

THE STATE OF THE PARISH
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The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2)

Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. (Matthew 4:19)

He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things. (Ephesians 4:10)

I have a confession to make. The first time I walked into this sanctuary in September of 2014, I thought it was small. And for me, it was. This is about the smallest sanctuary I have ever worshipped in. I remember looking around and praying, “Oh God, how am I supposed to accomplish your work in a place this small?”

My other first impressions seemed to back up that sense. The Average Sunday Attendance the week I walked in was 37. Our Annual Budget was \$56,000. One of my first jobs was to go in front of Diocesan Council with Deb Walters and Bob Hatley and request an assessment reduction. The Diocesan Office had informed me that my new parish was in debt to the Diocese for thousands of dollars, and they expected me to make sure that those monies got paid back. I was only contracted to work 15 hours/week. There were plants growing out of the gutters. The whole north side of the building was green. We couldn't open our front doors. The bell didn't ring. The walls of my office, when I walked in, still contained nails and screws from the last priest, along with quite a few unpatched holes from nails and screws that had been removed and marks and dents left from furniture and who-knows-what. My blinds were broken. My computer was ancient and slow. My file cabinets were full of vestry minutes from the 1970s.

The State of the Parish in September of 2014 didn't look all that great to me, I will admit. What could I accomplish in a parish such as this?

Compared to that, the State of the Parish right now is rockin'. Our Average Sunday Attendance at the end of 2019 was up from 37 to 46. Our Annual Budget for 2020 is up from \$56,000 to \$111,918. We pay our full Diocesan Assessment, and we had paid back a portion of our debt to the diocese when I appealed to Diocesan Council to forgive the remainder of our debt. My argument was that we were a mission-focused parish full of promise, and they affirmed that. For 2020, I am contracted to work 35 hours/week. The gutters are clean. The building is white. We can usually open up the front doors. The bell rings before and after each service. I fixed up the walls of my office during year 3—a sign for myself of my commitment to playing a long

game here. My office has new blinds AND new windows, along with the fellowship hall. I work on a laptop with a touch screen. I'm working on the file cabinets, but I can tell you that everything from the 1970s has gone into storage.

And more than that: Last year, Bishops Sparks, Little, and Gray met to discuss the state of each parish in the diocese. They put each parish into one of four categories:

1. Poorly-resourced and inwardly-focused.
2. Well-resourced and inwardly-focused.
3. Poorly-resourced and mission-focused.
4. Well-resourced and mission-focused.

A hint: Every parish should want to be #4: well-resourced and mission-focused. The three bishops put us at 3.5: we're definitely mission focused; we could be better resourced, but our resources aren't terrible. All in all, the Diocesan Office is thrilled with the State of this Parish. They often use us as an example of how to do things right.

In 2020, we celebrated Mass on a Saturday or Sunday 47 times. We had 10 weekday Eucharists, and 48 private Eucharists. Y'all had Sunday Morning Prayer twice, and said the Daily Office during the week 62 times. We had 5 funerals, and 7 worship services that don't fit into these categories. We are a people who pray together.

We also did our usual events—Pancake Supper, Homecoming Float and Strawberry Social, the Bazaar. And our Outreach! We interacted more deeply and more intentionally with Bristol Elementary School, the Bristol Community Food Pantry, LoveWay, and Habitat for Humanity.

We also engaged in a year-long visioning and discernment process that isn't quite done. During this process we have continually asked ourselves three questions: "Who are we?" "Who is our neighbor?" and "Who or what is God calling us to be or do?" I have seen the fruit of those discussions already, not least by our decision to join the rest of our denomination in the full sacramental inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community.

All in all, I think we've done pretty well.

So what's next?

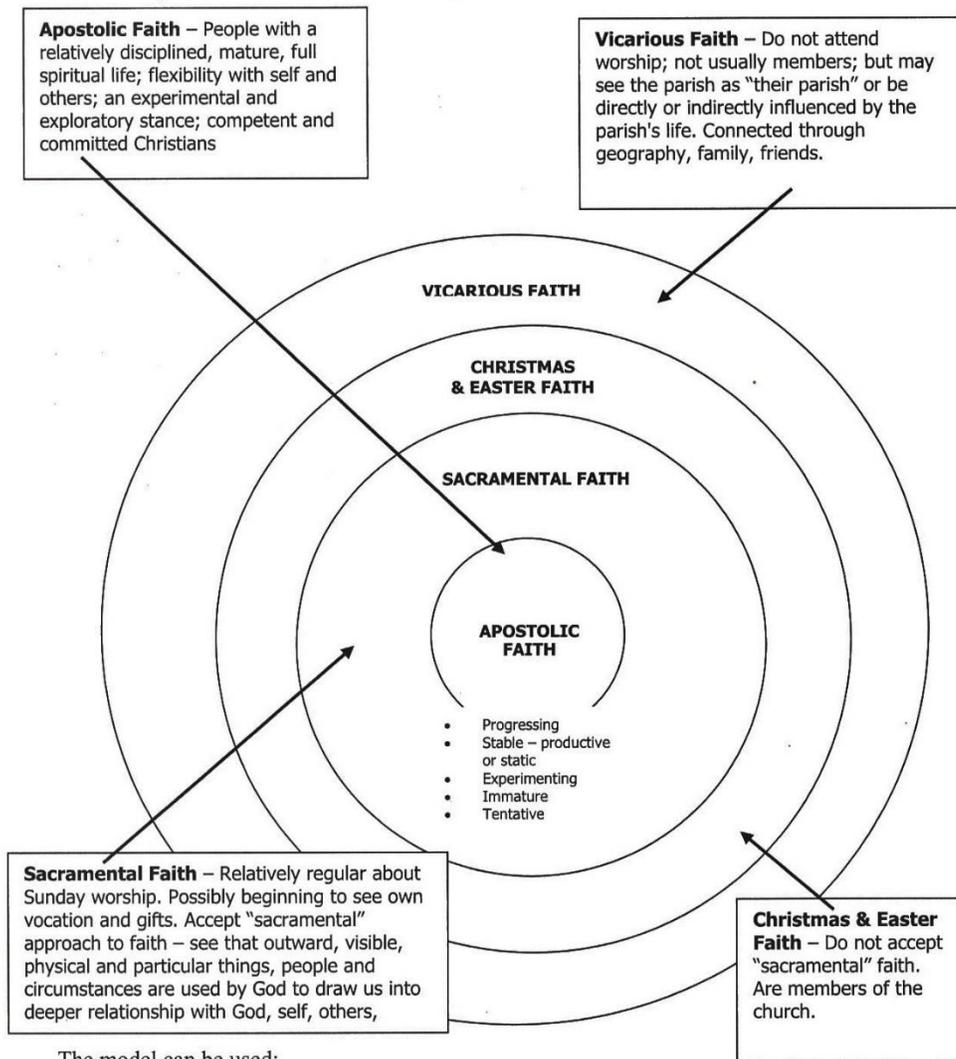
As of last September, when I completed my fifth year at this parish, I qualified for a sabbatical. I've chosen to postpone it, for a number of reasons, but the fact that the Episcopal Church offers its priests sabbaticals every five years is intentional: About every five years, priests seem to need to step back and think about their mission and call and the mission and call of their parish. One of the reasons I felt comfortable postponing my sabbatical is because we had been doing this work anyway, and so had I.

Here's what I hope for this year.

First, I want us to finish our visioning and discernment by reviewing where we've been and what we've done, and then by discussing mission in a focused, intentional way that will end with our development of an updated Mission Statement. I will be working with y'all to identify how we might live more fully into our specific sense of mission.

But I have also been thinking myself about this parish and how I feel called to serve you as a pastoral leader at this time. In order to explain to you my answer to that question, I need to teach you about an organizational model for parish life called "The Shape of the Parish."

The Shape of the Parish: A Diagram Overview



The model can be used:

- To assess the health of a parish, and
- To develop a strategy that deepens the parish's spiritual life, while staying open to the various places people are in their faith journey.

"Shape of the Parish" Diagram -- Robert A. Gallagher/Mary Anne Mann, 1983; Revised RAG 1999, 2003

Many people think that in order to grow and maintain a parish, the priest and leadership need to work on those outer circles: get more butts in pews and more checks in the offering plate. But the common wisdom around this model argues just the opposite: that in order to grow and maintain a parish, the priest and leadership need to grow and maintain its core—those with Apostolic Faith. In order to do that, the priest and the leadership need to provide doorways that allow people to move toward the center, and they need to build the level of commitment, competence, and emotional maturity at the center so that it grounds the parish in a mission orientation. When that happens, the scholarship says, the Apostolic Core will reach a point of “critical mass” which effectively pulls people into a deeper relationship with God and the church. About a decade ago, I attended a diocesan meeting in which we learned about this model, and at some point I said, “I’m not a part of the Apostolic Core at my parish, but I know who is, and I want what they have. I want to be more like them. So please, show me the doors that will get me there.” That attitude is an example of this idea of critical mass. One Diocesan leader has suggested that the Apostolic Core should serve like a life-giving black hole: pulling all things into itself.

I like that idea. But I would like to suggest another way to think about this model.

What if the Apostolic Core became so full of light and life, so full of a sense of mission, so in tune with God’s voice, that it couldn’t be contained within the walls of this church, or within the dimensions of this circle? What if instead of pulling all things into itself, OUR Apostolic Core spilled out and filled all things? What if THAT is what our parish did?

That would be Kingdom work. That would be living the Reign of God.

So, in order to move closer to that, we need to be strengthening all of you. And I have a 3-fold plan on how to begin that work.

1. We need to get better, more committed, more competent, and more mature in our corporate worship and private prayer lives. Thus, on the last Wednesday of each month, instead of having Evening Prayer, we will come together and worship and pray in different ways, learning each discipline as we go, and continuing to practice this together.
2. We need to know our Bible better. Thus, I have asked my father, Larry Coe, who has a Masters in Theology and has been teaching Scripture for 30+ years, to hold a Bible Study class every two weeks on Tuesday afternoons.
3. Every two weeks on Sundays after coffee hour, I will teach a class on one of the priorities of the Episcopal Church. After we finish our visioning and discernment, we will focus on the Way of Love, as seen on the banner in the fellowship hall.

Thus, I am creating doorways for each one of you to grow in your commitment, competence, and spiritual maturity by offering you opportunities to learn more about prayer and worship, Scripture, and Christian themes and foci identified by the national church. There will be a total

of 5 classes offered every 4 weeks. And they will be taped and posted (I hope), so that those who cannot attend all that they would like can listen to the discussions and learnings.

My hope is that we will become a people for whom the State of the Parish is not just about the Parish. I hope that the State of the Parish bleeds over into the State of our Families, the State of our Workplaces, the State of our Neighborhoods, the State of the Town of Bristol, the State of our World. Because that is the potential of the Gospel—that is the Christian promise. That with God, we can fish for people. With God, we can fill the dark places with light. With God, we can fill all things.