With God's help, we will create and shape cultures in which congregations and individuals will experience authentic fellowship and kinship.

Participation matters. With God's help, we will build real pathways to meaningful responsibility and contribution for lay and emerging leaders.

Rootedness matters. With God's help, we will teach and celebrate the Episcopal tradition with confidence and joy.

Abundance matters. With God's help, we will amplify signs of life and invest where there is energy.

Mission matters. With God's help, we will go where people are as a diocese, as congregations, and as members of Christ's body.

We move forward with discernment and action so that, together, the Episcopal Diocese of the Great Lakes can become the kind of ecosystem that helps every congregation recognize and respond to God's invitation in its own place and supports every individual as they embrace and embody God's call for them.

appendix 1 - limitations

Although our staff endeavored to engage in best and promising practices in mixed methods research, the ultimate goal of this project was to provide an informed (rather than inferred) place from which to plan how best to support congregations with our limited staff time and resources over the coming program year. Data limitations are acknowledged below, along with cautions for how to engage with the data.

Place responses

Ten clergy respondents chose not to name their congregation, an option offered to protect their anonymity. Percentages describing congregations therefore use the 222 responses that could be placed with a congregation.

Sample skew

A note on how to read all subgroup comparisons in this report: the survey sample leans toward people who are already deeply engaged in parish life. A majority of respondents are members of the Baby Boomer or Silent generations (68% combined), 85% are lay people, and about half have served in lay leadership. Responses also lean toward larger, fully staffed congregations: nearly two-thirds of responses come from congregations with full-time clergy, though only about one-third of the congregations represented engage full-time clergy. This does not make the findings less true; it means they best describe the experience of committed, longtime members, and describe more lightly the people the diocese most wants to understand: newcomers, younger people, and members of smaller congregations.

Small Groupings

Some groups in these comparisons are small. Only 38 respondents belong to the Millennial or Gen Z generations, 30 responses come from congregations served by supply clergy, and 43 respondents describe an outward-facing path into their congregation. Large differences in these comparisons are worth noticing as signals; small differences should not be over-read.

Congregation Size

Congregation size groups were set by dividing the 222 placed responses into three nearly even bands by average Sunday attendance: Small (ASA 35 or fewer), Middle (ASA 36–90), and Large (ASA 91 or more). Because responses, not congregations, were divided evenly, the seven largest congregations carry roughly the same weight in the aggregate results as the 38 smallest congregations.

Clergy Presence

Clergy presence is simplified into three categories: full time, part time, and supply. This is useful for broad understanding but flattens nuance. For example, the differences between a congregation which struggles to find consistent supply and one with a long-term, predictable supply relationship, or the posture of a congregation currently in search are not captured in those categories. Filtering nuances is beyond the scope of this project, though it suggests a direction for future inquiry.

Scale comparison caveat

The importance and frequency questions used scales of different lengths, so the two sets of scores cannot be compared number-to-number. Figure 5 rescales both to a common range; it should be read as directional only.

Two focus groups needing care

Two focus groups require special care in interpretation. The conversation with people who came from the Roman Catholic Church drew a single participant, so what appears here reflects one person's experience and is offered

as illustration, not pattern. The conversation with people who grew up without a faith background was not recorded; findings from that group draw on a detailed written summary rather than a verbatim transcript.

Anonymity

Focus group participants were promised anonymity: nothing in this report is attributed to any named individual, and participation in any particular group is not disclosed. Quotations are lightly edited for readability.

Growing-parish sample limit

The five growing congregations represented in the leaders' focus group contributed roughly 25 survey responses combined which is too few to support separate statistical claims about growing congregations. Where this report describes what growing congregations are doing, it relies on the focus group conversation, not on survey statistics.

appendix 2 - congregational representation in responses

City & Parish	Respon-dents	Mission Region	ASA	Clergy	ASA Group
Albion - St. James Episcopal Church	1	10	15	Supply	Small
Allegan - Church of the Good Shepherd	1	7	23	Supply	Small
Alma - St. John's Episcopal Church	1	3	13	Supply	Small
Alpena - Trinity Episcopal Church	3	4	60	Full time	Middle
Bad Axe - St. Paul's Episcopal Church	1	8	16	Supply	Small
Battle Creek - St. Thomas Episcopal Church	1	10	60	Full time	Middle
Bay City - St. Alban's Episcopal Church	2	8	27	Part time	Small
Bay City - Trinity Episcopal Church	4	8	38	Full time	Middle
Belmont - Holy Spirit Episcopal Church	2	5	19	Part time	Small
Beulah - St. Philip's Episcopal Church	2	2	38	Full time	Middle
Big Rapids - St. Andrew's Episcopal Church	1	3	20	Part time	Small
Boyne City - Episcopal Church of the Nativity	1	1	16	Part time	Small
Cadillac - St. Mary's Episcopal Church	6	3	15	Part time	Small
Charlevoix - Christ Church Episcopal	3	1	50	Part time	Middle
Charlotte - St. John's Episcopal Church	5	10	13	Part time	Small
Cheboygan - St. James Episcopal Church	1	1	28	Part time	Small

City & Parish	Respon-dents	Mission Region	ASA	Clergy	ASA Group
Coldwater - St. Mark's Episcopal Church	2	10	74	Full time	Middle
Davison - St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church	2	9	34	Part time	Small
Dryden - St. John's Episcopal Church	2	9	20	Part time	Small
East Tawas - Christ Church Episcopal	1	4	18	Part time	Small
Elk Rapids - St. Paul's Episcopal Church	1	2	26	Part time	Small
Fenton - St. Jude's Episcopal Church	2	9	56	Part time	Middle
Flint - St. Paul's Episcopal Church	7	9	70	Full time	Middle
Gladwin - St. Paul's Episcopal Church	3	8	24	Supply	Small
Grand Blanc - St. Christopher's Episcopal Church	1	9	63	Full time	Middle
Grand Haven - St. John's Episcopal Church	4	6	120	Full time	Large
Grand Ledge - Trinity Episcopal Church	1	10	35	Supply	Small
Grand Rapids - Grace Episcopal Church	3	5	67	Full time	Middle
Grand Rapids - St. Andrew's Episcopal Church	6	5	112	Full time	Large
Grand Rapids - St. Mark's Episcopal Church	30	5	154	Full time	Large
Grand Rapids - St. Philip's Episcopal Church	1	5	20	Part time	Small
Grayling - St. Francis Episcopal Church	3	2	17	Supply	Small
Greenville - St. Paul's Episcopal Church	2	5	19	Part time	Small
Harbert - Episcopal Church of the Mediator	2	7	44	Part time	Middle
Harrisville - St. Andrew's by the Lake	1	4	8	Supply	Small
Hastings - Emmanuel Episcopal Church	3	10	50	Full time	Middle
Higgins Lake - St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church	1	2	9	Supply	Small
Hillman - Calvary Episcopal Church	1	4	16	Supply	Small
Holland - Grace Episcopal Church	6	6	142	Full time	Large
Indian River - Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration	1	1	29	Part time	Small
Kalamazoo - St. Luke's Episcopal Church	9	7	134	Full time	Large
Kalamazoo - St. Martin of Tours Episcopal Church	3	7	53	Full time	Middle
Kentwood - Holy Cross Episcopal Church	3	5	44	Part time	Middle
Lansing - St. David's Episcopal Church	6	10	60	Full time	Middle
Leland - St. Peter's Episcopal Church	1	2	79	Full time[1]	Middle
Lexington - Trinity Episcopal Church	1	9	27	Part time	Small
Manistee - Holy Trinity Episcopal Church	1	3	23	Part time[2]	Small
Marshall - Trinity Episcopal Church	2	10	48	Supply	Middle
Midland - Holy Family Episcopal Church	1	8	17	Supply	Small
Midland - St. John's Episcopal Church	7	8	90	Full time	Middle

City & Parish	Respon-dents	Mission Region	ASA	Clergy	ASA Group
Montague - St. Peter's by the Lake Episcopal Church	2	6	30	Supply	Small
Mt. Pleasant - St. John's Episcopal Church	2	3	47	Full time	Middle
Muskegon - St. Gregory's Episcopal Church	6	6	33	Part time	Small
Muskegon - St. Paul's Episcopal Church	3	6	41	Supply	Middle
Newaygo - St. Mark's Episcopal Church	1	5	40	Part time	Middle
Niles - Trinity Episcopal Church	4	7	17	Supply	Small
Owosso - Christ Church Episcopal	1	9	15	Part time	Small
Paw Paw - St. Mark's Episcopal Church	2	7	20	Supply	Small
Pentwater - St. James's	3	6	18	Part time	Small
Petoskey - Emmanuel Episcopal Church	19	1	91	Full time	Large
Richland - St. Timothy's Episcopal Church	2	7	36	Part time	Middle
Saginaw - St. John's Episcopal Church	4	8	36	Full time	Middle
Saginaw - St. Matthew's Episcopal Church	2	8	23	Part time	Small
Saugatuck - All Saints' Episcopal Church	1	6	59	Full time	Middle
South Haven - Episcopal Church of the Epiphany	1	6	71	Full time	Middle
St. Clair - Holy Family Blue Water Episcopal Church	3	9	22	Part time	Small
St. Joseph - St. Paul's Episcopal Church	1	7	28	Part time	Small
Sturgis - St. John's Episcopal Church	3	7	37	Full time	Middle
Three Rivers - Trinity Episcopal Church	2	7	19	Part time	Small
Traverse City - Grace Episcopal Church	3	2	139	Full time	Large
West Branch - Trinity Episcopal Church	2	4	23	Supply	Small
TOTAL (placed responses)	222				

[1] St. Peter's Leland is a Summer Chapel; however, it has a full time clergy presence during its open months.

[2] Holy Trinity Manistee is served by a Priest-in-Residence. In this three category scheme, it is listed as having "part time" clergy presence because of the dedicated relationship it has with its priest.



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